

# How to Create an Exceptional Experience for Patients

Your patients can enjoy their encounters with staff and physicians if you follow specific steps at your facility.

BY MARKEY RATLIFF, MATT JENSEN, PHIL JACKSON, AND CONNIE ST. CLAIR

**A**dopting great customer service as an overall philosophy is key to your practice's longevity in the LASIK market. Simply selling the red carpet treatment to your patients is not enough. It is essential for you to deliver excellent care consistently. This article addresses the gap between your practice's image and reality, and it offers advice for optimizing every patient/doctor encounter.

## ESTABLISH AN IMAGE

Decide how you want the public to view your practice (eg, technology-driven or one with a highly skilled physician). Then, make sure that image is present in everything you are marketing and advertising to your potential patients. Ensure that your practice's services reflect your image and that every staff member upholds it. For example, if you promise patients personal care and one-on-one communication, then warmly greet every patient when he walks through the door.

## EVALUATE, EDUCATE, AND EMPOWER

Today's counselors must follow the lead of each patient rather than a standard protocol. Tailoring your message to individuals will maximize their experience at your practice. For instance, young, Internet-savvy patients may have conducted extensive research on their own. They may want a few specific answers from you before scheduling surgery. Other patients may look to you for step-by-step education. They will probably have more time to invest and will expect you to do the same.

## POINTS OF CONTACT

Your patients' experiences boil down to how you make them feel throughout the process of vision correction. You

should strive to impress patients from the point of contact and with every detail thereafter. From a caller's time on hold to a handshake and a smile at the end of a visit, each of your interactions is an opportunity for you to acquire a new patient.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Your initial phone call with a potential patient is crucial. This first impression can either mean a new patient (and word-of-mouth referrals) or a missed opportunity. Hire positive, informative, sincere intake personnel. Train them to be proactive when addressing issues like technology, safety, and what makes your practice superior to the competition. By addressing LASIK fees early and offering competitive financing options, such as CareCredit's (Costa Mesa, CA) no interest payment plans, you can help ease prospective patients' concerns about price and earn their trust.

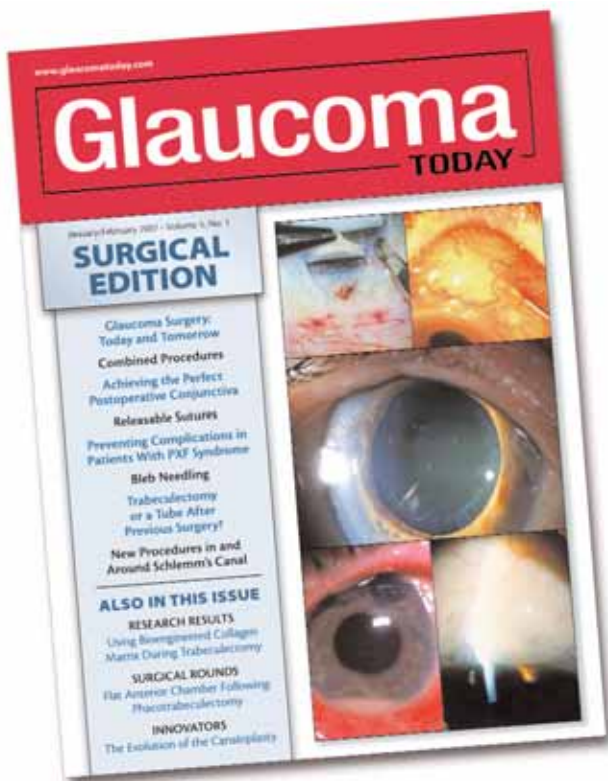
## THE CONSULTATION AS AN INTERVIEW

Try asking prospective patients a simple question such as, Why now? Give them the opportunity to tell their story and to share their motivations and concerns. By asking open-ended questions, you may get all the answers you need and allow patients to sell themselves on refractive surgery.

Be upfront about potential complications and carefully consider your words when discussing the procedure. At her center, Ms. Ratliff relies on scripted material (with a personal touch) to ensure the message is consistent with her practice's image and the physician's style. Words can allay fears. For example, you might say *measurements* instead of *tests*, *procedure* instead of *surgery*, and *creating the flap* instead of *cutting the flap*.

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### BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

#### HAPPY LASIK ANNIVERSARY!

Consider adopting a referral program that rewards patients at certain stages after their refractive procedures. For instance, after a year, send a small gift as a LASIK anniversary present and politely ask patients to share your promotional cards with friends and family.

#### DELIVER A STRESS-FREE PROCEDURE

Your patients will look forward to surgery but also may feel anxious about it. Turn any negative feelings into positive ones with words and gestures of reassurance. For example, at Ms. Ratliff's practice, she and her colleagues strive to deliver a soothing, spa-like experience with little extras such as blankets, movies, and music. If patients seem nervous, Ms. Ratliff offers to sit with them and hold their hand during treatment. After the procedure, she and her colleagues make sure to thank patients for choosing their facility and send handwritten thank-you cards.

#### ENVIRONMENT

Assess your marketing and advertising materials and compare them with those of other local practices. If several LASIK centers in your market push general features, such as personal care or technology, get specific about how your technology is superior and how you personalize each patient's experience.

Spend half a day observing your practice from your patients' point of view. What makes them smile? When do they seem frustrated? Is the atmosphere too clinical to put nervous patients at ease? Ask patients for their input on ways to improve everything from décor to waiting times.

Mr. Jackson and his colleagues refer to the waiting room as the lounge. It has soft, relaxing chairs and is stocked with educational books instead of outdated magazines. A greeting system welcomes patients and keeps them informed of waiting times. Mr. Jackson has found that they really appreciate the extra effort.

#### WRAP-UP

Follow-up care is part of the total patient experience. Use questionnaires, focus groups, and testimonials to find out where your practice really excels and, more importantly, where it needs improvement. Then, follow through on making the appropriate changes. ■

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