

# Surefire Ways to Attract New Refractive Patients

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Finally, after a slow couple of years, consumers are waking up to the life-changing possibilities of modern refractive surgery. Articles on photorefractive keratectomy (PRK) and laser in situ keratomileusis (LASIK) are appearing in popular magazines. Even America's sweetheart, Meg Ryan, proclaimed her desire to "have her eyes lasered" in the movie *You've Got Mail*. It seems laser vision correction (LVC) has reached the mainstream.

Potential LVC patients are everywhere. They are looking into their options, checking out various surgeons, evaluating financing plans, and talking to their co-workers and neighbors. They *will* be patients

somewhere this year . . . will it be at your practice?

This article is a guide to help prepare your mind, heart, and practice for these lucrative new patients. Some suggestions are familiar and

time-tested and have been used successfully for years by the busiest practices to attract cataract patients. Some are new and unique to the special needs of the younger, more affluent, more mobile, more fickle consumers

who, in general, will be considering whether to choose you as their “laser” practice. Each guideline pinpoints an internal process that needs attention in your practice if you’re serious about success in the competitive world of refractive surgery.

**1**

### Make your surgery the best it can be.

A word of advice to physicians: “Train like a surgeon. . . . Think like a patient.” Innovate. Observe surgeons you respect. Listen to your patients. Try to find ways to improve your technique and delivery of care. If you haven’t already, join and participate in professional associations with a refractive interest.

**2**

### Make your service the best it can be.

Another suggestion: “Train like a surgeon. . . . Think like a businessperson.” Think *retail*. Think *customer*. These customers (prospective patients) are thinking of making a \$4,000 to \$5,000 purchase. Give them their money’s worth—and more.

**3**

### Believe in the procedure.

Have LASIK on your own eyes. Perform LVC on your loved ones. (Or refer them to a trusted colleague, but show your dedication to the technology by being personally committed.) If you aren’t comfortable with this step, skip the rest of the article and concentrate on your cataract practice.

**4**

### Take time to determine a unique selling proposition.

Think about it. Why *should* a patient choose your practice to have LVC? What makes you different and better? Determining this takes time

and effort and is best done with the help of your employees. Get together and brainstorm. Ask yourselves, “What do we do that patients like?” “What do we do that patients don’t like?” “What are our competitors doing that patients like?” “What’s an unmet patient need/desire on which we can capitalize?” This exercise builds your brand, and your brand is what will make you stand out among your competitors. We are rapidly reaching a time in which potential patients already know a lot about refractive surgery. Now they are hungry for information that will help them choose the right practice. Don’t make the mistake of promoting the procedure; rather, promote your practice.

**5**

### Determine exactly who your customers are.

Do a retrospective study. Pull your last 25 to 50 refractive surgery charts. See who your LVC patients are, where they live (ZIP codes), what they do for a living, where they work (ZIP codes), how they paid for their surgery, who referred them to you, what sports they participate in, why they said they wanted the procedure, and so forth. All this information should be in your chart. If not, do a telephone survey to complete the chart and in the future, start gathering the data from the first day you see a patient. Analyzing these important data will begin to reveal your unique “composite” patient. With that information, you and your staff will know potential candidates when you meet them. You will know how to find them and can then target your advertising dollars.

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### Develop an irresistible offer.

Based on the knowledge you gained in your retrospective study of files,

create an irresistible offer targeted at your potential customers. Examples include the following: “Free sunglasses with surgery.” “Win a free procedure by coming to our seminar.” “Get a free subscription to our newsletter, which contains great money-saving offers.” “Free postoperative care included.” Be creative, and make sure your offer is the call-to-action in all your advertising.

**7**

### Create your communications image.

From exterior signs to facsimile cover sheets, from business cards to brochures—your practice image should be classy and consistent. If you don’t have a professionally designed logo, hire someone to create one. Develop a set of graphics standards that include signature font styles, colors, logo varieties, and so forth. Assign this responsibility to one staff member who will make sure that all letterhead, brochures, and paperwork meet your graphics standards. Image is important because many potential new patients will base their initial impression of you and your practice on the consistency of your communication pieces.

**8**

### Tell the world.

Once you’ve taken care of the internal basics, you are ready to tell the world! Start with your existing patients. Direct mail works great for people who already know you. Think targeted “recall.” Radio is a popular medium for attracting LVC patients because many prospective patients spend a lot of time in their cars, especially during morning drive time. Television spots and infomercials are effective, although expensive. Patient education seminars can be effective, as are information booths at health fairs and special events. Make sure

your patient education brochures, videotapes, audiocassettes, and welcome packets are distributed to patients and especially among office co-workers. Encourage your patients to share the information you give them.

**9**

### Make your practice look the part.

Does your office look like a place at which you should spend \$4,000 to \$5,000 of discretionary income? Look at it through the eyes of a prospective patient and compare it to those of your competitors. Some things to evaluate are exterior decor, your signs, and whether there is ample free parking. Other questions to ask: Is the locale secure at night? Is the common area well kept and well appointed? Pay special attention to your front door and reception area. Are the magazines current and well displayed? What about your flowers, plants, lighting, and art? Are the patient restrooms clean? Are the employees well groomed and friendly? Are the patient lanes clean and uncluttered? Is the surgery scheduling office especially neat, calm, and well-appointed to ease important decision-making? Make a fearless inventory and change what needs to be changed.

**10**

### Turn your telephones into a customer service tool.

Make this your top priority. You can really shine in this area because most calls to any practice are numbingly awful; callers will use those negative experiences to compare how you handle calls. Assign designated personnel to answer incoming calls. Teach them—with scripts—how to greet, gather information, book a consultation, and refer to other designated staffers. Make sure you hire the right people for these important positions. Think this: "Personality + knowledge = success = profits!"

**11**

### Make sure your communication technology is up to date.

Do you have enough incoming lines? Have you designated a specific line for marketing calls? Do you have a message-on-hold, appointments by facsimile and e-mail, and voice mail for specific employees or departments? But please—*no automated attendant!*

**12**

### "Are you calling about LASIK?"

Assume each caller is contacting your practice about refractive surgery. For example, "Thank you for calling our practice. This is Sandy. Are you calling about LASIK?" Even if the caller isn't, you might spur an impromptu conversation about the benefits of refractive surgery or plant the seed for later harvest.

**13**

### Get a web site.

You don't have to be a web-jockey to attract patients to your practice through a web site. Surf the Internet and see what everyone else is doing. You'll see everything from tasty to tacky. Don't build the site yourself; homemade is easy to spot. Hire a professional. Remember your graphics standards. Focus on your unique selling proposition and your irresistible offers.

**14**

### Make your services convenient.

Is it easy to get in to see your doctors? How long would you have to wait for an appointment? How long would you have to wait in your office on the day of your examination? Do you offer Saturday morning appointments or surgery? What

about after-work postoperative visits?

**15**

### Make your services affordable.

Accept credit cards. Help your patient get a new credit card with a \$5,000 limit. (Call your banker.) Offer outside financing. Think monthly payments: "For about \$99 a month, you can have laser surgery."

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### Location. Location. Location.

How far do you think customers will drive to get your service? It's probably a shorter distance than you think. You must have something special to encourage people to drive across town to see you; today, "laser" doctors are everywhere. What hassles do your patients face? Are there construction delays on the way? Is your address hard to find? Is parking difficult? Be resourceful. If you can't move, there are many things you *can* do, such as offering valet parking, sending patients a map, putting your map on your web site, faxing a map, forming a partnership with a co-manager in his or her office, and validating parking if there is a charge. Be creative.

**17**

### Stimulate word-of-mouth referral.

Thank your patients. Thank their spouse or significant other for accompanying them for services. Share the joy when they celebrate their improved vision. Give a "sales kit" to satisfied patients containing your brochures, cards, videotape, and so forth. Thank them for bringing in new patients. Keep track of each patient referred, and send a special thanks to your best referrers. Develop a referral-monitoring system.

**18**

### Track or die.

Almost nobody does it . . . except the busiest practices! Track your leads manually or with a computer. How you do it doesn't matter. Just do it. Monitor daily, weekly, or monthly. This is how to know whether your advertising is paying off. What gets measured gets better.

**19**

### Feed the masses.

Offer coffee, tea, juice, water, cookies (individually wrapped), a basket of apples, popcorn, or nutritional bars. Make sure to provide a cleanup crew and plenty of trash baskets. Offering food and drink can be messy, but it can put patients at ease and create a homey, festive atmosphere. If you think this is inappropriate in a doctor's office, I have failed to teach you that this is about patients . . . *not* doctors.

**20**

### Educate. Educate. Educate.

Everybody needs education about refractive surgery: your patients, your community, and your staff. Raise everyone's awareness. For example, play videotapes in the reception and dilating areas. Use point-of-purchase displays everywhere (in the lanes). Use message-on-hold. Teach at regularly scheduled staff meetings.

**21**

### Be visible.

People do business with people they know or have heard about. Participate in local civic groups, the Chamber of Commerce, medical societies, places of faith, and school and community activities. Encourage your staff to participate also. Network! If you are too shy, hire someone to do it for you.

**22**

### Visit local optometrists.

Ask for their business. Listen to their needs. Co-manage and co-market. Offer staff training to paraoptometrists. Offer seminars at their offices. Give up your optical dispensary if it makes sense to do so. Be professional, ethical, and persistent.

Listen to your patients. Try to find ways to improve your technique and delivery of care.

**23**

### Advertise.

Establish a reasonable advertising budget for the year (3% to 4% of net revenue). Allocate resources monthly, but not necessarily evenly. Plan a marketing mix (direct mail and radio or newspaper and radio) for each campaign. Choose the media based on the demographics of your patient population. Stay with your marketing plan; results take time. Be sure to let your staff know when the advertising will begin.

**24**

### Use radio.

Hire an agency to create your radio campaigns. Use professional voice talent . . . not disc jockeys. Frequency is more important than reach. Know your target market. The call to action is what you can measure: "Call for free screening." "Come to a free seminar." "Call for free video." Use your irresistible offer, discussed above, as a call to action.

**25**

### Use direct mail.

For your direct mail campaign, start with your existing patient base—your personal gold mine. Identify patients who have been to your practice in the past 3 years, who are 25 to 54 years old, and who wear contact lenses or have bought luxury optical items. You can also rent a list based on specific demographics and psychographics, such as ZIP codes, age, household income, prescription required to obtain a driver's license, frequent fliers, gardeners, cyclists, police officers, and firefighters. Check your "Yellow Pages" for mailing list brokers. Mail three times to the same list. Use a "P.S." in the letter; it increases effectiveness by 18%.

**26**

### Enlist your employees' enthusiasm.

Make it fun to come to work. Share with all employees your vision for what the practice can become. Ask for their help. Catch them doing things right. Give them training both inside and outside the practice. Provide the systems for doing things properly (e.g., forms, tools, structure), but constantly innovate and encourage their creative input.

**27**

### Deliver more than you promise.

Lagniappe. Be generous with the "little extras" for patients and employees. Offer optical shop coupons, certificates for lunch or dinner out, T-shirts, visors, fanny packs, bookmarks, movie passes; send flowers. Have fun! æ

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