

The LASIK Rainmakers

Hiring the right LASIK coordinator.

BY MICHAEL W. MALLEY



First, you buy an excimer laser. Then, you start thinking about which microkeratome or femtosecond laser you're going to use. You hire a laser technician and a keratome technician and complete the finishing touches on your new laser center. You finish printing the new

brochures, hang your new, four-color wall posters, and put together an absolutely killer external marketing campaign.

A smile breaks out across your face on Monday morning when your print ad and radio commercials start generating the kind of inquiries you were hoping for. Yep, you've done your homework, and you start to think to yourself, "This doesn't seem so difficult after all."

Like any dedicated surgeon and business owner, you track every expense, every inquiry, and every single patient. You run your expense-to-profit ratios, patient conversion factors, and cost-per-surgical lead ... and then you realize that you aren't hitting your projected numbers. Your cost-per-lead is skyrocketing. At this pace, you're wondering how long you can hold out before you do something desperate like drop your price just to boost your volume.

The problem? Instead of hiring (or training) a competent LASIK counselor, you tried to save some money by putting the least busy person in your practice in charge of your biggest investment. Instead of giving yourself a "rainmaker," you're losing money with every inquiry you generate.

A CRITICAL COMPONENT

The good news is that you don't need a bigger boat. You simply need the right person in the right seat at the right time. You need a qualified and well-trained LASIK coordinator. The role of the refractive coordinator has evolved over the last few years. With the introduction of wavefront technology, femtosecond lasers, and advances in lens implant technology, it is more important than ever that today's refractive coordinators be well versed in the latest refractive developments. They must also be able to listen carefully to patients and guide them in the right direction.

According to Cory Pickett, LASIK Coordinator for Lusk Eye Specialists in Shreveport, Louisiana, coordinators must understand the importance of not wasting a busy surgeon's

clinical time with patients who are less-than-ideal candidates for refractive surgery. "This is why listening to potential patients during the consultation process is of utmost importance," Pickett says. "Being able to create the correct expectations prior to the patient's seeing the surgeon can save a practice potentially thousands of dollars in surgeon's time lost over the course of a year."

Pickett goes on to explain how important patient management is with early presbyopes in the practice. "I find this to be especially true in regard to the over-40 crowd, for whom numerous options have come to the forefront over the last couple of years. It is imperative that the refractive coordinator have at least a fair amount of knowledge on each procedure available, whether or not that particular practice offers it or not. Being able to communicate intelligently about a particular procedure and giving the patient a sense that you have his best interest in mind is crucial to the overall success of the practice. This instills confidence in not only the surgeon but the entire staff," Pickett explains. He relays something that a patient once told him: "I thought to myself, if the staff knows this much about the procedure and what is right for me, imagine what the doctor knows." What this does is build a trust between the patient and the coordinator, which is second only to the trust between the patient and the doctor. The coordinator is someone that the patient can call at any time to answer questions. This also builds a bond between the two. Ideally, this trust is beneficial to word-of-mouth marketing, when a patient can say, "Hey, call this guy and talk to him about LASIK."

Pickett feels that by listening to prospective patients, the LASIK coordinator can save a practice thousands of dollars each year by maximizing the surgeon's time, reducing wasted external marketing dollars, and creating happy patients who will relay their experience to everyone they know.

CASE STUDY

To give you an example of the rainmaking ability of a good LASIK coordinator, I'd like to share a case study involving a young coordinator named Paul S. who earlier this year left one of the country's highest-volume LASIK practices (reportedly performing in excess of 1,400 procedures per month) to work for an upstart surgeon in a rural mid-western town. Prior to Paul's arrival, the struggling surgeon

had contracted with our firm to perform his external advertising. I was initially very pleased with the sheer number of inquiries coming into the practice, but I soon became concerned by its dismal surgical growth. The practice was forced to consider halting its advertising and came close to moving to another midwestern city.

Paul arrived on the scene at a time when the practice's initial monthly surgical volume hovered in the range of 15 to 20 cases per month, and the surgeon had decided to give external advertising one last shot. Within 60 days of when Paul started the job, the practice's surgical volume for April surged above 100 cases per month. The trend continued in May as the practice performed nearly 70 cases—despite the surgeon's 2-week absence. June's numbers were equally impressive.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this practice's experience, however, was the average selling price (ASP) of LASIK during the period of explosive growth. Prior to Paul's arrival, the practice had performed 15 to 20 LASIK procedures per month with an ASP of approximately \$1,000. In April, the practice performed 127 LASIK procedures with an ASP of just over \$1,700!

I wish I could say that my firm's external advertising was responsible for the explosive growth that occurred within this practice in the spring of 2004, but I can't. The advertising variables remained the same; the only change was a new LASIK coordinator.

TIPS FROM A PRO

When I asked to interview Paul for this article, I wanted him to express the most important components of being a successful LASIK coordinator. Following are his responses.

- The most important attributes of being a LASIK coordinator are knowing your product and being able to share your excitement about it with patients. To prevent complacency in a highly repetitive job, you must find ways to challenge yourself while remaining consistent with your message to patients.

- First impressions are huge. During your "opening" to prospective patients, you must build rapport by finding a connection (work, family, hobbies, etc.). Treat every patient like a VIP and don't make him wait. Offer him a soft drink or bottled water.

- During the middle part of the consultation, be extremely honest about the patient's candidacy and discuss what percentage of patients in his target range achieve 20/20 or better vision. You should also discuss reading glasses and the entire issue of presbyopia with prospective patients.

- In the closing portion of the conversation, discuss pricing and everything that is included in your practice's price before the patient has a chance to bring it up. Be sure to offer financing at this point; do not embarrass the patient

by making him ask for it.

- Explain enhancements to prospective patients and perhaps use the analogy of basketball, golf, or something similar. For example, tell candidates that the farther away they are from the basket or hole, the greater the chance is that they will need a second shot to achieve their visual goals. You should also re-address the possibility that they will require reading glasses postoperatively so that patients fully understand this potentiality.

- Remind patients that the next step after a free consultation is not surgery, but rather the dilated comprehensive examination. Share with them information about wave-front measurements, corneal topography, etc., and get them excited about moving forward with the surgical process. Finally, direct patients to schedule their examination either that day or at a time that is more convenient for them.

- Surgeons searching for the "ideal" LASIK coordinator should focus on a candidate's personality first. This individual should have a fairly high energy level, be able to make eye contact well, have a certain "spark," and be easily approachable. Good LASIK coordinators should also be confident in themselves and their product and be able to speak with confidence.

- The ability to think quickly and be in control of the conversation at all times is another critical skill of a LASIK coordinator. Closed-ended questions and the "either/or" method of questioning are great tools for maintaining control.

- Finally, good LASIK coordinators must be happy in their workplace and have a vested interest in their efforts. That means an incentive program. It's human nature to expect that the harder you work, the greater the reward you will receive. Given such a highly repetitive environment, it's easy for coordinators to become complacent and emotionless about their jobs without a monetary incentive for giving 110% every day. The high levels of energy, concentration, enthusiasm, empathy, and commitment required to perform this job 5 days a week, 6 to 8 hours per day, can quickly wear out even the most dedicated employees.

NO SMALL JOB

In closing, never underestimate the talent required to convince a substantial number of people on a daily basis to spend \$4,000 to \$5,000 of their hard-earned money on an elective procedure. A good LASIK coordinator is worth his weight in gold. Take care of him! ■

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