

GREAT MARKETING STARTS AT HOME



Building your practice's brand begins with hiring the right people.

BY KARL G. STONECIPHER, MD

There are many strategies for marketing a cataract and refractive surgery practice in a competitive landscape. Some of the most effective strategies will remain constant across all practice types, whether a high-volume practice, a premium services practice, or a practice looking to grow, but others may be unique to one's own situation.

This article addresses some of the unique approaches you might use to try to grow your practice, but remember, every great marketing strategy starts at home—with your staff.



STARTING AT HOME

First, decide on your brand.

You need to determine what your practice can offer patients in order to determine your brand. Do you offer only LASIK? Do you offer premium IOLs, dry eye therapy, and other treatments? You must decide what you want your brand to be and how that brand is going to look, and make sure that your staff is on the same page. If the people who answer the phone in your practice are not clear on the direction of your practice's brand, you have a problem. Staff members should be able to talk to prospective patients about what differentiates your practice from your competitors' practices.

You need to hire smart. My colleague R. Bruce Wallace III, MD, taught me that you need to hire people who are in the people-pleasing business. Find individuals who have a likeable personality because that is not something you can easily teach. I have interviewed candidates who did not have direct experience performing the tasks I was looking for, but I hired them because they had the

right personality for the job. You can usually teach people to perform a specific task, but it is harder to teach someone how to mesh with your practice and how to make a patient feel at ease.

Second, make a budget. The next step is to establish a marketing budget. You have to set a budget and dictate exactly where and how that money will be spent. Will it be an advertisement on Google, a sponsored post on Facebook, an advertisement in a local newspaper, or something else? No matter what you decide, it needs to be trackable. You can figure out the success of a particular avenue of marketing by asking patients how they heard about your practice.



EMPOWERING PATIENTS

Advertise with clear

direction. To get more out of your marketing dollars, find out where potential crossover exists in your services. For example, you could advertise *premium glaucoma surgery* or *premium cataract surgery* to attract a new demographic of patient that you might not reach if you advertised simply *cataract surgery*.

Some practices advertise without having a clear direction and without a focus on a specific procedure or product, which is a mistake.

Educate your patients. Advertising a premium service such as refractive cataract surgery helps to educate patients about their potential options. By the time a patient comes in for an examination, he or she at least should have an understanding of the procedures you offer and what to expect. I can then say to the patient, "Look, I'm not trying to sell this to you, but I'm telling you about these options so you know exactly

what we can do for you." I don't want patients to receive a standard monofocal IOL and then later learn that they could have received a premium lens that could have given them better vision.

Advertising can educate and empower patients, and your staff should be trained to answer patients' questions on the first phone call. Not only does this provide a better patient experience, but it also saves time down the line because patients already have a basic understanding of the procedure in question. To use your phone system effectively, have a dedicated phone staff ready to answer questions because sometimes these calls involve a lot more than simply scheduling an appointment.



GROWING THE PRACTICE

Determine and reach your target audience.

If you want to grow your practice, you must determine your target audience and get creative about the ways you can reach that audience.

Your marketing plan will depend on your chosen audience. For example, you probably should not advertise in a newspaper if your goal is to reach young people, but it is also important not to underestimate how many people in older generations might find you on the internet.

Consider hiring a designated staff member for your social media efforts. Social media platforms offer great avenues to reach audiences of all demographics. If you are not taking advantage of these platforms, you are missing out on tremendous opportunities to grow your practice. Use these tools appropriately and effectively, which often means hiring a staff member specifically for this

task. In my practice, we use social media not only to advertise our services, but also to educate patients. We upload photos and videos to educate people about devices or procedures, and we livestream events to help patients understand exactly what we can do for them.

Encourage your patients to post reviews of your practice. Ratings and reviews are huge drivers of traffic for any business, and the business of ophthalmology is no exception. In our practice, patients receive a note before they go home that asks them to share their experiences on Facebook. You should say to patients, “I really appreciate that you enjoy your new vision. I really appreciate that you pointed out how nice my staff was to you. Would you mind sharing your experience online?”

If you have treated a famous athlete, entertainer, local newscaster, or other celebrity, this can be a great promotional opportunity. Ask the person to share with his or her followers the experience and how your services were helpful. You can also let your local news station know that you, an expert in your field, are available to educate viewers about a new buzzworthy product or procedure.



CREATING A PREMIUM EXPERIENCE

If you offer a premium service, you need a premium office. *Premium* can be as simple as keeping a clean waiting room with nice furniture; WiFi access; and snacks, coffee, or other beverages. You don't want your patients to feel like they are being run through a mill. They should be as comfortable as possible.

The true premium experience should start from the moment patients walk through the door and last until the moment they get home. Train your staff to send patients home in a comfortable state, whether that means holding their hand as they are walked to the door or telling them jokes during the procedure to ease their minds. In our practice, we adopt an *ABCDEF strategy*, which I learned from the market strategist Joshua Smith. When it comes to working with patients:

- Ask questions;
- Be informed;
- Comfort them;
- Document everything;
- Educate; and
- Follow up.

CONCLUSION

Great marketing starts and ends at home. Hire and train your staff to be the ambassadors of your practice's brand, and do your part to ensure that your practice is on the right track. Call your office every now and then masquerading as a patient and see firsthand what the experience is like. Try to view your website from a patient's perspective—someone who doesn't know what a multifocal or extended depth of focus IOL is. Does the terminology on your website help prospective patients understand what you offer and how you can help them?

Try adopting some of these suggestions and see whether they help you refine your target audience and grow your practice as a result. ■

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