



How to Improve Conversion Rates

Put patients' needs ahead of your own.



By Shareef Mahdavi

The ability to convert a patient's interest into a procedure has been both the easy and the hard part of the process of running an ophthalmic surgical practice. Historically, it was

easy. Patients called the practice to schedule a consultation, came in for a workup and counseling, and if it was appropriately recommended, often moved forward with their decision to have refractive surgery. Data from a survey conducted by SM2 Strategic showed conversion rates of roughly 50% when measured as a percentage of phone inquiries. That is, roughly one out of every two people who call (and schedule a consultation) will eventually show up and agree to proceed. I am not going to judge this average conversion rate as good or bad. I will, however, offer advice on how to improve your conversion rate, whatever it may currently be.

ASSUMPTIONS AND ARROGANCE

I have spoken with doctors who tell me they convert nearly every patient who walks through their door. No matter how compelling their personality, I do not believe this statement to be an accurate report of actual results. Numerous variables affect a practice's conversion rate: the quality and quantity of external marketing (to create awareness and interest), the skill with which the staff answers inquiries via telephone and electronic media such as e-mail and texting, and the delivery of effective education and counseling once a patient is at the practice. Although past success may have been a winning combination of paid advertising and a counselor with effective "closing" skills, the successful refractive practice of today and the future will need to greatly expand beyond this repertoire. In short, the assumptions of what creates success in refractive surgery conversion rates need to change.

More important is the need to let go of the arrogance that characterizes the entire medical profession when it comes to how doctors "treat" their customers. Arrogance

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comes in many forms. Some are subtle (eg, "We will answer all your questions at the consultation."), and some are not (eg, making patients wait long periods of time to be seen). Consumers often assume a doctor's technical competence, just as people assume the pilot's qualifications when they walk down the jetway to board an airplane. What prospective refractive surgery patients are looking for are those soft skills that transcend clinical capability. (Was I listened to? Was I given every opportunity to ask questions? Were those questions answered? Does this feel like a safe place? Is this a surgeon I can trust?) Do not underestimate a patient's ability to focus on these issues. They often make the difference between a "yes" and a "no" to the request for a commitment. Mediocre soft skills frequently produce a mediocre response (eg, "I need to think about this and do more research").

AUTHENTICITY

What is driving the need to change? I believe it is a consumer groundswell that can be summarized as people's desire for authenticity in their lives. Any daily newspaper's headlines highlight a sad but true fact of modern life. Many of the institutions that people depend upon—including businesses, universities, religious centers, and the government—are failing to fulfill the very purposes for which they were created. Corporate greed, failing educational reform, religious scandals, political infighting—these daily topics in the news have undermined consumer confidence and trust beyond what can be measured on any index. As a result, consumers are increasingly seeking authenticity in their interactions and purchasing decisions.

Books have been written on the meaning of authen-

ticity. In general, consumers wish to do business with people whose values they share in addition to wanting to purchase the product or service. Their response now goes past “I like that (product or service)” to include “I’m like that,” meaning that they perceive a shared sense of values. The success of organic food (eg, Whole Foods Market, Austin, TX), Harley-Davidson motorcycles (Milwaukee, WI), and vacationvacations.com represents just a few examples of a societal movement. Its implications are already evident in your practice whether you realize it or not.

Putting the patient who calls your office on hold for a long period will get him or her to hang up faster than you can say “but wait.” Poor ratings posted on myriad review sites will keep prospective patients from calling you in the first place. Why? A patient put on hold quickly concludes that the practice does not share his or her sense of the value of time (meaning his or her time). The discriminating consumer gives more credence to what other patients say and post on the Internet than what you or your staff says about your practice. In short, the world has changed, and the power in the transaction has shifted from the provider to the consumer.

A BUYER’S MARKET

This phenomenon has been acknowledged by the more enlightened CEOs, who recognize that the hierarchical pyramid structure that had them at the top has been turned on its tip. Customers are now at the top, the employees that serve those customers are in the middle, and the company’s leadership is at the bottom. In other words, executives serve as the foundational support that allows all employees to effectively serve customers. In the medical environment, this idea can best be translated as “we are here for the benefit of our patients,” rather than the other way around.

The idea seems obvious, and most doctors like to say they are patient-centric. Their approach and systems, however, are still centered on the convenience of the doctors and staff. Consider the ubiquitous waiting room, the use of an answering service at lunchtime and in the early evening (just when most customers are able to make phone calls), the reservation of the parking spots closest to the office for the perennially delayed surgeon, and the mention of available financing only to those patients who appear to need it. These cues communicate, however unintentionally, that you are more important than the person you are serving. Each of these cues gets interpreted differently, and today’s demanding consumers will increasingly refuse to follow what essentially is an old script.

CONCLUSION

Do you want to improve your conversion rates? Write a new script. Make sure that every aspect of your practice—in deed as well as word—is evaluated against a single criterion: does it enhance the patient’s experience? Change whatever does not. Each refinement you make, no matter how small, is worthwhile. Ultimately, you will make it easier for patients to say “yes” at the critical moment—during the consultation—because their entire experience has pointed them in the right direction. It has allowed every patient, not just those with a special symbol in their chart, to feel like a VIP.

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Top seven ways to convert prospects to procedures.



By Joanna Chmiel; Joan Wahlman, BS; and Cindy Haskell



Even as the economy shows signs of recovery, ophthalmology practices need to sharpen their conversion skills to capture all prospective patients who call or come in the door. Unfortunately, the economic downturn has given consumers a discount mentality. With online offers from sites like Groupon and Living Social, everyone is looking for the next deal. When LASIK practices sell on price, however, patients start viewing the surgery as a commodity. Instead of relying on price promotions and discounts, here are seven ways to convert prospective patients into scheduled procedures.

No. 1. MAKE PRICE IRRELEVANT WITH VALUE

When you provide value that, in the patient’s mind, exceeds the cost of the procedure, you will find that price is rendered less important and conversions become easier. Today, consumers expect outstanding outcomes, regardless of which practice they choose. If you are not effectively communicating the value of the service you deliver—beyond improved vision—patients can only make a decision based on price.

Value is what is important to your patients, and it will vary by patient and by practice. To find out what value you can offer to increase conversions, ask patients for their input and then ensure you deliver those things and exceed their expectations. Also, ask former patients why they selected your practice. Their responses will help you clearly communicate your value to prospective patients. For example, when a potential patient asks, "How much does it cost?" Your answer should be, "First, allow me to share with you some things you will find only here so you can more easily see that we offer the best value for the price."

No. 2. ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

The saying, "People do business with people they like," is especially true in elective health care. When prospective patients come to the practice expecting exceptional outcomes, they tend to judge the practice and determine their willingness to schedule a procedure based on their experience. That includes what they see, hear, and smell as well as how your practice and team make them feel. To improve conversion rates, you must ensure that prospects like all of these things, which means you must be committed to excellence from start to finish. Does your receptionist sound warm, inviting, and attentive or distracted and busy? Does your reception area look bright, clean, and professional, or could it use a makeover? Details matter.

No. 3. TRAIN YOUR COUNSELORS TO READ MINDS

One of the best ways to exceed prospective patients' expectations and deliver value is to anticipate their needs and desires. The key to exceeding expectations is preparation, thoughtfulness, and training. First, your staff needs to ask the right questions during the initial phone call and record information that can help customize the prospect's experience. A great question to ask is, "Why are you considering LASIK now?" The potential patient will often share a life event or communicate an emotional need, which you can use to create a personal experience. For example, if the individual is getting LASIK for graduation, be ready for the consultation with a graduation card and a celebratory cupcake. Being proactively thoughtful can be as simple as noting that it is hot outside and ensuring that the practice has a variety of cold beverages available.

No. 4. REMEMBER YOU HAVE TWO EARS AND ONE MOUTH

When it comes to increasing conversions, effective listening skills are critical. The general rule of thumb is to ask open-ended questions and spend twice the amount

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of time listening as talking. There is a difference between hearing and listening. When you listen, you are seeking to understand, not just to respond or deliver information. It can be useful to identify and respond to words and body language that communicate "no." When a prospect begins to avoid eye contact, he or she has disengaged. Stop talking and say, "We have discussed a lot of information today. I sense there is something holding you back from getting the better vision you want and deserve. Can you share what you are thinking?" This question will help redirect the conversation to the areas the potential patient feels are important.

No. 5. HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS IN YOUR TOOLBOX

When discussing cost, take the time to be prepared with visual aids such as testimonials, a comparison of the cost of LASIK versus the lifetime cost of glasses and contacts, and photographs of actual patients enjoying life without glasses or contact lenses. Also, make sure you offer a variety of payment options, including a health care credit card like CareCredit (GE Capital; Orlando, FL). Monthly payment plans are especially appealing in today's economy and make it easier for potential patients to fit the cost into their budget and justify moving forward with the procedure. Offering a monthly financing plan is a way to give patients a promotion without reducing prices.

No. 6. GET TRENDY

You do not know how your business is performing unless you track your own trends. Next to patients' satisfaction, the conversion rate is the most important metric for evaluating how well you are meeting your goals. Measure the number of leads that become consultations and the number of consultations that become surgeries. Track daily and monthly conversion rates and compare reporting periods such as monthly or yearly. Contrasting your numbers with other variables that have an impact on your business, such as consumer confidence, offers insight. Analyzing trends can help determine training needs and is especially useful when adding new staff. Most practice management

software has tracking and reporting functions available. Remember, however, it is one thing to have the information; it is another to use it to make good business decisions.

No. 7. ENCOURAGE AND INCENTIVIZE

You use advertising and promotions to encourage and incentivize consumers to consider your practice for LASIK. It is important to treat your team in the same way. Tying performance to compensation is a proven business strategy that can increase conversions, but it should be balanced. If your staff is individually compensated on scheduled procedures, the patient may feel like the recipient of a sales pitch rather than help. Alternatively, if you offer bonuses based on the group's performance, hard feelings could develop if an individual team member does poorly. Your counselors should have the flexibility to meet the needs of the prospect but not enough freedom to give away the store. Here are a few tips to consider when developing an incentive and bonus program:

- Require counselors to meet an average sales price to be eligible for a bonus
- Reward both individual and team performance
- Tie the counselor's bonus to a patient-satisfaction survey

Motivation does not always require a monetary incentive. There are many creative ways to recognize and reward your team for a job well done, like time off, words of appreciation—especially in front of others—or a handwritten note.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the best conversion tool is a well-trained, motivated team that believes the service you provide to patients is life changing. Authentic enthusiasm and a commitment to excellence are two of the most effective conversion tools available. ■

The authors are members of the Ophthalmic Strategic Council, a group founded in 2006 by CareCredit. The Ophthalmic Strategic Council seeks to identify trends and share insights and strategies with other vision health care professionals to help grow the overall demand for LASIK and presbyopia-correcting IOL procedures. For more information, please contact oscanswers@carecredit.com.

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