

ATTRACTING MILLENNIALS TO YOUR REFRACTIVE SURGERY CENTER

Practices must change how they market to this new generation for laser refractive surgery.

BY JEFFREY L. MARTIN, MD



For the next 2 decades, our refractive surgery patients will come overwhelmingly from generation Y. This demographic group, also known as *echo boomers* and *millennials*, is composed of individuals born roughly between 1980 and 2000. This group of young people, today's 15- to 35-year-olds, numbers more than 80 million. They already command more than

US\$200 billion in spending power and will soon be dominating the work force and outspending their baby boomer parents.¹

Like previous generations, millennials share a broad set of experiences and cultural values. They are highly educated, self-confident, and optimistic about their financial futures, despite high unemployment and the recession that have forced many of them to delay milestones such as marriage and home ownership. These so-called *digital natives* are highly connected and heavily dependent on technology: They have never known a world without the Internet.²

As a market for refractive surgery, millennials hold a lot of potential, particularly if the economy continues to grow. After years of declining LASIK volumes, our surgery center finally saw a year-over-year increase in volume in 2014. For that to continue, it is essential that we understand how to reach this demographic and what makes these people tick.

MARKETING TO MILLENNIALS

A recent article in *US News & World Report* about how hotels are engaging with millennials highlighted some of the characteristics that appeal to this generation: Communication via text and social media; collaborative and communal space with an open, streamlined design; virtual check-in and check-out; and a unique or personalized experience.³

We have used similar approaches to enhance our appeal to millennial patients. For example, we have been shifting our resources from radio and print advertising to social media and

US\$200 BILLION

The amount in spending power that millennials command; millennials will soon be dominating the work force and outspending their baby boomer parents



Internet. Data from the Pew Research Center demonstrate that millennials are less likely than older Americans to watch TV or read a newspaper and much more likely to tweet, post videos online, and frequent social networking sites.²

Although we have sharply reduced our ad buys, that does not mean we have stopped spending money on marketing. Instead, we retain a young, hip, Internet company, and we invest in continual search engine optimization to guarantee that our practice shows up high on lists of search results.

To attract millennials, you need an up-to-date website with appealing graphics and short, personal videos, and it must be mobile-ready. Members of this generation are so attached to their smartphones that 80% keep the phone next to their bed at night, so all web content must be built to display correctly on phones and tablets.

We have moved from relying on a traditional blog (cutting edge when we started it 10 years ago) to making more postings on social media. The constantly evolving nature of social media is a real challenge. As soon as we have figured out a platform like Facebook, millennials have already moved on to Instagram and SnapChat (and probably others I do not know about yet). If, like me, you do not have a strong interest in exploring all these new media platforms, you need to hire people or marketing agencies who do.

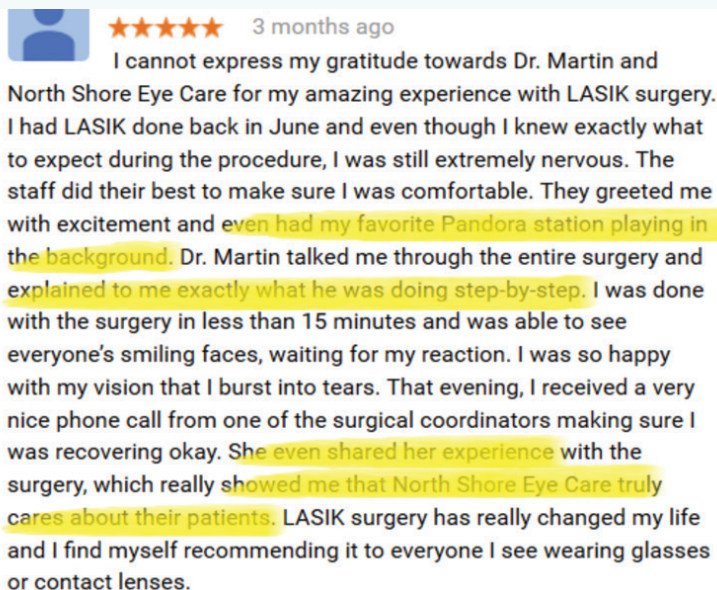


Figure 1. This Google+ review, posted by a real patient, illustrates many of the qualities that are important to millennials: comfort, a personalized experience, a clear explanation, a sense of connection, and shared experiences.



Comment from Jeff M. of North Shore Eye Care
Business Owner

8/29/2012 · Hi Matthew,

I am very sorry to hear that you were disappointed with our service. Please know that myself and all the staff at North Shore Eye Care strive to provide the best quality of care to all our patients. We work very hard to ensure wait time is minimal, however at times emergency appointments arise that can interfere with scheduling. I value your time and please accept my sincerest apologies. Please feel free to contact the office and ask for me personally with any concerns [S \(631\) 265-8780](tel:6312658780).

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Figure 2. Not every patient review will be positive. When this patient complained on Yelp about having to wait too long at the office, Dr. Martin responded personally.

Millennials are jaded about being sold to. We find that they are not as impressed by fame or brands as their parents were. Our professional sports affiliations, for example, do not seem to resonate with this age group. They like to support organizations that are doing the right thing, so our discounts for community superstars, such as military, law enforcement, firefighters, teachers, and doctors and nurses, have been well received.

COST CONSCIOUS

The cost of refractive surgery is certainly a barrier for millennials. After all, they are less likely to be working and have accumulated less wealth than previous generations had at the same age. However, there are a couple of mitigating factors. For

one, my sense is that millennials do not price-shop as much as members of generation X do. They have access to a wealth of information online, and they seem to be looking for a sense of connection rather than the best deal. That is not to say that price does not matter, but making these patients comfortable with you as a surgeon and with what they will gain from a refractive surgery procedure is more important to them.

Additionally, millennials' relationships with their parents are far less adversarial than my generation's. They tend to value and be close to family and often lean on them financially. It is not uncommon for parents to help their millennial children pay for LASIK.

Finally, this is a generation that is comfortable with financing. We have long offered 2-year, no-interest financing, and this continues to be important. We are straightforward about the costs and about how we can help patients afford the refractive surgery procedure they want.

TRUSTING TECHNOLOGY

A big advantage in talking to millennials about refractive surgery is that they inherently trust technology. I find that, compared with older patients, they are less fearful and much less concerned that the high-tech instruments we employ will not work.

They come in with a pretty solid baseline of information—gathered online, of course—but it is still important to share with them the latest statistics on visual acuity and satisfaction with LASIK. Better yet, share your own personal results in patients with refractive corrections similar to their own.

The millennial patient will want to know which platform you use and why. "Don't sell me, just tell me," is their attitude. I tell them, for

example, that our iFS iLASIK system (Abbott Medical Optics) produces the best bladeless flaps possible. I share the excellent safety profile of the lasers we use, and explain how customized, wavefront-guided LASIK will take the equivalent of a fingerprint of their visual system, digitally transfer the information to the laser, and automatically track features in their iris. To a generation raised on choice and customization, this is an aspect of the technology that resonates with them. Using a video on my iPad (Apple), I walk them through each step of the procedure.

If you gloss over issues they can find out about online, millennial patients will not trust you. This generation values authenticity and transparency, so you must be honest and straightforward

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AT A GLANCE

- As a market for refractive surgery, millennials hold a lot of potential, particularly if the economy continues to grow.
- An up-to-date, mobile-ready website with appealing graphics and short, personal videos can help to attract millennials to a practice.
- Millennials inherently trust technology; they will want to know which platform you use and why.

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with them. With that approach, I find they are likely to commit to refractive surgery once you get them in the door.

FOLLOWING UP

After surgery, if you can turn millennial patients into ambassadors for your practice, they can have a big impact. We now have a street team of young people who have had laser vision correction and who represent us and gather leads at local events and festivals.

Each millennial patient is likely to have a wide network of friends on social media, and they are not shy about sharing feedback. At the 1-day postoperative appointment, we proactively ask satisfied patients to post reviews on Yelp, Google+, and other social media sites they use. I say to them, “I would love for others to hear your story.” Their millennial peers take these reviews seriously and trust the opinions of the crowd (Figure 1).

However, we are also savvy enough to know that there will be some negative comments. What matters is how one responds. As part of our reputation management strategy, surgeons in our practice answer all bad reviews personally (Figure 2).

No one has marketing to millennials totally figured out, in part because this generation is still growing up and evolving. But millennials are certainly the future of refractive surgery. Continuing to find ways to adapt and appeal to this generation will be well worth the effort. ■

1. Kerwin AM. Millennials with money? Find out where they live and how they spend. *Advertising Age*. December 9, 2012. <http://adage.com/article/news/affluent-millennials-live-spend/238679>. Accessed April 16, 2015.

2. Millennials: A portrait of generation next. Pew Research Center. February 2010. pewresearch.org/millennials. Accessed April 16, 2015.

3. Mettler L. Millennial appeal: 5 ways hotels are engaging Gen Y. *U.S. News & World Report*. <http://travel.usnews.com/features/Millennial-Appeal-5-ways-hotels-are-engaging-Gen-Y/>. Accessed April 16, 2015.

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