

Going Cosmetic: Keep Patients for Life!

By Glenn Morley

This is Part 3 in a 3-part series exploring the integration of cosmetic services into a dermatology practice.

You've made the strategic shift toward increasing cosmetic lines of service. You've developed a solid infrastructure to support your vision. The final and most important philosophy to adopt as you build a cosmetic dermatology practice is this: when you acquire a cosmetic patient, ***make it your goal to keep them for life.***

Unlike general dermatology, medical necessity is not driving a cosmetic patient's decision to see you. For the majority of cosmetic patients, emotions, thoughts, and feelings about the visible signs of aging drive their decision. And because there are many options available for patients to have their cosmetic service needs met, never take patient loyalty for granted.

Cosmetic patients visit the practice more frequently than medical patients. This is a critical difference for practices shifting from medical to cosmetic to understand. These frequent visitors must receive a consistently positive experience in order for them to develop a deep loyalty to you. Success requires team buy-in and may take time to achieve, but it's well worth the effort.

The Value of Loyalty

Every patient relationship has an economic value. Generally speaking, it costs the practice less to retain an established, loyal patient than it does to attract and acquire a new one. Think about the marketing, communication, and staff resources needed to motivate a new patient to call or email, schedule a consultation, and actually arrive in the office. If you dazzle them once they are there, if you build a loyal relationship and develop a skincare and rejuvenation plan that is aligned with their needs, these patients will return again and again and continue to spend money in your practice. But if you don't, that new patient you spent so much money and time to get into the exam room will essentially become a 'one and done' episode of care.

That's why cultivating the loyal patient is so critical. Loyal patients can spend thousands each year in your practice, with very little financial effort on your part. For instance, if every year a loyal patient comes in for a few injectable treatments and a peel series, perhaps your yearly revenue from that patient is \$2,500. If that patient is loyal to your practice for 10 years, that's \$25,000 in revenue – plus the potential revenue from the 1, 2, 5 or more patients he or she refers over those 10 years. In fact, the "Lifetime Value" of a loyal patient can become hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But let's say that same patient begins to have less than optimal experiences with the practice after only two years of treatments. Maybe a new staff person was rude, or she felt rushed during her last visit. If she flees to a competitor, you've potentially lost \$20,000 in easy, opportunistic revenue dollars over the next 8 years. To say nothing of the referrals you missed out on.

Understanding this value is good business management, and in no way diminishes the important and mutually satisfying patient-doctor relationship or patient-staff relationship. Strive to develop the philosophy that every cosmetic patient will be a "frequent flier" lifetime customer. You and the patient will reap long-term rewards by implementing a sustainable retention strategy that includes the review and potential expansion of the patient's personal treatment plan at every visit.

Create a “Patient for Life” Protocol

Adapt a loyal, lifetime patient philosophy for every cosmetic patient. Establish these protocols, train staff, and make sure everyone in the practice becomes an ardent disciple:

1. Develop a plan for every patient. During an initial cosmetic consultation you may discuss a myriad of options. By the end of the visit, deliver the patient a written plan that aligns each patient need and interest with products or services you confidently recommend. Ideally this plan can be reviewed, financing options presented, and decisions made in the same visit. Few dermatologists provide this ideal scenario. It will be a strategic advantage if you do.
2. Articulate and schedule the “next step” for every patient, for every treatment. Educate patients who believe there is a ‘silver bullet’ for achieving their desired result immediately. Most services and treatments must be repeated at predictable intervals in order to maintain results, so dispel the myth that one little Botox® Cosmetic (or filler, or laser) treatment is all it will take. These services are ‘annuities’ and making a variety of payment options available can build patient loyalty over time. If you accept a healthcare credit card that can be used at your practice again and again*, patients may be more likely to feel comfortable scheduling and returning for their next procedure or treatment. Your ability to communicate options, and make each “next step” in the process clear and manageable will separate you from the majority of practices that take a laissez faire attitude to the patient’s treatment plan follow through.

*Subject to credit approval. Minimum monthly payments required. See carecredit.com for details.

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