Certain fundamental components are common to just about every successful cosmetic dermatology practice. These are elements such as physician skill and expertise, patient demand, and comprehensive financial analysis, planning, and implementation. However, some other characteristics distinguish average practices from strong, vigorous ones, making them enjoyable places for patients to visit and for the dermatologist and staff to work.

Based on my experience adapting my primarily surgical practice to include cosmetic dermatology, I will share strategies that I feel contribute to success. These tips will benefit your practice whether cosmetics comprise 30 or 100 percent of your practice. Even if you offer no cosmetic services, you may find that implementing many of the tactics outlined below will enhance patient satisfaction, encourage loyalty, and increase referrals.

Establish Perspective
There are several good reasons a dermatologist might consider introducing or expanding cosmetic offerings. Ultimately, the dermatologist must have a personal interest in these services and be willing to learn the skills necessary to successfully treat patients. Much depends on the dermatologist’s personal perspective.

My current practice split is roughly 50/50. I am a Mohs surgeon and continue to enjoy this component of my practice. However, after about 25 years as a surgeon I became sufficiently intrigued with the developments in cosmetic dermatology to explore the field and eventually began to offer cosmetic services. Currently, I spend most of my days performing Mohs surgery in the mornings and cosmetic services in the afternoon. It is a comfortable arrangement that works well for me and my patients. It is important to discover the balance that works best for you.

While cosmetic services generally are not medically-necessary procedures, they are nonetheless rewarding for patients as well as the physicians who provide them. I firmly believe that providing my patients with effective cosmetic interventions can be equally important and rewarding as treating skin cancer. Helping our patients look and feel better—contributing to a healthy appearance and attitude—is within the realm of what we do medically as dermatologists.

Just as with medically-necessary procedures and services, our duty begins with informing and educating patients about elective procedures and determining which procedure(s) is right for him or her. Furthermore, dermatologists providing cosmetic services are guided by the principles of offering treatments that are safe and present few side effects and minimal risks. Dermatologists who follow these principles will find that their cosmetic patients are happy. Having happy patients make me feel good; it is personally rewarding. Finally, providing cosmetic services can also be financially rewarding.

Find Patients
After investigating the field and acquiring the appropriate training, how does a dermatologist transform a strictly medical practice to a cosmetic practice? The first step is to attract patients for cosmetic services—a seemingly daunting task. But the fact of the matter is that you already have a steady stream of potential patients walking through your door every day.

Never overlook the importance of your current medical patients. Some of these may convert to cosmetic patients. More importantly, these individuals have family and friends who may be interested in the cosmetic services you can provide. Often the middle-aged daughter of an elderly Mohs patient asks me about fillers after reading a brochure in the reception area. You don’t need a broad (and expensive) public marketing campaign. Focus instead on internal marketing and patient word-of-mouth, especially in the early stages, when you may be trying to contain costs.

Each time you competently provide a patient with a service that is painless and they feel comfortable and cared for, they will spread the word to friends and acquaintances. Personal testimonials from satisfied patients are the best advertisements available—and you cannot buy them.
A Successful Practice

Be Prepared to Say No
One of the biggest mistakes possible is failing to be selective about patients. Recognize early on that it is sometimes appropriate to refuse to provide cosmetic services to a patient.

Be vigilant for physician shoppers. Be skeptical of the patient that reports a long list of physicians who have treated them previously. You surely do not want to be the tenth name on that lengthy list, especially when the patient is speaking with friends, family, and acquaintances—your potential patients. Also consider the patient’s history of compliance or likelihood of current compliance.

Patients who doctor-shop, those who have lots of experience with cosmetic services but minimal satisfaction, and those who do not comply with post-op instructions simply will not be satisfied by the services you provide—even if you achieve excellent results. It is better not to treat such patients than to deal with the lengthy and convoluted follow-up that will surely ensue. Be willing to say “no.” Simply state, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I have anything I can offer you now that will provide the result you are looking for.”

Assess and Understand Patient History
Establishing realistic expectations is a well-known, fundamental element of successful practice. The dermatologist must truly understand the patients’ desires and previous experiences. While most patients are very well informed about available products and services, they may also be misled by optimistic reports. Furthermore, even the most reasonable patient can indulge in wishful thinking with regards to possible outcomes.

If a patient comes to you for treatment because “Botox (or any other product) didn’t work” when Dr. Smith did it, consider the reasons for the insufficient response. Perhaps the previous physician used insufficient material or is less skilled. Maybe the product used simply was not appropriate for the patient’s deep wrinkle or scar. You must be prepared to steer the patient toward more appropriate treatments or combinations and refuse treatment if you truly feel he or she will not benefit.

Ultimately your goal must be to make the patient look and feel better. I’ve injected patients in their 80s with dermal fillers and provided modest improvement that they appreciated. But I established realistic expectations from the start. They knew they would not look 50 or even 60 or 70 when I was done, but they did look and feel better about themselves.

Build a Winning Team
Your staff spends a significant amount of time interacting with and bonding with patients. They are your representatives. They must be effective communicators who are able to build rapport and establish trust. This is especially true of your medical staff. Nurses spend a good deal of time interviewing and prepping patients. Each interaction must reinforce the patient’s belief that they have made the right choice of physician and procedure. Treat staff well and they will convey positive perceptions to patients. Conversely, a “dysfunctional” work environment leads to tired, edgy, cranky staff members who convey a negative vibe to patients.

It is imperative that your staff members know your skills and experience and are prepared to communicate these to patients. Obviously a staff member in doubt should not answer a question, but a well-trained, well-integrated staff won’t confront many questions they are not prepared to answer. For example, when a patient asks about the brochure on Sculptra that she saw in the waiting room, a staff member in my office might respond, “Oh, yes, Dr. Weinkle has a lot of experience with Sculptra. She also has experience with the other wrinkle fillers that are available. Patients have been really pleased. In fact, she even treated me. When she comes in she can talk to you about the best option for you.”

Treat Your Staff
The dialogue above leads into another important strategy: Let staff try out procedures and products. Recruiting “test subjects” from the staff early on allows you to hone your skill, but it’s wise to continue to provide services to your staff. They can then share their first-hand experience with patients, which instills confidence and excitement. Similarly, allow staff to sample products you dispense. Not only can they help you determine which items are worth dispensing, they can also tell patients how good the products are. Essentially, your staff members “sell” you and your practice and what you have to offer.

Establish Communication
Staff members don’t just represent you to patients, they are often your eyes and ears. Establish effective communication systems so that staff members can share important information with you. Ideally, the staff member can “huddle” with you before you enter the exam room to let you know that the patient is afraid of needles, is worried about pain, etc. However, this is not always possible. So encourage staff to place Post-it notes on the front of the patient file or some other dedicated place where you will know to look to be prepared to address the patient’s concerns at the outset.

Also, in my practice, every informed consent form for the day’s procedure is clipped to the front of the patient’s file right where I can see it. Because my staff is well prepared and aware of my style and the nature of each service I perform, when I see the informed consent, I know that my assistant has thoroughly and clearly communicated to the patient what the procedure will be and what to expect. Patients need, deserve, and appreciate a lot of face time—it doesn’t necessarily have to be your face they see.
A Successful Practice

Emphasize the Post-Op Period
Always accurately describe the post-op period, including any possible bruising, swelling, etc., and assess the patient's personal, professional, and social schedule. If they are attending a wedding or a conference in two days, injecting dermal fillers is not wise. Postponing treatment will ultimately lead to a happier patient.

Be as efficient as possible, but don’t ever make patients feel rushed. Don’t usher them out of the exam room. Allow them to gather their things and go at their own pace.

Make positive comments during and after the procedure. Show enthusiasm. Hold up a mirror and show the patient what you did and why you are pleased with the results.

Always provide written post-op instructions. These are an adjunct to, not a substitute for, the verbal instructions they are sure to forget. I publish my private home number at the bottom of each form. I have done so since I started my practice. I am emphatic about the appearance of the office as well as of my staff. The reception area—it is not a waiting room—neat and comfortable. Hang attractive artwork and decorate with warm colors and soft lighting. Play relaxing music in the reception area and exam rooms. Soft music in the exam room provides distraction for the patient before and during a procedure. I even have blankets in my Mohs waiting room in case patients become chilly.

Provide patient education booklets and brochures in the exam room. These not only provide a distraction for patients, they are also marketing tools. Keep displays neat and easily accessible.

I am emphatic about the appearance of the office as well as of my staff. The reception area and each exam room must be clean and well-organized. Each staff member wears scrubs; it is a surgeon’s office. Plus, if a front-office staffer has to fill in in the back office, he or she will not look out of place. I have lockers in the back where they keep their work shoes, and the footwear never leaves the office.

Make treatment convenient. Be prepared to offer same-day cosmetic services, when appropriate to the patient’s schedule. They don’t want to come back (and some may not). Same day service often exceeds patient expectations—and that’s what you should strive to do.

Front-office staff should ask every patient to complete a reminder card that will be mailed to them when it’s time for their next appointment. If you invite the patient back, then he or she probably will come back. If you don’t ask, they may not.

We also ask patients if they wish to receive e-mails about new products and services and offer to add them to the mailing list of our e-mail newsletter. If you mail a printed newsletter, ask patients if they wish to receive it.

Go The Extra Mile
There are so many easy and low- or no-cost ways to make patients feel welcome and appreciated in your practice. This builds loyalty and makes them want to come back. Some successful strategies include:

Say thank you. Shortly after my receptionist joined the practice I overheard her answer the phone by stating, “Thank you for calling Dr. Susan Weinkle’s office. How may I help you?” Now everyone who answers the phone includes a “thank you for calling.” This simple statement means so much to patients who are used to hearing either an automated voice or a curt “Doctor’s office, please hold” when they dial their physicians.

Answer the phone. Which brings me to another key point: have a live person answer every phone call. Automated answering systems are impersonal, often confusing, and frankly annoying. A pleasant voice on the line is welcoming and demonstrates a level of personal service.

Also, make sure every call is answered. Of course your time is best spent providing patient care, and you should not be bogged down with answering phones, but on the rare occasion that you hear the phone ringing and no one seems to be answering it, just pick up the line and state the greeting your staff normally would. Place the call on hold and direct it to an appropriate staff member. Patients don’t even need to know it’s you on the line.

Follow-up. We all encounter patients who need a bit of extra hand-holding for any number of reasons. Take the extra few moments to make a follow-up call to those patients. Also, make a point to follow-up with new patients. In many cases, a staff member can make the call. The patient will appreciate the care and attention. Sometimes I send a thank you note to new patients or to a patient who has provided referrals. Be sure that your staff follows up on every patient communication and request.

Make the Call. When it comes to patient relations, do not hesitate to admit a mistake and apologize (I’m not talking about medical/care issues here). The patient is always right. If there is a scheduling mix-up or you run late and a patient leaves without being seen, then you personally should call that patient to apologize and to rectify the situation (rescheduling at the patient’s convenience, for example).
A Successful Practice

Why Get into Cosmetic Dermatology?

As cosmetic dermatology continues to evolve, dermatologists must continue to assess whether the field represents an opportunity for them. Now may be good time to make the move. Consider:

The Stats: From 1997 through 2004, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Reports, there has been a 44 percent increase in the total number of cosmetic procedures. While surgical procedures increased only 17 from 2004 to 2005, the number of non-surgical procedures increased 51 percent. • The Boomer Boom: The growth in demand for cosmetic services reflects the aging of America. Every seven seconds someone in the US turns 50! Baby boomers are nearly 80 million strong, and increasing numbers of them may seek procedures to help them look and feel younger and healthier. • The Cost Factor: Cosmetic services are not just for the wealthy. Data show that 86 percent of cosmetic procedures are performed on working women. Forty percent of these reported annual income of $30,000 to $60,000. The median income of baby boomers, by the way, is $43,000. • The Horizon: There are numerous beneficial products and services currently available in the US, but there is so much more on the horizon. Products and services now available in Europe will soon be available here. • The Reward: In addition to personal satisfaction, there are potential financial rewards associated with providing cosmetic procedures.

Additionally, set aside time each evening to follow-up with your VIP patients. You know who they are: high profile or well-connected members of the community who choose you as their cosmetic dermatologist. The few minutes spent to follow-up and convey thanks are priceless.

Track Trouble. Keep 3x5 inch index cards by each phone and at the reception desk. If a problem arises during the day (schedule conflict, etc.) or a patient voices a concern (whether related to their procedure or the practice), staff can record the patient’s name, contact information, and relevant notes. At the end of the day, you simply go through the cards and call each patient to follow-up.

Show You Care. I check the obituaries on a consistent basis and send sympathy cards to patients who experience a loss. This simple act demonstrates that I care in an easy way patients appreciate. Some tell me that, of all their numerous physicians, I "was the only one who cared."

Recruit, Convert, Retain

Building a thriving cosmetics practice from a successful medical or surgical practice need not be difficult. Hundreds of individuals pass through your office each week, and they are all potential patients. Once you begin to cull cosmetic patients from this reservoir, success depends on your ability to retain them. Remember, it is six to 10 times more expensive to gain a new patient than to keep an existing one.

The dermatologist with a strong foundation of knowledge and skill and appropriate financial/logistical planning is well on the way to success in cosmetic dermatology. The most successful practices will emphasize personalized service to each individual, demonstrate their high level of care, and focus on creating a warm, welcoming environment. Then your staff and your patients become your most effective marketing tools.

Why Get into Cosmetic Dermatology?