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Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today

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Creating the Ultimate Patient Experience



This supplement is based on a series of videos that discuss methods for creating the ultimate patient experience.

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CHELSEA ASMUS

Director of Project Development
Vance Thompson Vision
Sioux Falls, SD



PHIL JACKSON

Director, Refractive Services
Associated Eye Care
Stillwater, MN



JAMES D. DAWES, MHA, CMPE, COE

Formerly: Center for Sight
Founder and President, J. Dawes Group, LLC
Principal and Director, BK Ventures Group, LLC
Sarasota, FL



JOAN WAHLMAN

Marketing Director
Mann Eye Institute & Laser Centers,
Houston & Austin, TX



CINDY HASKELL

Formerly: Marketing Director
Gordon-Weiss-Schanzlin Vision Institute
Cindy Haskell Consulting
Encinitas, CA



JONATHAN WEST

Chief Executive Officer
Formerly: Tidewater Eye Centers, P.C.
Precision Eye Care
North Carolina

Tips on Expanding Your Practice Population

Focusing on customer service is an effective way to acquire new patients.

There are several ways for ophthalmic practices to attract new patients. These can include referrals from current patients, advertising, cross marketing, and corporate discounts, among others.

This article details some of the approaches that have worked in our practices, which are located in various regions of the country.

WORD OF MOUTH AND REFERRALS

Creating a culture of service enables you to have a strong referral base. Two of the biggest factors for patient dissatisfaction are wait time and the total time the patient is in the clinic. Using direct patient feedback to improve these issues can result in dramatic improvement in patient satisfaction. Pleased patients will spread the word about the great service at your practice, and new patients will call.

Improvements in a practice's overall customer service atmosphere must involve the entire team and should focus on the perfect experience at every step, starting with when he or she calls the office, walks in the door, undergoes preoperative testing, and prepares for surgery.

The Disney approach, used by some practices, identifies seven core ways the clinical staff can be welcoming and attentive to patients: (1) making eye contact; (2) smiling; (3) greeting and welcoming each patient; (4) seeking patient contact; (5) providing immediate service recovery, or resolving a problem mentioned by a patient; (6) displaying appropriate body language; and (7) thanking each patient.

Using an integrated approach to marketing, advertising, and public outreach is also effective at attracting new patients. Standard types of advertising—print,

radio, television, social media, and a user-friendly website—should all be integrated around a customer service approach.

Practices that do not participate in large advertising campaigns should focus strongly on internal referrals and referrals within the community.

CROSS MARKETING AND OTHER PROGRAMS

Cross marketing can also expand a practice's patient base. Often when patients present for a single service, whether it is a routine eye exam or a pathological issue, they really do not know what other services a practice offers.

Therefore, all patients (especially new ones) should be sent a patient services guide in advance of their appointment.

A marketing program aimed at employees of local businesses can be helpful in attracting new patients, because some insurance plans do not motivate subscribers to choose elective surgery. An outreach representative can be helpful in developing a corporate program that provides a specific discount off elective surgeries and identifying businesses that may find them useful.

PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

Using an outreach representative to interact with local optometric associations and provide education to community organizations can boost referral numbers. Optometrists appreciate continuing education events and ophthalmologists' help in ensuring patients return to them for follow-up. Even if your office offers similar ancillary services, encourage



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patients to return to their referring doctor to maintain that good relationship.

Understanding how your practice is perceived by referring physicians, both ODs and MDs, is also important. Having an OD/MD liaison is helpful in determining what

your practice is doing right and where it can improve.

A fully integrated approach to patient care, which includes a reciprocal relationship between ODs and MDs, not only benefits both professions, but also enhances the patient experience. ■

Quick Tips

- Maintain a presence in the local press – focus on customer service
- Make great first impressions with your website and social media
- Utilize an optometric co-management network
- Establish a corporate-focused marketing program
- Develop and promote public seminars to educate future patients
- Create standard operating procedures to deliver exceptional patient experiences
- Hire customer-oriented staff
- Seek internal and community referrals
- Offer patients a superb telephone experience
- Create special moments for each patient
- Use direct patient feedback to create a better patient experience

Putting Patients First to Give Them the Best Possible Experience

All staff members should treat each patient with respect and a smile.

The most effective way to keep patients in your practice is to invest heavily in customer service to create the ultimate patient experience. This begins with exceeding the patient's expectations, which are often defined geographically. What works in one practice may not work as well in another.

PROPER EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Hire staff based on their customer service skills, and train them for clinical skills. Staff members should strive to make the patient's experience superb, starting with the initial phone call. The goal is for the staff member to keep a smile on their face during the call, affecting the overall friendly tone of voice.

The staff member making the appointment should show an interest in each patient by asking why he or she is seeking an evaluation or consultation. Is something special happening in his or her life, such as the marriage of family members or a dreamed-of vacation? Staff should make personalized notes in the practice management software about individual patients, so

that when they arrive at the clinic, staff members can build on the relationship.

Separating the front-office staff from the phone receptionist can also enhance patients' experience. Patients calling the clinic should reach a dedicated phone concierge, which frees up the front desk personnel to focus on the patients in the office. In addition, all our counselors are trained to be able to answer patients' questions about any procedure we offer. Patients are most impressed when the entire staff appears knowledgeable and invested in the practice's success.

MAKING THE PATIENT FEEL EXCEPTIONAL

There are various gestures—and many of them simple—that go above and beyond typical clinical processes and will make patients feel their experience was exceptional.

For example, throughout the entire visit, all staff members should treat each patient with respect and a smile, and use the patient's name as frequently as possible.

If a patient is returning for surgery, a designated surgery

counselor assigned to the patient should schedule the procedure and explain what to expect leading up to and the day of surgery. The counselor can also be the one to show the patient where to check in on their surgery day, walk them out of the office, and most importantly, thank him or her for coming. If your practice is in an area that needs parking validation, this can also be done at this time.

To enhance a patient's experience on his or her surgical day, make sure the financial side of the transaction is complete before the patient arrives. During surgery, having a staff member hold the patient's hand if he or she is anxious.

IMPROVING WAIT TIMES

To keep patients calm during the wait time, communicate with them continuously to let them know they are not forgotten. Always make patients feel relaxed and comfortable throughout their visit.

A time-stamping process can help improve patients' wait times. Measuring the time they arrive, the time they finish checking in, their time with the technician, etc., can help set benchmarks for acceptable durations. This is helpful for procedures such as a routine eye exam, a contact lens exam, LASIK, and cataract to name a few. Examine processes from their individual components to make them simpler and more efficient.

PATIENT EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Wait times can be an opportunity to educate patients in various ways. They may watch a video or read a brochure about their particular procedure or on other services offered by the practice. During this time, patients could also apply for the CareCredit credit card online or on their smart phones. Some practices use this time for office counselors to conduct one-on-one interviews to find out who may be interested in cataract surgery. Also provide information on advanced-technology IOLs for all patients so they are aware of all their lens options before surgery.

Quick Tips

- Physical environment of your office should be outstanding
- Provide a welcoming environment that supports patients' needs; immediately establish a personal rapport with the patient
- Use dilation wait time to learn about patients
- Measure patient wait and cycle times; set benchmarks to make internal processes simpler and faster
- Use every tool available to ensure each patient is well-educated about his or her procedure; train all counselors on all procedures; require regular training to stay current
- Inform all patients about all services offered and pricing options; discuss pricing early and often
- Handle all financial discussions and transactions prior to the surgery date
- Have counselors walk patients to the door and explain how their surgery will go

If patients choose to learn more about the procedure they are scheduled for, give them an opportunity to watch a short video about the procedure, and provide them with printed information to take home and show their families, including the affordable pricing options.

Surveys and in-office research can help determine exactly what your patients want, and each practice should try to cater to their patient demographic. Trial and error will provide the results needed to make your patients happy. ■

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Preparing Patients for Surgery and Securing Referrals

Patient surveys can become a tool for each department to use to either improve the overall experience or to reward your staff for a job well done.

Properly preparing a patient for surgery begins by making him or her feel comfortable and at ease. This article describes methods that work in our practices, based on information gathered via customer satisfaction surveys.

STEPS BEFORE SURGERY

Interviewing a patient before surgery allows the counselor to develop a relationship with the patient while gathering important information. Our data show that interviewing every patient twice before surgery is ideal. The first interview should occur once the patient has scheduled surgery; the purpose of this is for the counselor to gather and provide basic information about the procedure. The second interview should take place 7 days prior to surgery for 10 to 15 minutes to make sure all the patient's questions are answered and to give him or her preoperative eye drops. At the conclusion of this meeting, thank the patient and give him or her a number to contact the counselor if any questions arise prior to surgery. Having the surgeon call the patient the night before the scheduled surgery is another way to make the patient feel reassured and valued.

To make surgery day as stress-free as possible, collect all co-pays and/or deductibles beforehand.

THE DAY OF SURGERY

Make sure all physicians and staff members are trained to make the patient feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible on his or her surgery day.

For example, providing a small pillow for the patient to hold on their stomach during a procedure and having a technician hold the patient's hand can help reassure a patient and make him or her feel at ease. Some patients may enjoy light-hearted music playing. Asking for continuous feedback will help determine what is best for each patient and can be a real differentiator to help achieve high levels of patient satisfaction and practice growth through positive word of mouth.

Immediately after surgery, ensure the recovery area is a tranquil, supportive space with snacks and water. Offering to take a photo of the patient with the surgeon after surgery can make some patients feel valued. This

photo can be e-mailed to patients, along with a thank you note, which can be shared on their social media pages and also linked to your practice's sites.

DAYS AFTER SURGERY

Automatically send all patients a post-procedure satisfaction survey, and invite them to share their experiences

Quick Tips

PRIOR TO SURGERY

- Take care of all financial arrangements
- Encourage patients to call the surgical counselor with questions
- Have the surgeon call patients the night before surgery to make patients feel at ease and answer questions
- Create an exciting, positive atmosphere on surgery day

AFTER SURGERY

- Provide a tranquil, supportive recovery area
- Immediately resolve any patient concerns and find solutions
- Invite patients to share their experiences on your social media sites; offer a photo with the surgeon that patients can share via social media
- Ask for referrals
- Thank patients when they provide referrals
- Send all patients a post-procedure satisfaction survey
- Share with staff members any positive feedback from patients
- Follow-up with referring optometrists



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on your social media outlets. These surveys can also be included in patients' surgery kits. The staff member who established the best rapport with the patient should ask for an online review.

The post-procedure follow-up visit is a good time to ask a patient for a referral. Sending thank-you messages and small gifts for those referrals helps to foster good patient relationships and additional referrals. For example, a thank-you note with a gift certificate to a local restaurant can be effective.

IMPROVEMENT BASED ON PATIENT REVIEWS

Patient surveys can also become a tool for each department to use to either improve the overall experience or to reward your staff for a job well done.

Have a staff member contact unhappy patients and address their concerns immediately. Key items should be discussed in team meetings. It is equally important, however, for the staff to be acknowledged and

rewarded for positive reviews. For example, put their names into a weekly drawing for free movie tickets or another prize. After all, high morale among the staff is the best way to ensure that patients receive the care they deserve. ■

The authors are members of the Ophthalmic Strategic Council (OSC), a group founded in 2006 by CareCredit. The OSC seeks to identify trends and strategies with other vision healthcare professionals to help grow the overall demand for LASIK and premium IOLs.

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