

THE FEEL-GOOD JOURNEY



Pointers for creating an exceptional patient experience.

BY AMIR M. PARASTA, MD, PhD

We are in the business of helping people see better. In my belief—and in the beliefs of most eye care practitioners I know—our responsibility extends beyond the operating room. Creating an environment in which every patient can experience a feel-good journey, one that they are proud of and want to share with family and friends, is also monumentally important. This article reviews the steps involved in creating a feel-good patient journey and provides some pointers that can help practices to enhance the overall patient experience.

First and foremost, a feel-good patient journey requires the surgeon and his or her entire team to give honest, authentic, and unbiased advice to patients. In that regard, the focus of any interaction with patients should be on making sure it is a valuable consultation, rather than a result-oriented sales pitch. Once you and your team break away from the pressure to sell, the feel-good journey can begin.

THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Let's look at the customer journey for refractive surgery patients. Today, their journey typically starts on the internet, and more specifically on their mobile devices. As they gather information about the risks, best methods, and costs of refractive surgery, they will also read countless patient testimonials to help determine whether they are making the right decision to undergo surgery.

Although we cannot physically lead patients on this important part of their journey, once they find your website and make their initial contact, the immediate focus of your team should be to gain their trust, provide accurate information, and reduce their fears.

What your website says about your practice is extremely important. Ultimately, that information will guide and influence patients to choose your practice or to keep looking for another one. In that sense, *word-of-mouth* referrals have become *world-of-mouth* referrals, with referrals largely coming from internet searches and online patient testimonials.

The best way to show that your practice is the right one for patients is to make sure that your website acts as a knowledge transfer. It should inform patients about refractive surgery; detail the surgical options they will have at your clinic; and offer them recommendations, fair and balanced information, and testimonials from past patients. This last part is very important, as second to recommendations from family and friends, online consumer opinions are trusted by 70% of online consumers (Figure 1). Your website is the very early stage of the feel-good customer journey.

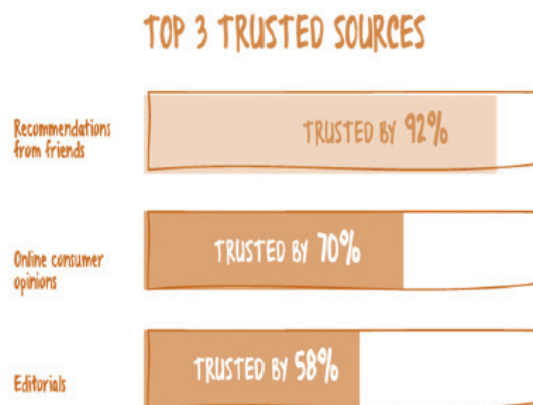


Figure 1. According to a 2012 Nielsen Global Trust In Advertising Survey, patients trust word-of-mouth and online opinions more than anything else.

The next step on the journey is booking patients for an individual consultation. Eye surgeons are obligated to talk about the effects and side-effects, risks, and alternatives of all refractive methods. These obligations can be time consuming for surgeons and confusing to patients, and therefore they should not be discussed during the initial consultation. Rather, it is important that a refractive manager or counselor lead the consultation. This person presents to patients unbiased information on all options and methods of vision correction including LASIK, PRK, small-incision lenticule extraction, refractive lens exchange, and phakic IOLs. The refractive manager should also check patients' suitability for certain procedures, answer any questions, and address initial fears in a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

In refractive surgery, the two top concerns for patients are safety and quality of vision. Therefore, it is also important to further address these issues during a second consultation, this one led by the surgeon. But keep in mind that biased information feels like sales talk to patients. Speak about the advantages and disadvantages of each procedure, and do not be afraid to discuss the risks of laser vision correction and the irreversibility of the procedure in comparison to the removability of phakic lenses like the EVO Visian ICL (STAAR Surgical).

Laser surgery is no longer the holy grail of refractive surgery, especially for millennials, and patients should be well educated on all of the alternatives. In our practice, the initial patient consultation lasts 1 hour, and we charge €37. Between 68% and 75% of patients who come in for a consultation and are good candidates for refractive surgery will undergo some form of vision correction surgery at our practice.

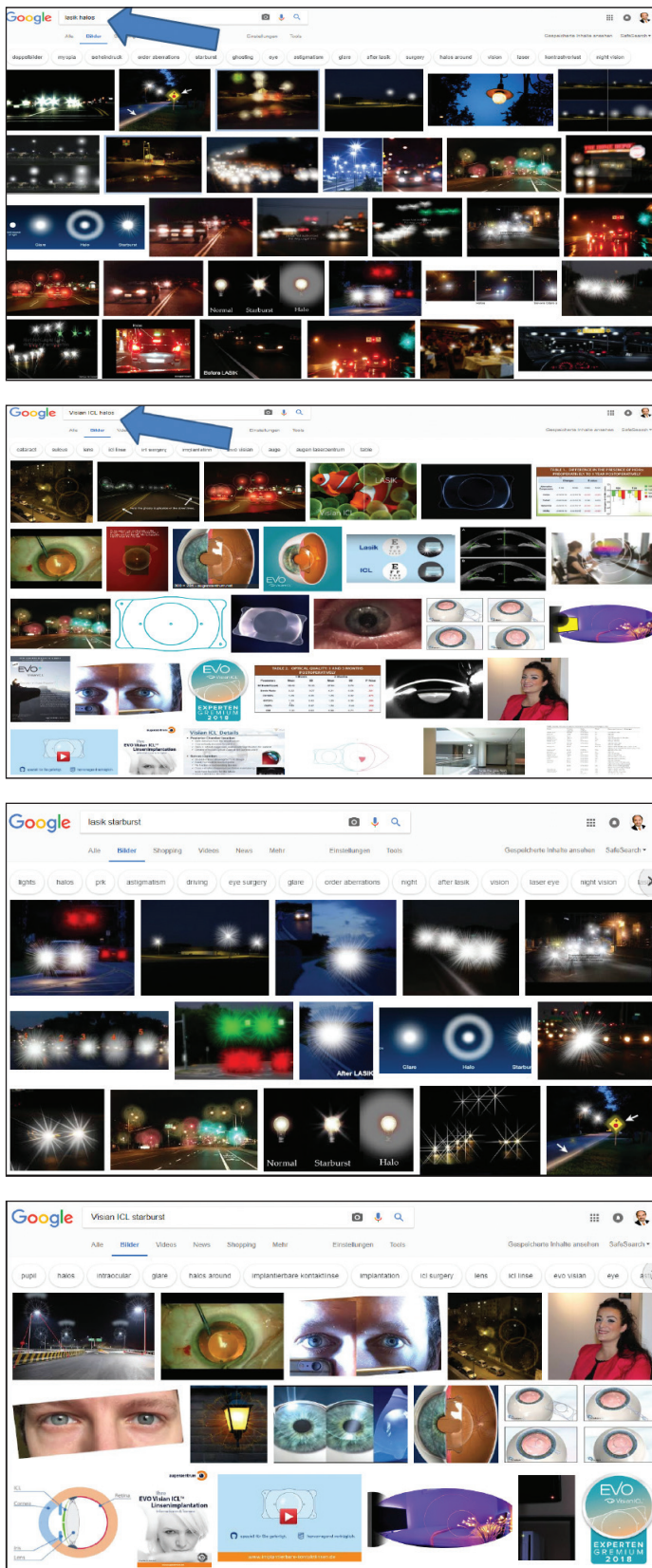


Figure 2. Google searches for LASIK glare, Visian glare, LASIK starbursts, and Visian starbursts.

More than 80% of young patients (under 50) who come into the clinic asking for laser vision correction instead opt for the EVO Visian ICL after their first consultation. In many cases, patients had not heard about the technology previously and become interested once they've learned about it, mainly because the technology is removable, there is reduced risk for dry eye,¹ it does not require tissue excision, and it causes fewer visual side effects (eg, halos and glare) compared with laser vision correction² (Figure 2).

The point is that we do not offer the EVO Visian ICL as a second option and only in suspicious corneas. We offer it as the first option, along with other suitable options, and thus also to patients with normal corneas.

The next step of the feel-good patient journey occurs once the optimal method of vision correction is selected. This is the preoperative examination, which is conducted by the operating surgeon. This contact is also a very important part of the journey, as it is the perfect time to discuss risks, expectations, and achievable results. Thereafter, the next steps of the patients' journey include surgery and postoperative follow-up and continued care. These, as well, have significant impact on the feel-good nature of the patients' journey.

CONCLUSION

There is no magic spell that will bring patients to your practice. In today's fast-paced and connected world, it is more than likely that patients will be drawn to your practice based on referrals—both word of mouth and world of mouth (ie, the internet). Be sure that your website serves the main function of educating patients and motivating them to come into your practice for a consultation and to learn more. That is the tip of the iceberg of the feel-good patient journey. From there, be sure that you wow patients with your personable and impeccable service and impress them with how you share information on their surgical options. Do not sell one procedure over another, but give patients the information they need to make a well-informed decision.

What makes our clinic unique and what has been the secret to our successful refractive surgery practice is that, of our team members, consisting of 70% opticians, orthoptists, and optometrists and 30% doctors, we all have the respect, the knowledge, the expertise, and the passion to turn our responsibility of helping people see better into a joyful patient experience. When all is said and done, the feel-good patient journey should start with your team and set fire to your patients. ■

1. Naves JS, Carracedo G, Cacho-Babillo I. Diadenosine nucleotide measurements as dry-eye score in patients after LASIK and ICL surgery. Paper presented at: the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery; 2012.
 2. Shin JY, Ahn H, Seo KY, Kim EK, Kim TI. Comparison of higher order aberrations after implantable collamer lens implantation and wavefront-guided LASEK in high myopia. *J Refract Surg.* 2012;28(2):106-111.

AMIR M. PARASTA, MD, PhD

- Medical Director, Munich Eye, Germany
- Lecturer in Optometry, University of Applied Sciences, Munich, Germany
- Avicenna Professor in Ophthalmology, State Medical University, Tajikistan
- Dr.Parasta@augenzentrum.net
- Financial disclosure: None