



Understanding Cosmetic Patients: New Insights into what Makes Them Tick

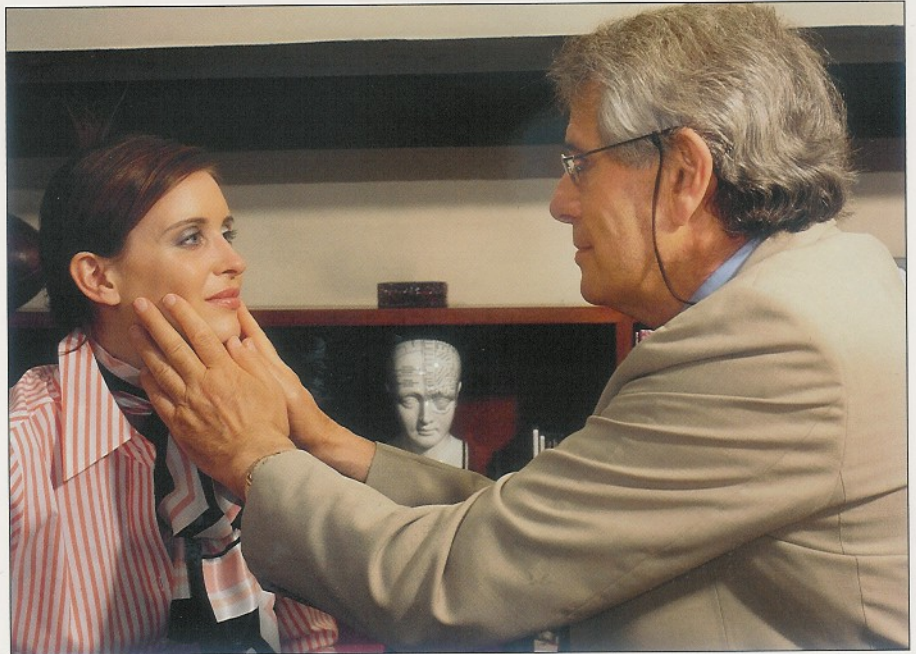
The First of a Two Part Series By Wendy Lewis

Health care is one of the only industries that has fostered the attitude of leaving the customer out of the equation. Whereas that culture may suffice in the realm of managed care, plastic surgeons do not have that luxury. Patient-initiated cosmetic surgery is fundamentally different than medically necessary surgery. Therefore, patients have unique expectations both about the results and surrounding the whole process. When it comes to elective cosmetic procedures, delivering what the customer or patient wants often comes even before what the patient really needs. If you give your patients what you think they need and discount what they want, the end result can be a fatal breakdown in doctor-patient communication.

A 2006 report of the Institute of Medicine entitled *Performance Measurement: Accelerating Improvement*, identifies the following six main characteristics of quality health care: that it is safe, equitable, evidence-based, timely, efficient, and patient-centered.¹ The first three objectives are controlled by the physician, whereas the next three are directly influenced by patient satisfaction.

"Everyone gives lip service to a commitment to give the best patient care, but that standard is relative. The most fundamental concern for patients is a reasonable level of skill and patient commitment. Is the physician not only a qualified surgeon but also a caring doctor who is there for the patient following surgery? The greatest burden on surgeons performing elective cosmetic surgery is to do no harm, and both meticulous intraoperative technique and postoperative care is the key to an uneventful recovery and a result that is satisfying to both the patient and the physician," says Dr. James M. Stuzin in Miami, Florida, President of ASAPS.

Perhaps the next most important concern is that the patient be treated with



respect, as an individual with unique goals. Being treated with respect means being given the information they need and services that are appropriate for them. "You cannot do the same operation on every patient, and another essential element to successful results is to individualize the treatment plan according to the aesthetic needs of the patient," says Dr. Stuzin. "Of course, the patient needs to be an integral part of the process, and what the patient expects and what the physician can deliver need to be congruent."

Taking the High Road

The delivery of a first class product is paramount when you are building an aesthetic practice. This single element will either catapult you to success if you do it well, or come back to haunt you if you miss the mark. The best advice for younger plastic surgeons starting out, according to Dr. Alan Gold in Great Neck, New York, ASAPS Vice-President, is to "Understand

your general strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly know your surgical limitations. Your greatest source of referrals will be your satisfied patients, and you should cherish and cultivate them."

The most important investment any plastic surgeon has is his professional reputation. Once that is tarnished, you can never get it back.

Faced with the overwhelming financial burden of starting a cosmetic practice, some plastic surgeons may attempt to cut corners on the important things such as staffing and building out their facility. There is no way to have a practice that can effectively treat the wide array of concerns of cosmetic patients without creating an infrastructure suitable to service them.

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For example, getting by with a part time person or utilizing your scrub nurse or receptionist to serve in the role of patient coordinator rarely works in the long term. In addition, it is important to choose the products and devices you use with diligence. Everything you offer in your practice is a reflection of your credibility as a physician. Rather than trying to save a few dollars on a cheaper laser or illegally importing dermal fillers, investigate all your options and choose quality and value over price alone.

The philosophy of continuous improvement applies to every facet of a plastic surgery practice as a whole. Never underestimate the advantages of additional training and continuing education courses for yourself as well as key members of your staff. Even the most experienced senior plastic surgeons know that they cannot possibly know everything, and they are not above learning a new technique or a new twist on an established method. There is always something that can be learned from your colleagues, as well as your patients, in this evolving specialty of aesthetic medicine.

As you evaluate new technology and procedures, not every technological advance is going to be a worthwhile adjunct. When new techniques arise, it behooves plastic surgeons to make an honest appraisal to determine whether the potential benefits outweigh the risks. We have all seen many procedures come and go, but you have to make quality the core of your practice values, philosophy and mission.

"In an aesthetic surgery practice," Dr. Malcolm Paul in Newport Beach, California, Past President of ASAPS and National Secretary for ISAPS, explains, "we have to be prepared to look at our procedures and results objectively, and to constantly improve how we are doing things. We have to stay current and pay attention to new developments. Cosmetic patients are very savvy, and they are no longer satisfied to have things done the same way they have been done for decades. They want a plastic surgeon who is willing to change his philosophy or technique as new concepts evolve that offer advantages."

Doctor, Make Me Beautiful

More than ever before, plastic surgeons are faced with the need to educate their patients, set realistic expectations, and choose the right technique for the right patient at the right time. Sometimes this will mean bypassing the newest gadgets or techniques available, for those that have stood the tests of time and peer review. "My commitment to my patients is to assure their safety, comfort, and privacy. With that comes the responsibility of selecting procedures that serve the patients' best interest," says Dr. Foad Nahai in Atlanta, Georgia, President-Elect of ASAPS.

Your staff can also be your most valuable asset, or your downfall if you are not paying attention. Plastic surgeons should take a close look at their staff periodically, and reassess whether they have the right people on the bus.

In this era of total transformation surgery, it is vital to try to get the patient to focus on what bothers her or him most. By urging patients to prioritize—i.e., face vs. body, or eyes and nose vs. breasts and liposuction—you can map out a long term plan for them that is safe, sensible, and affordable. Start with the first stage and hopefully they will come back for other procedures or treatments over time, and you will have a lifelong patient. But patients today have a lot of choices, and there is always a chance that even if you did a terrific job, the patient will never come back for more, will choose another doctor, or will move out of your area. In some cases, it may have nothing to do with your results or your practice. The patient may simply decide that he or she cannot afford to take time off of work, or pay the price of additional surgeries, or repeat treatments with botulinum toxin every four months. Most people just don't have the resources to tackle more than one stage of procedures at a time. It is like renovating your home. Although you

might be tempted to tear it down and rebuild from the ground up, you are probably more likely to do a little bit at a time. You might slap on a coat of paint, change the wallpaper, upgrade to a Sub Zero® this year, and tackle the master bedroom in a year or two.

Although it may be difficult at times to resist yielding to often misguided and unreasonable patient demands, plastic surgeons have an overriding responsibility to ensure that the scope of the procedures they offer serve their patients' overall best interests. It is much easier to get into trouble by operating on every patient you see, than to master effective patient screening.

Another point to consider, adds Dr. Gold, is not to alienate the medical community (which can be a major source of referral) with too much self-promotion.

Plastic surgeons who do not succumb to the lure of overexposure and glitz and glamour may be as busy as they want to be throughout their careers. In many cases, striving to be the "doctor of the month" may have its short term rewards and long term disadvantages. Your phone will ring off the hook at first, and you will be booked for two years out, but you will have lost credibility with your peers and many of your existing patients. The most important investment any plastic surgeon has is his professional reputation. Once that is tarnished, you can never get it back.

Assessing Your Own Practice

Unless you approach your practice with a critical eye, you will never improve. Look at your practice objectively and figure out what needs improvement and what you're doing wrong or could do better, rather than feeling confident that you are doing everything right.

Your staff can also be your most valuable asset, or your downfall if you are not paying attention. Plastic surgeons should take a close look at their staff periodically, and reassess whether they have the right people on the bus. Treating patients well is not something that you can teach. There is no formal training course that can show people how to be friendly, warm, or caring. It is either in their DNA, or it's

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not. If patients are impressed by how welcome your staff makes them feel and the treatment they get, you are doing a great job. Yet if they aren't wowed on a consistent basis, you may not even be aware until you don't see their names on your daily schedule anymore. Establishing a patient-centric ethos in your practice from day one, and monitoring it closely, has become almost mandatory today.

Increasing competition is driving an interest in measuring patient satisfaction in all aspects of the health care industry. Patient surveys are an effective way of enlightening you about your patients' opinions of both you and your practice, and the results can be a very humbling exercise. Cosmetic patients want and expect better service than in the past, and they know they can get it. Many practices are implementing a service excellence

program to reward the staff for meeting or exceeding the needs and expectations of patients.

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1. Pathways to Quality Health Care, Performance Measurement; Accelerating Improvement, INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES, THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES PRESS, Washington, D.C.
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