

# Customer Service: The Key to Economic Success

Providing excellent service and surgical outcomes can help to boost financial return.

BY TOM S. TOOMA, MD

**N**o matter what profession you have chosen, the goal is to be happy and content practicing that profession. I am most satisfied professionally when I feel that I am providing my customers—my patients, referring doctors, staff, and vendors—with the best I can offer in customer service and surgical outcomes. I feel blessed to have chosen ophthalmology and refractive surgery specifically as my profession. I cannot think of myself being any happier and more satisfied in any other profession.

At NVISION Laser Eye Centers in California, concentrating on doing what is best for our customers and treating them as we would want to be treated is our first priority. When these goals are executed successfully, economic growth and increased success have followed.

Ten of our 15 locations throughout California and Nevada are laser vision correction centers, and the rest are ambulatory surgery and comprehensive ophthalmology centers. Offering patients our best customer care possible combined with the latest technologies has allowed us to charge a fee for LASIK that is one of the highest in our area (US\$5,200 for two eyes). Despite this price tag, we manage to be the largest refractive surgery practice in California. We believe that focusing on excellent customer service and care are important for a practice to thrive in our current economic environment.

## PRICING STRUCTURE

We do not use a tiered pricing structure, and we did not discount our LASIK fees with the economic downturn in 2008. Rather, our average sales price has continually increased over the past 6 years. We increased our fee by US\$1,000 when we transitioned from mechanical microkeratome to the femtosecond laser more than 10 years ago. Keeping up with new surgical techniques and adopting new technologies can help a practice to consistently gain market share.

A lower fee is offered only if patients are enrolled in a study; otherwise, we have been strict about keeping our

surgical fee intact and not allowing any discounts. This fee includes the preoperative evaluation, LASIK surgery with the Femto LDV femtosecond laser (Ziemer Ophthalmic Systems) and the Wavelight Allegretto EX500 Excimer laser (Alcon), 1 year of follow-up, and a lifetime enhancement commitment. In a recent company-wide analysis of patient outcomes, our rate of enhancements was 1.4% (personal data). We use sophisticated outcome analysis software to analyze all of our outcomes and minimize enhancement rates.

## COMMUNICATE THE DIFFERENTIATORS

Working diligently to communicate differentiators—qualities that make us unique—to our patients, and then upholding them, has helped us to maintain and grow our surgical volume and average sales price in different economic environments. With the downturn of the economy in 2008 and 2009, the volume of laser vision correction performed in the United States dropped by nearly 50%;<sup>1</sup> however, our surgical volume dropped only 22% and bounced back quickly. In the past 4 years, we have experienced annual growth.

Our differentiators are the experience of our surgeons, our postoperative outcomes, the technologies we use, our customer service, and the lifetime commitment we offer to patients. For instance, we were the first practice in the United States to use the Avellino Gene Detection System (Avellino Laboratory) for the detection of granular corneal dystrophy. These differentiators have helped increase the

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## TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- When customer service is executed successfully, economic growth and increased success will follow.
- Adopting new technologies can help a practice to consistently gain market share.
- Work diligently to communicate differentiators and then uphold them.

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number of ophthalmologists and optometrists in our area who want to be part of our referral network, which is how we acquire most of our patients. The second largest source of referrals to our practice is referrals from happy patients—our alumni. We do not use direct-to-consumer marketing other than our presence on the Internet.

In addition to hearing about us from a referring ophthalmologist or optometrist or a friend or family member who underwent surgery at one of our centers, patients learn about our differentiators during their initial visit with a counselor, which lasts approximately 75 minutes. During that consultation, my team and I communicate our differentiators, and we reinforce our center's commitment to meeting patient needs and hopefully exceeding expectations.

Our experience has been that, if we communicate our differentiators effectively, patients who have been on multiple refractive surgery consults frequently choose to have surgery at NVISION, even though other practices offer them a fee that is US\$1,000 to US\$2,000 lower than ours.

#### **KNOW WHAT YOU STAND FOR**

At NVISION, our goal is to provide customers with the best experience they can expect in a medical setting. We are also focused on providing the best surgical outcomes and minimizing our enhancement rate. We spend a lot of time educating our staff on good customer service, and we offer a variety of opportunities for continuing education. We also make sure that all forms of communication with our patients and their referring doctors are prompt, consistent, and crisp and that we are uniform with the way we answer questions and explain procedures.

Spending a lot of time selecting, training, and educating the staff members who make up our team allows us to give patients our best in customer service in a medical setting. I consider my staff to be a part of my family; they are an extension of who I am and of what NVISION is. Therefore, it is important to me that each and every staff member treat our patients the way they would like to be treated as patients.

In my opinion, economic success is possible only when a practice is focused on customer service. When that relationship is in perfect harmony, it is not just a win-win for everyone, it is the only way that a practice can do well in a professional environment such as ophthalmology. ■

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1. Market Scope. Quarterly Updates on the US Refractive Market. Q4-2009 US Refractive Update. Market Scope. [http://www.marketscope.com/market\\_reports/refractive\\_reports.html](http://www.marketscope.com/market_reports/refractive_reports.html). Accessed May 12, 2014.