

Five Steps for Successful Marketing

Areas to consider when advertising your premium refractive surgery practice.

BY JOHN F. DOANE, MD, FACS

Another expert on marketing to help you build your practice I am not. I have never taken a marketing, business, or media class, but I have survived for 10 years in the field of refractive surgery without missing a meal. For those of you interested in growing a segment of your practice in the next 1 to 3 years, this article reviews five key elements of a marketing plan.

No. 1: ADVERTISE—THE REASONS

For many physicians, the idea of advertising their refractive surgery practice is distasteful and not in harmony with medical practice. When corporate medicine pushed for changes in the marketing of medical care approximately 20 years ago, however, the landscape changed. Every hospital system in the US advertises its physicians and services.

There are many valid reasons to develop a plan for educating the public and raising awareness about your services. This sort of marketing provides patients with the background that they need to make an informed decision about their personal care. Although I do not believe that refractive surgeons must advertise or die, I do think that all practitioners have the ability to disseminate information about their practices in a tasteful manner.

No. 2: DEVELOP A MESSAGE

Your message is an essential part of your campaign. Your market probably has a provider that emphasizes low cost and another that trumpets its innovation, which comes at a high price. I recommend identifying and focusing on your practice's strengths from the start (ie, your experience or training, personalized care, long-term commitment to the community, etc). Be sure to include a specific call to action as well, such as a request for a complimentary screening or a call to determine a patient's candidacy for surgery. In essence, you want to develop a mes-

sage that piques the interest of prospective patients and gets them to make that initial phone call.

No. 3: CHOOSE YOUR MEDIA

Refractive surgeons' emphasis should be on developing an effective, efficient campaign, not on being the biggest advertiser in their market. As support for this statement, consider General Motors (Detroit, MI), the stated aim of which was to become the world's leading automaker. The company achieved that goal but is unhealthy financially.

Being efficient is the key to success. The array of advertising media is large. Will you use radio, TV (major networks, local stations, cable), newspapers, bulk mailings, seminars, public talks to organizations, or internal marketing? What works in your geographic region may not be effective in mine. In Kansas City, from 1996 to 2000, educational seminars were very effective as LASIK was still a new procedure. Today, these type of seminars are not well attended in Kansas City, but in other markets they seem still to be a beneficial modality. In some markets, newspapers work great, and in others they do not. Cost may also be a factor and prevent your practice's use of the most expensive medium. There is a niche for your practice nevertheless. A key will be monitoring and measuring the success of your efforts in order to see which strategies work the best for your group (discussed in greater detail later).

No. 4: DEFINE YOUR CAMPAIGN

You could spend your entire budget in one shot (eg, a single 30-second advertisement during the Super Bowl) or spread it out for a 365-day campaign. Advertising executives will tell you that the frequency and duration of your advertisements are of the utmost importance. If your budget will allow for one TV commercial per month or five radio advertisements per week, the latter is proba-

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bly a better a choice. If your budget will buy 2 months of five radio advertisements per week or 12 months of weekly bulk mailers, the mailings are a better choice because their duration is longer.

No. 5: MEASURE SUCCESS

You can only assess how effective your campaign is if you try to measure its impact. Doing so may not be easy. Designate a person or group of people to take charge of evaluating your success. This staff member should make a note if a patient arrives at the practice with your advertisement (if printable) in hand. He should ask patients what prompted them to call or visit your practice. Questions should be specific. Did you hear, see, or read our advertisement? What do you remember about the advertisement? Where and when did you see/hear it?

CONCLUSION

Effective advertising can spur interested parties into action, but these individuals will only schedule a consultation if their first contact with your practice is effective. Make sure your designated personnel can make the most of each inquiry by being well-versed in answers to common questions that arise, displaying confidence to the patient about the outcomes your center provides, and also being able to turn the phone call into an evaluation for potential surgery. ■

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