



Proven Business Strategies for a Successful Refractive Clinic

Jan Ashton, COA, Mark Walsh

Trying to incorporate refractive surgery into a practice or building a solely refractive clinic presents many challenges. However, you can succeed with the right program. We offer strategies, tips, and advice for open-access laser users, who use the laser but have little or no financial risk in its operation or that of the facility.

The Marketplace

Most laser vision centers in the United States today share a common weakness: They are for open-access users who have little or no incentive to perform a high volume of laser procedures. It is this phenomenon—many users, few procedures—that has kept the growth of laser vision

correction well below industry projections.

This has occurred for several reasons. One is the notion that laser vision correction is the answer to the ever-shrinking cataract dollar, an idea that is not a major source of motivation. Many who are certified to use an excimer laser are aggres-

sive cataract surgeons who have continued to streamline the efficiency of their practice while expanding into other areas, such as optical dispensing. They explore co-management and other optometry venues to increase patient volume and provide additional sources of patient care. Thus, it is the rare practice that has enough staff, time, or motivation to incorporate a major laser vision correction endeavor into an already-stressed schedule.

Another challenge is the daunting task of converting a pathology-based practice into a sales-oriented retail space. Inexperienced management, unmotivated staff, and expensive advertising budgets can leave today's practice sitting on the sidelines of modern refractive surgery, even with the availability of open-access lasers.

Defining the Patient

It is important to understand the pattern of laser vision correction growth before you begin to develop your own program. New technologies and increased competition often create confusion in the marketplace. Prospective patients can be flooded with technical terms (e.g., excimer laser, PRK, LASIK). That's why it's important to use one general term, such as *laser vision correction*, so patients don't have to sort through the medical jargon.

Laser vision correction has been described as an "evangelical" procedure; patients who have it often talk very positively of their experience. Thus, word-of-mouth is a valuable

It is the rare practice that has enough staff, time, or motivation to incorporate a major laser vision correction endeavor into an already-stressed schedule.

tool that, when combined with a good marketing plan, results in consumer response. Word-of-mouth educates; marketing motivates.

Advertising

Several simple techniques can be used to develop a conservative, yet dynamic laser vision correction program. The first important step is *don't* advertise, at least not right away. The temptation to spend funds on newspaper or radio advertisements must be checked until a cohesive internal marketing and training plan is implemented. A good strategy is to develop a patient education program and a well-thought-out strategic plan before spending even one advertising dollar.

The cost of advertising varies depending on the market. Although it is best to start out with a conservative budget, make sure that it is large enough to enable you to reach the widest possible market the most number of times over the longest period. A slow approach allows your staff to become accustomed to dealing with refractive surgery patient inquiries and processing.

Patient Education and Tracking

There is a marked distinction between marketing and patient education. The goal of marketing can be summed up as "making the phone ring." Marketing efforts are to generate interest about laser vision correction. The goal of patient education is informed consent, and the importance of meeting this goal cannot be overstated. You must make sure that all patients considering laser vision correction are aware of the potential risks and rewards.

Two often-quoted reasons people give for not choosing laser vision correction are fear and money. Financing plans should be offered up front in your internal and external marketing efforts. Giving patients the financing option will ease their concerns about this potentially uncomfortable subject. You can address the fear by providing a sound patient education program that clearly addresses the risks while highlighting the benefits of the procedure as well as the benefits of having it done at your practice (e.g., physician experience, extended follow-up visits).

Inexperienced management, unmotivated staff, and expensive advertising budgets can leave today's practice sitting on the sidelines of modern refractive surgery.

Patient tracking can help streamline your clinic operations by eliminating redundant entries. Many contact management software programs are commercially available to gather such information and sort it. These programs can be customized to detail essential information about the activities of potential laser candidates.

An Open-Access Alternative

Staff training and motivation are essential to your success. Without a knowledgeable staff, who will answer patient inquiries? Scheduling practice downtime for training is expensive. However, training will benefit your practice by clearly defining the parameters of your laser vision correction endeavor.

Start with the basics. Here are some suggestions:

- Explain and illustrate the advantages of laser vision correction and why you want it to be an integral part of your practice.
- Clearly define your procedural goal for the next year and how you intend to achieve it.
- Show your staff the economic benefits of treating patients with myopia and astigmatism; it is naive to expect staff to abruptly change without seeing a direct benefit to their paycheck.
- Adopt a certain "look" to your practice. Just as your optical shop promotes frames and contact lenses, your reception

area and examination lanes should promote laser vision correction. Laser and promotional companies offer high-quality educational materials including posters, videotapes, and information packages.

The next logical step is to combine these principles and market to the myopic patients in your database. Instead of trying to attract new patients, initiate a direct mail campaign using a list of your own patients who fit specific criteria; for example, patients 29 to 45 years old with myopia or astigmatism. This group has shown the most promise in responding to laser vision correction because of their loyalty to their ophthalmologist, status in life, and presbyopic status.

Start with a direct mail campaign that is staged to provide two to three "hits" (pieces of follow-up information) to your database. Send an initial mailer that highlights the advances of laser refractive surgery and your physician's expertise in the procedure. Subsequent mailers should focus on the affordability of laser vision correction through payment plans and answer frequently asked questions about the procedure.

When designing your piece, remember the caveat of direct mail: People receive only two types of mail: bills and bulk. To guarantee a response, your direct mail piece must be packaged to be opened by someone who recognizes your practice logo, name, or address. The news-

letter format has proven effective for many practices.

Preparing the Right Tools

Any promotional campaign must have effective tools. The first is a staff member to manage your program. This is often the administrator or front desk manager. This person oversees the paths of the laser vision correction purchase by breaking down the role each individual person, department, or activity plays in "selling" laser vision correction. For example, your external promotion (e.g., direct mail) must motivate patients to contact you. Your front desk must motivate and assist patients to your examination lanes. Your technical staff must educate and process patients. Finally, the physician must confidently recommend and perform the laser vision correction procedure.

Summary: The Road Ahead

For several reasons, laser vision correction will likely evolve into a community-based procedure rather than an industry dominated by nationwide "ACME Vision" chains. People with myopia and astigmatism already put much trust and faith in their eyecare providers. It is this existing positive relationship that today's ophthalmic practice can use to its advantage.

Laser vision correction is an evolution of refractive surgery that can be accommodated as part of the overall vision care supplied by most practices today. It is never too early to begin educating your patients about your involvement in this modern alternative to other forms of vision correction. **æ**

Jan Ashton, COA, is the eastern regional manager for ClearVision Laser Centers, Denver, Colorado. Mark Walsh is a laser vision correction consultant, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.