

# Strengthen Your Elective Medical Practice

Constant reinvention of your marketing messages and environment is essential.

BY JAMES D. DAWES, MHA, CMPE, COE

**A**s you read this article, the global recession is weighing on the hearts and minds of both you and your patients. In these economic times, you might ask: "Why would I consider expanding or developing the elective or noninsurance-based component of my practice?" I would propose that now is the time you must learn to compete for the discretionary medical spending available in the health care marketplace.

As the population ages and the burden on national health care systems and third-party payers increases, in the absence of much higher taxes or insurance premiums, the expenditure per patient must—by the forces of economics—decrease. Therefore, more people will be paying out of pocket for health care services. As a result of these market forces, your patients will be more aware of health care costs and how they spend their discretionary health care funds than ever before. Having worked in the competitive US markets of elective LASIK, refractive cataract, and cosmetic surgery for several years, I can safely say the key to success lies in realizing the strategic direction of your practice and assessing the areas detailed in this article.

## UNDERSTAND YOUR PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

How do the products and services you offer differ from the other options patients have when allocating their discretionary medical spending? Can you effectively articulate how refractive and/or cosmetic surgery will enhance your patients' quality of life? How will these

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lifestyle enhancements impact your patients economically, socially, and professionally? We have learned through interacting with tens of thousands of patients over the years that quality of life factors that convey an emotional connection to the patient have the greatest impact on decision-making. For example, for a refractive cataract surgery patient, the lifestyle benefit of being able to read without glasses to her grandchild at bedtime is highly motivating. You and your staff must understand the motivations of each and every patient individually and be able to educate him on how your particular product or service will generate a return on investment through lifestyle improvements.

## CREATE THE PREMIUM PATIENT EXPERIENCE

We believe that in order for a patient to choose to spend his discretionary income on an elective procedure, the experience of the entire procedure itself must be differentially better than the average doctor visit. The experience begins with the first phone call to the practice and continues through all aspects of the procedure and postoperative follow-up care. To create a pre-

## TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Realize the strategic direction of your practice.
- Effectively articulate how elective surgery will enhance your patients' quality of life.
- Assess the patient experience you create, including your office environment, opportunities for communication, personnel, and business success.

mium patient experience, you must first assess the experience you are creating. The following is a short list of assessment areas and key points.

**Environmental assessment.** When examining your office environment, start by walking through the front door. Upon entering the practice, the environment must be professional, courteous, relaxing, and informative. Each hallway, examination room, counseling room, and diagnostic area must convey those same characteristics. Most challenging is creating an environment that is both relaxing and informative. Careful placement of internal marketing and patient educational materials must be balanced with tasteful décor that allows the patient to learn while soothing any anxieties he may have about seeing the surgeon.

One of the most successful strategies I have seen is utilizing images of patient testimonials as artwork and educational materials. Tailoring patient testimonials around specific lifestyles and procedures helps patients make that emotional connection that will help them move forward in the buying decision-making process.

**Communication assessment.** In addition to the physical environment, it is equally or more important to assess the environment created on the telephone lines and through other forms of passive and active communication. Patients must be able to speak to a person as soon as possible without delays and waiting on hold; they must be able to quickly get answers to questions that arise out of the practice's marketing efforts.

Although passive patient education, such as flatscreen monitors with video loops, messages on hold, and well-placed brochures and literature, are helpful, nothing can take the place of an active, face-to-face encounter with another person. It is important to remember that although we are providing life-changing medical services, these procedures have risks; therefore, a thorough understanding of the procedure must occur in an environment of trust and confidence.

**Personnel assessment.** The most important part of any organization is the human element—people make or break all other investments. For the staff to deliver a differentially better experience, they must understand what

that experience is. In addition to constantly assessing the staff's customer service performance and providing continual training, the staff must understand the technology, lifestyle benefits, and pricing of the procedures offered.

We create talking points and word tracks for all staff to help provide harmonious communication of our desired message. The front desk staff, technicians, counselors, surgeons, clinical assistants, and check-out staff must be able to not only inform the patient but reaffirm his choice to move forward with the procedure. Role playing and constant monitoring of the staff's ability to communicate the desired messages must be routinely performed.

The human element is the most difficult piece of the puzzle to manage; however, it produces the greatest return on investment. We also strongly believe in providing clear and immediate incentives to our staff based on demonstration of superior customer service and achievement of our practice's goals.

**Business success assessment.** Each surgeon and practice differs in his product and service offerings. Elective medical surgeons must evaluate their success in several areas so that they may continually develop and improve their business model. Below, I offer a few key metrics that each practice should monitor on a regular basis:

- marketing leads generated by source (eg, Web site, seminars, etc);
- cost per lead generated by product line;
- leads converted to appointments by product line;
- appointments converted to procedure by product line;
- quantitative and qualitative patient satisfaction by product line; and
- postoperative patient satisfaction per procedure.

Continual monitoring of the practice's success is important; however, more important is the process of sharing data with the staff and surgeons. Such tactics will allow constant reinvention of the practice's marketing messages, patient communication, and environment to ensure that you are exceeding patients' expectations and meeting your practice goals for the delivery of a premium patient experience. ■

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