

Making a memorable first impression: the key to building and maintaining your clinic

In a sector that is continuing to show solid year-on-year growth, despite the recession, there are more aesthetic practitioners than ever wanting to take their share of the market. However, as the market increases in size, it is harder for clinics to gain and maintain new clients. Gilly Dickons, Founder of Aesthetic Response, stresses the importance and benefits of making a great first impression

Whatever lifecycle stage your business is in, it still rests on one fundamental principle: making a great first impression. This is undoubtedly one of the most important factors that will affect your business growth and development.

When you set out on a journey to turn the dream of your own clinic into a reality, there are so many factors that you need to address. First of all, there are the logistical issues of where and when to practise, and then there is marketing your new venture, having a website built, designing your logo and managing your finances. At the beginning, the list of things to do is endless and can appear to be quite overwhelming.

However, the real problems start when, in the midst of the logistical tasks, during those frantic early days, you end up trying to pick up valuable calls from clients on a mobile, or you miss the landline because you cannot be in two places at once. By taking calls in this way, you have just set a standard that could potentially become a routine way of handling enquiries.

What happens when your clients call?

For those of you with an established practice, the chances are that you may not have found time or recognised the need to audit the enquiry-handling side of your business. Consequently, valuable enquiries may be slipping through the net as you fail



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to respond to the increase in call activity, or you may have a staff member who does not manage the calls as effectively as you would wish them to.

In a sector that has weathered the recent recession and is continuing to show solid year-on-year growth, there are more aesthetic practitioners than ever wanting to take their share of the market. However, as the marketplace becomes more competitive, it becomes harder to gain and maintain new clients. Practitioners' natural response to driving the business is often to upgrade their websites, produce newsletters with special offers, and even offer Groupon and voucher deals, all in pursuit of more new clients. Have you stopped to consider where else you can make an impact on your growth, revenue and client retention?

The first impression, which is ultimately the first point of contact for your business is the best place to start. Sometimes it is really useful to just wind things back to the beginning and review your offering, starting by putting yourself in your clients shoes, whether they are new or existing. What happens when they call? If you are managing this side of the business effectively, they will get a response within a few rings by a knowledgeable person who can book them an appointment there and then. A potential new client may require time to discuss the available treatments; again this time should be available.

Are you answering your own phone or do you have a receptionist? Does the caller get a hurried response, or do they receive your full attention? What about the answer machine—how often is it the first response? All of these questions relate to the immediate response a caller receives, and we have not yet scratched the surface in regards to the quality of the response.

When you are in a rush, or your receptionist is dealing with your patient in the clinic, where is your attention? It is not safe to assume that a new enquirer will simply book with you because you are 'good' at the treatment, because you have won an award, or have a great looking website. If that were the case, the accepted industry gold standard conversion of call to initial appointment would be much higher than 60%, and we certainly wouldn't see the average figure of 45%.

The initial call is a vital step to building a relationship of trust; in my experience, engaging the client effectively will enable you to achieve high conversion rates from 75–90%. If this is not the figure you are currently seeing in your practice, just imagine how much of a contribution it can make to your revenue and growth. It would be a really valuable exercise to do a few calculations at this stage; that is, of course, if you know how many enquiries you get in the first place.

How can you keep on top crunching the numbers?

For some of you busy nurses, it may be time to consider whether or not you know how many new enquiries you have received over the last year. Have you captured contact details for your prospective new clients or have they disappeared into the ether? This then leads to the question: how much does it actually cost you to generate one of those leads? Have you ever crunched the figures to find out? It is a critical exercise to run as it will help you to plan marketing budgets and strategies.

Don't forget—not everyone who enquires about treatment is ready to commit to a consultation; some people are very cautious and will spend a long time researching and

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mulling things over before they will take this step. In the meantime, you can send them an occasional newsletter to remind them that you are there when they are ready to take the next step.

If you have front of house staff and understand your cost per lead, you could consider sharing this information with them. The person who handles new enquiries may benefit from understanding their value to your business, both in terms of the cost of generating the lead in the first place, and then the prospective value of new clients should they commit to treatment.

Every call is equally important and you can manage them effectively by sharing this information. The reality is that most clinic staff have absolutely no idea of the value of the new enquiries, so may not give them the full attention that they require. When making a choice between attending to the patient in reception or the phone, it is only to be expected that staff focus on the person in front of them, even if they are simply passing the time of day.

How are you treating your existing clients?

Consideration should also be given to the impact your call response may have on your existing clients. In a society where there are increasing demands on both our time and resources, people are often running to a tight schedule. When a client struggles to reach you to make an appointment, there is always a risk that he or she may choose to move on to a new practitioner where it is simpler to make an appointment; this is



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a particular risk if they have only been to you once before and your relationship with them is still new.

It is widely recognised that you will need patients to visit you 2–3 times before they can be classed as a regular and loyal customers; this means that you need to work hard to keep them on board. Ensuring that your practice can be reached quickly and an appointment can be given there and then will support good client retention. It is acknowledged that a new client costs 16 times more to gain than maintaining an existing one.

What happens to clients that are lost or running late?

Do they get through to someone who can help them to find you, or to let you know that they will be late? Do they come through your door stressed and harassed, not in the best frame of mind to be making decisions about procedures, or to be receiving treatment? Again, this is something that can affect your business, causing both yourself and your clients frustration. I am sure that some of you may even have experienced a situation where a client has become lost and has decided that fate is telling them to go home as it is 'not meant to be'.

Conclusion

To summarise, these are the key areas for you to consider:

- ▶ Running your practice from your mobile phone—is this causing you problems?
- ▶ Using an answer machine during normal office hours—does this put clients off?
- ▶ Understanding your cost per lead—is your marketing investment paying off?
- ▶ Training your receptionist thoroughly—they are your client's first impression of your service.
- ▶ Take time to talk to prospective new clients—are you able to accommodate these longer calls?
- ▶ Accessibility—are you available for your valuable existing clients to make appointments easily?
- ▶ Review your clinic's enquiry-handling provision regularly
- ▶ Continually assess your call-to-appointment conversion and your client retention statistics, ensuring that you are making the most of all opportunities.

You are encouraged to explore these situations and consider your current call-handling approach so that you will be able to identify areas of weakness. If you have identified some issues to be addressed, you are guaranteed to see results. ◀ JAN