

How to Market Your Refractive Practice

Begin with what you and your current facility have.

BY MATT JENSEN, MBA, AND VANCE THOMPSON, MD

Are your marketing efforts producing healthy call volumes and a strong conversion rate? If the quantity of incoming, positive telephone calls could improve, then read on for suggestions on how to increase your refractive volumes with strategic marketing maneuvers starting at the practice level.

START WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

In terms of marketing dollars, it is far less expensive to attempt to convert a current caller into a potential patient rather than to motivate a new person to pick up the phone and contact your practice. It is also more cost effective to market additional procedures or continuing eye care to your existing patient database than to try to lure new patients to make an appointment at your facility. You can start, simply, by focusing your marketing efforts on enhancing your practice's image and by establishing clear and memorable communications.

IDENTIFY TARGETS

Implement your marketing strategy, which should be based upon current research, such as market factors approximating consumers' spending patterns and levels of discretionary income. Invest in the collection and evaluation of professional data and conduct training sessions to educate your staff about the minds of consumers.

Stay in touch with your patients by consistently requesting their feedback in order to be knowledgeable about their needs and to recognize areas in which your practice or team can improve. By understanding what your patients want, you not only can better meet their expectations for vision correction, but you can stimulate them to call in the first place.

STAGE MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES

Focus on exceptional experiences for your patients. Come up with ways to improve a patient's experience before concentrating on expensive media advertising. Involve staff members in the strategic brainstorming process as characters in the production. Your employees who are truly invested in new ideas are more likely to contribute their thoughts

and opinions for implementing and maintaining important protocols.

START MARKETING FROM YOUR FIRST CONTACT

Take the "inside-out" approach by putting yourself in your patient's shoes. Make sure, first, that phone calls correspond with your marketing messages. Imagine your disappointment if you received an impressive, high-quality brochure advertising a positive personalized experience, in addition to a knowledgeable, friendly staff, but instead you were greeted by a grumpy intake person who was reluctant to answer your questions.

The staffers in charge of initial, potential patients' phone calls should have a warm and friendly personality, and they should be informative, persuasive, and confident. The training, support, and evaluation of these types of personnel are crucial to your practice's growth. Consider using scripted material when training intake workers. Information that these employees should communicate includes countering cost barriers, promoting the surgeon's experience, and discussing the values and benefits of surgery. Compensate these staff members well as they strive to grow your conversion rates.

MARKET DURING HEAD-TO-HEAD CONSULTATIONS

Face-to-face consultations should be a continuation of your marketing efforts. Think of the encounter with a potential patient as an interview or audition: prospective patients are looking to you for important information on a procedure and deciding whether to choose your practice instead of your local competitors'. This visit is a golden opportunity for you to listen to and address specific obstacles to the patient's committing to surgery and to provide highly personalized feedback and recommendations.

ADDRESS A PATIENT'S FEAR EARLY

During calls and consultations, your staff must be able to anticipate and address patients' fears before discussing prices or procedures and treatment. Your staff should emphasize your surgical skill level and bedside manner. They should get patients excited about the possibility of clear vision by asking them what they hope to accomplish with

MARKETING VERSUS ADVERTISING

Marketing and advertising are two diverse disciplines, each of which requires special attention. The former refers to how you reach a potential customer. Marketing is often subtle and almost always image driven. A comprehensive marketing plan may include public relations, media planning, pricing strategies, sales tools, patient intake, customer service, market research, community involvement, and advertising.¹

Advertising is direct, persuasive, and informative. It is designed to drive call volume and can include direct mail and advertisements in newspapers and magazines and on television, the radio, the Internet, and billboards. It is through advertising that you share a realistic message of the value and benefits of your practice's offerings.¹

Successful advertising campaigns must be supported by linear marketing efforts. Whereas advertising has a hard dollar cost attached to it, great marketing support—or the ways in which your actions earn patients' trust—can be as simple as a friendly voice during the intake process.

1. McCall K. What's the big dif? Differences between marketing and advertising. <http://www.marketing-profs.com/2/mccall5.asp>. Accessed July 8, 2008.

the procedure. Staffers should ask them to share specific concerns and then address each with positive answers that are well thought out.

It is an excellent time to elicit and address each candidate's apprehensiveness and to discuss long-term benefits. Emphasize value; a procedure takes little time, but improved vision lasts for years.

COUNTER COST WITH FINANCING

In our experience, the earlier we address patients' concerns about cost, the less likely they are to sever the relationship during the consultation stage. Use patient financing as a marketing tool. Regularly evaluate your fees and financing plans. Talk to patients and record their feedback. If you are not currently offering a wide variety of payment plans with true benefits, search for different financing options that will assist patients with comfortably fitting vision correction into their budgets.

MARKETING AS A COLLABORATION

Your internal marketing plan must reflect a cohesive image for your practice. The philosophy behind your practice should be apparent in all aspects of your marketing and advertising efforts. Never underestimate the power of first impressions. ■

Matt Jensen, MBA, is Director of Vance Thompson Vision in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Mr. Jensen may be reached at (605) 328-3903; jensenmp@sanfordhealth.org.

Vance Thompson, MD, is Executive Director of Refractive Surgery for Sanford Health in South Dakota, and he is Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. Dr. Thompson may be reached at (605) 328-3937.