

THE ART OF PATIENT REFERRALS



Two surgeons, one in Europe and one in the US, describe their strategies for generating patient referrals.



BY PROF. AMIR-MOBAREZ PARASTA, MD; AND BLAKE WILLIAMSON, MD, WITH AMBER PERKINS, MARKETING DIRECTOR

Building Trust Beyond the Surgery – The Patient Referral Strategy of Munich Eye

PROF. AMIR-MOBAREZ PARASTA, MD

My practice, Munich Eye, is located in the heart of Munich, Germany, and is part of a private, owner-managed ophthalmology network with two outpatient clinics and an ambulatory surgical center. We maintain full autonomy and clinical independence and are not affiliated with any corporate chain or investor-backed network. Our decisions are solely guided by medical standards and patient benefit. We are a family-led eye care provider focused on quality over quantity, treating around 2,000 patients surgically each year.

Our subspecialties include refractive surgery, cataract surgery with a refractive focus, keratoconus treatment, vitreoretinal procedures such as floater surgery, and aesthetic eyelid surgery, as well as some pediatric procedures.

EARNING PATIENT REFERRALS THROUGH TRUST AND GOOD COMMUNICATION

My team and I have learned that personal recommendations are the most powerful engine for our practice's growth, and that building a successful patient referral system is not about asking for reviews, but about earning lifelong loyalty from our patients.

More than 60% of our patients come through direct referrals from previously treated patients; only about 10% of our cases are formal referrals from other doctors or clinics. The remaining percentage consists of new patients who find us via digital outreach or self-research.

Our referral approach evolved from a common mistake: assuming that excellent outcomes would automatically lead to long-term referrals. Over time, even transformative experiences like successful refractive surgery fade into the background of daily life, and patients begin to forget details, even the name of the clinic or the doctor, unless we find subtle, respectful ways to remind them.

Today, our referral system is highly structured but emotionally personal. We:

- call or e-mail each patient at 6 months postoperatively for check-ins, and we invite them to schedule an annual preventative in-person check-up;
- schedule regular follow-up reminders and annual vision anniversaries (“eye birthdays”);
- send printed greeting cards to commemorate the anniversary of the surgery;
- maintain low-barrier contact channels between our counseling team and patients, including on WhatsApp; and
- share monthly newsletters with useful, nonpromotional content.

The goal is never to “sell” a service, but to preserve the emotional memory of the patient's positive outcome, just like hearing from an old friend. Our golden rule: always act as if you are checking in on someone you care about.

A DEDICATED COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

We have a dedicated team of people who conduct patient communications and refractive counseling, trained under the leadership of Prof. Ralph Salzmann, a former brand strategist for major brands such as FC Bayern, SportScheck, and the Otto Group. Prof. Salzmann brings a data-driven, behavioral science-based approach to referral marketing. His methodology allows us to measure and optimize how messages resonate, how trust is maintained, and how loyalty can be encouraged without pressuring the patient. This professional approach ensures that all touchpoints—from pre-consultation to years after surgery—follow the same tone: competent, warm, and truly personal.

SOCIAL MEDIA: EMPOWERING THE PATIENT VOICE

We leverage a wide variety of social

media platforms to strengthen our patient network and build visibility for our practice:

- Instagram Stories for real-time, behind-the-scenes insight and testimonials;
- YouTube for explainer videos and personal patient stories;
- TikTok for younger audiences, particularly about the EVO ICL (STAAR Surgical Company) and SMILE (Carl Zeiss Meditec); and
- paid media campaigns to amplify the reach of authentic patient stories.

Most of our social media efforts are centered around ambassador content—patients who share their joy, freedom, and renewed self-confidence after their surgery. These stories are far more impactful than any commercial. We aim to empower patients to tell their stories in their voice, with full transparency and no pressure.

LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps the most important lesson we've learned is that capturing patient referrals is not about capitalizing on a moment with a one-time ask. They are the result of a process of building trust, offering education, and engendering gratitude. Second, personalization is essential—patients don't remember medical facts as much as they remember how you made them feel.

And finally, we've learned that our best advocates are not necessarily the loudest, but often the most connected. We strive to reach out consistently, but always in a way that respects boundaries and adds emotional value.

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The Referral Strategies of an Integrated OD-MD Practice in the United States

BLAKE WILLIAMSON, MD, WITH AMBER PERKINS, MARKETING DIRECTOR

We work at the Williamson Eye Center in Louisiana, which is built upon the optometric practice my grandfather founded more than 80 years ago. Because my grandfather was an optometrist, our multicenter practice has operated with complete vertical integration between ophthalmic and optometric services since before this approach was popular. Our optometrists perform general eye examinations and offer glasses and contacts, and they also provide the follow-up care for the high-volume cataract and refractive surgeries that are our specialty. We have more than 200 employees, including 14 optometrists, 5 active surgeons, and a physician's assistant across eight locations.

HOW WE FOSTER REFERRALS

Ms. Perkins: We are fortunate to have three sources of surgical referrals: internal referrals from our own optometrists, outside referrals from approximately 20 eye care practitioners in our community (about 5% of our business), and word-of-mouth referrals from our own happy patients (about 35% to 40% of our business). What drives all these referrals is our commitment to excellent patient outcomes, which we achieve by matching the right procedure to the right patient and then providing exceptional patient care.

To help our physicians fit the best procedure to each patient, our refractive counselor holds periodic trainings at each clinic site to review with the staff the ideal candidates for the procedures we offer. Additionally, all our staff have been trained on how to schedule a refractive consultation, and we have started tracking internal referrals for consultations for LASIK, the EVO ICL (STAAR Surgical Company), and custom lens replacements.

Happy patients create better

word-of-mouth than a practice's reputation, longevity, or technology. We have an automated system that surveys patients as soon as they check out. Through this format, they are asked to leave a Google review about their experience in our offices. We also participate in STAAR Surgical Company's patient referral initiative, which is exclusively available in the United States.

REINFORCING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PATIENTS AND REFERRING PHYSICIANS

Dr. Williamson: Clinically, it's important to get to know our patients, especially our new and referred patients. Our physicians always indicate in the chart if a patient is comanaged, and we always ask new patients how they found our practice and who referred them to us. From the initial encounter, it's essential to reassure these patients that they are under good care, and that their surgeon's role will hopefully be a temporary one before we send them back to their primary doctor for follow-up care.

Once I'm finished with a straightforward cataract surgery, I typically conduct a day-1 follow-up visit virtually through an audio/video call with the patient, followed by a 1-week postoperative follow-up visit with the patient's referring optometrist at their practice. This on-site visit keeps the patient's care team in the loop on their progress and decreases the risk of miscommunication.

For postoperative follow-ups for EVO ICL procedures, I will evaluate the patient 4 hours following their surgery for an IOP check. I will see the patient again at their day-1 postsurgical visit, after which I will send them back to their referring OD for their 1-week follow-up and subsequent visits.

For those patients who are pleased

with their postoperative progress, on the day-1 visit, I will record a short video of them talking about how happy they are with their vision. I'll send this video to the referring doctor with a note thanking them for sending the patient to our practice. I think it's important to close the loop and allow the referring doctor to be part of their patient's surgical journey. I believe this courtesy reinforces the value of these vision-improving surgeries and inspires doctors to continue referring patients to us.

BEING A GOOD REFERRAL PARTNER

Dr. Williamson: To maintain patient happiness and continue to foster relationships with internal and external doctors, I believe we surgeons must execute at a high level in terms of the surgical care we deliver to our patients. This means answering their questions and providing them with relevant educational material to aid in their recovery process, so that their satisfaction is obvious when they return to their referring doctors. Again, high patient satisfaction not only reflects well on the abilities of the surgeon, but also on whoever referred that patient. ■

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Important Safety Information

Important Safety Information for the EVO/EVO+ ICL

The EVO/EVO+ ICL is indicated for phakic patients 21-60 years of age to correct/reduce myopia up to -20.0 D with up to 6.0 D of astigmatism. Careful preoperative evaluation and sound clinical judgment should be used by the surgeon to decide the risk/benefit ratio before implanting a lens in a patient with any of the conditions described in the DFU. Prior to surgery, physicians should inform prospective patients of possible risks and benefits associated with the EVO/EVO+ ICL. Reference the EVO/EVO+ ICL DFU available at <https://edfu.staar.com/edfu/> for a complete listing of indications, contraindications, warnings and precautions.