

LASIK and the Crystal Ball

Millennials are the key targeted demographic market for the procedure.

BY CINDY HASKELL, COE

Oh, for the good old days when you could track LASIK volumes based on the Consumer Confidence Index and feel pretty secure knowing that the number of procedures would increase or hold stable. Market Scope estimates the 2013 refractive surgery procedural volume—including LASIK, surface ablation, phakic IOLs, and refractive lens exchange—to be 602,000 (counting procedures performed in Mexico and Canada). This represents a 6.6% decline from 2012. The first quarter of this year was affected by winter storms across the Midwest and eastern United States, and although consumers' confidence is on the rise and the economy is recovering, LASIK volumes are still lagging.

WHAT INFLUENCES REFRACTIVE SURGERY VOLUME?

What outside factors are affecting the volume of refractive surgery procedures being performed? Is everything relevant being measured? How do current conversion rates compare with those in the past? According to Market Scope, only 45% of survey respondents in the fourth quarter of 2013 were tracking conversions. Of those practices measuring conversion rates, there was a 5% decline in "call-to-consultation" conversions compared with the fourth quarter of 2012 and a 7% decline in consultations to surgery.

Considering that Millennials (individuals born in the early 1980s to the early 2000s) are the key targeted demographic market for LASIK, what has changed? Underemployment is an issue, because baby boomers are staying longer in the workforce and Millennials are competing for jobs. Many Millennials delay employment, opting for more education rather than accepting entry-level positions. By the time they enter the job market, they are burdened with student debt and hesitant to increase it by financing elective medical treatments. The choice to

"Millennials are not motivated by the same factors as their predecessors, Generation Xers and boomers. Culturally, Millennials value technology differently, and how they choose to communicate is different."

have refractive surgery is no longer a decision on how to spend disposable income but rather a decision on how to meet one's commitments when the economy and one's employment status may change at any time.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Advertising strategies have changed due to new online and social media choices. Millennials seem to enjoy customizing their TV and radio preferences by using online options that allow them to watch and listen to content when they want and how they want—with limited commercial interruptions. The marketing arena is in flux, making it challenging to reach consumers and potential patients for elective procedures.

Additionally, Millennials are not motivated by the same factors as their predecessors, Generation Xers and boomers. Culturally, Millennials value technology differently, and how they choose to communicate is different. They also demand transparency. (Do not minimize LASIK's potential risks, because these patients will do their research and will not trust providers who do not point out risks.) The freedom and convenience of LASIK may not resonate as well with Generation Y as with members of previous generations, and Millennials may need more information to convince them of the procedure's bene-

WHAT IS NEXT?

On June 6, 2014, the FDA's Ophthalmic Devices Panel met to consider AcuFocus' application for the Kamra inlay. As reported by Dave Harmon in Market Scope, the panel issued a mixed recommendation for the device. The panel's recommendation is a key milestone in the approval process, and a mixed recommendation is significantly better than a vote not to recommend. Nonetheless, the path forward is uncertain, and panel recommendations are just one factor that will lead the FDA to a final decision regarding US marketing approval for the Kamra.

Other ongoing clinical trials include that of the Presbia Flexivue Microlens (Presbia), an inlay designed to improve near vision. The technology will potentially be removable

and replaceable, making it possible to change powers, should a patient's presbyopia advance. The Raindrop Near Vision Inlay (ReVision Optics), a microscopic hydrogel inlay, is also designed to correct presbyopia.

Presentations at this year's American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery's annual meeting in Boston included results with lenticule extraction using the VisuMax femtosecond laser (Carl Zeiss Meditec). John Doane, MD, reported favorable US clinical trial results that are comparable to or better than those in similar LASIK clinical trials (see his article on page 89). The refractive procedure involves two laser intrastromal lamellar cuts that are dissected, creating a lenticule that is then extracted through a small incision.

fits. A cost analysis of a lifetime of glasses versus LASIK, for example, may help them to see value in the procedure.

FIGHTING BACK

How are refractive practices responding? One is promoting a "LASIK tomorrow" credit from their optical department at the time of the purchase of eyeglasses and contact lenses. It offers the patient a \$1,000 credit toward LASIK for up to 3 years after the eyeglass sale as an incentive to save for the procedure at a later date.

Joanna Chmiel, administrator at Kraff Eye Institute in Chicago, is "recommitting" to LASIK and using this opportunity to train staff on communication, the value proposition, and the patient's experience. All of this has improved conversion rates. "Our practice has always been very committed to laser vision correction," she says. "Current times require an attitude of recommitting to LASIK, as it is a great procedure! With no disrespect to other ocular procedures and all of the technological developments, including laser cataract surgery, we have strongly maintained our 'eye on the ball' in terms of educating patients and prospects on the advantages of LASIK. Many factors in today's economy are outside of our control, so let's control what we can!"

Ms. Chmiel says:

- We **can** always be a step ahead of the competition by providing a stellar customer experience at all times.
- We **can** make a strong effort to maintain and grow comanaging and referral relationships.
- We **can**, and need to, truly understand a contemporary LASIK patient and place our message/promote our brand exactly where that patient is looking for it.

According to Ms. Chmiel, all of the aforementioned can only be done by a committed team who lives this

vision every day, from staff in the trenches, through management, to the doctors and surgeons.

Practices are also reallocating marketing budgets from radio and TV to website and Internet marketing. Market Scope reported that the average per-procedure advertising spending dropped to \$171.73 in Q4 2013 compared to \$212.82 in Q3. Surgeons responding to the survey rated Internet search advertisements as the most effective form of advertising. TV and radio followed with social networks close behind. Review sites, the new word-of-mouth referral source, were not listed but are definitely an important tactic in the social network arena.

CONCLUSION

Current trends suggest that surgeons and their staff must carefully consider whether their practices are positioned to serve the Millennial market in a tailored way. Exuberant testimonials from patients confirm that LASIK is still an offering that resonates with active adults who enjoy the benefits of unencumbered vision.

New technologies (see *What Is Next?*) may create media buzz, renew the population's interest in refractive procedures, and increase the market with presbyopic treatments. Relatively flat to moderate growth, however, may be expected for the next 5 years. ■

Cindy Haskell, COE, is head coach at Spectacle Network, providing national data and usage trends of advanced technology to improve patient outcomes. She helps practices more rapidly adopt those technologies that serve their patients best. She acknowledged no financial interest in the products or companies mentioned herein. Ms. Haskell may be reached at cindy@spectaclenetwork.com.

