

Push Boundaries and Challenge Limitations

Recently, the Journal of Dental Technology sat down with **Saro Hatz, CEO** of Alien Milling Technologies. Every person and every company has a story, and this is the story of Alien Milling Technologies.

Your journey in dental laboratory technology started in 2007. Tell us more about that and what led to Alien Milling?

My dad opened his first lab in Beirut, Lebanon in 1968. By 1997 he, along with his brother, ran the largest laboratory in the country. Around that time, Lebanon was going through major political unrest, which caused economic collapse and the migration of many citizens. My parents came to the U.S. and my dad started a new lab from scratch; this time alone, with no money, and at 50 years of age. I was nine years old at the time, and in essence his dental lab was my after-school program. Although at first I played games on the computer, I learned that if you spend enough time in a lab, you want to get your hands dirty. I started pouring models and waxing copings, and lucky for me, I had the pickiest boss so almost everything I made had a clear route back to the trash. After years of practice, and rejections, my work made it down the assembly line which consisted of my dad and brother. In 2007, my dad purchased a Nobel Biocare Scanner called the Forte, and that is when I considered myself an official lab technician. This scanner alone leveled the playing field for everyone who wanted to transition into digital dental technology. Computers were my stronghold, and with my broad knowledge of the tasks at hand, I was scanning and seeing my designed units move down the assembly line much more efficiently.



In June of 2015, the fun came to a screeching halt. Growing a company is accompanied by growing pains, and ours was no exception. It almost put our family business on the brink of bankruptcy. One night I decided to write a brand new business model, creating a low-cost outsourcing solution for small to medium sized labs. I developed a website, with fee transparency, and kept the workflow organized. Under pressure, and almost out of time, Alien Milling was born.

What was your vision and how has it evolved?

My vision was to help labs, just like ours, avoid the burden of costly equipment, and offer reliable milling solutions at affordable prices. In keeping our prices low, we enable laboratory partners to maximize profit. This vision has not changed, but our product offering has tremendously increased thanks to partner feedback.





Alien offers customers an outsource option for the short or long term. What are Alien's sweet spots in terms of product offerings and what does an ideal new customer look like?

By listening to our laboratory partners, we know exactly what to offer next. Our extensive lab services give our partners the ability to expand their product list. We are aware of the technician shortage, and know how to bring forth timely and efficient solutions. Since we accept digital, traditional, or CAD ready cases, our partners can have it their way. The online prescription customizes what work Alien Milling handles.

How did Alien support customers when facing large orders of cases due to post-pandemic shutdowns?

We rolled up our sleeves until every single unit was in the oven that night. Everybody was working overtime. Our mission is "reliable milling solutions" and we don't take that lightly. We understand our role and know our customer's business depends on us. I like the facility to always run at or below 50 percent maximum capacity, and during peak days, we were over 125 percent. We have since then doubled our machines and are more prepared.

What would your customers say is Alien's biggest differentiator?

Some would say they like the ease of ordering milling services anytime, anywhere, or the loyalty points earned for every dollar spent. Others like the free shipping on orders over \$149 and some love paying in cryptocurrency instead of fiat. I think, however, most customers agree on the quality finish, and speedy delivery at amazing prices. Our online customer reviews reflect a general sense of gratification, expressing reliable service.

Alien is a licensee with the Identallo/Identceram program? How does that program benefit Alien and your customers?

Tremendously. Laboratories want to deliver quality products to their clients. Without the Identallo/IdentCeram certifications, customers have to trust their milling provider on materials used. With the certificate, an accredited third party has validated the materials which assures consumer confidence.

What are Alien's core values?

We came from a laboratory background and evolved with the industry. Now, one might say the industry is evolving with us. As we all transition, we continue to push boundaries and challenge limitations. Our core value is to innovate new technologies and products for the industry. This is what we were born into and this is our way of life.

With your crystal ball, what does the typical dental laboratory look like in 3-5 years?

In three to five years, labs will automate the majority of their work. As their clients transfer IO scans, they will be designed by an AI intermediary. Upon receipt of the CAD-ready file, the laboratory may produce the restoration internally, or outsource to a milling center. The lab will then receive the crown that is ready for characterization and glaze.

Now who's to say a machine can't do this last part...

Welcome to the world of Machine Learning, and the endless possibilities of fatal errors. Computers are great, when they function as they are supposed to. AI, and Machine Learning, seem optimistic but even the best-trained machine will encounter unknown cases. When machines can't solve a problem, humans need to intervene. Skilled and reliable labs will be rewarded those cases but trickling in a few cases that a computer can't solve will not keep the doors open.

The truth of the matter is that most clinicians do not want to add more tasks. Dental laboratories and dental offices are very different businesses serving the same patients. Regardless of how advanced technology gets, adding yet another job to a busy practice will be cumbersome. A clinic's sole purpose is to attend to patient-specific needs, not calibrate machines or glaze crowns. A laboratory's sole purpose is to deliver outstanding quality restorations before the patient's next appointment. This process has been working harmoniously for decades and will continue. Anyone that says laboratories will be obsolete in a decade are in for a very big disappointment. Labs will not only thrive, but lead the evolution with new dental technology innovations. ■

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