

# AHEAD OF THE competition

**Gilly Dickons** on how to deal with growing competition in the sector

**O**ver the past decade there has been a huge surge in demand for aesthetic treatments across the UK, with clinics springing up on every high street. Thousands of medically trained professionals are now offering aesthetic treatments and, with more and more aestheticians and beauty therapists entering the market place too, the competition is growing rapidly year on year.

Whether you are running a well-established clinic or are in the process of setting up a new practice, you can't afford to sit back and assume that you won't be affected by the growing competition in this sector. It is essential to protect the valuable business you have by retaining clients, while at the same time working hard to attract new ones in this challenging market place. Whether you are a new practitioner looking to hit the ground running in the industry, or a long-established clinic with an extensive client base, you will know how important, and challenging, it is to stay ahead of the curve, keeping up with new trends and developments, as well anything else that comes your way to impact your business.

One key to keeping up with this ever-growing sector is to ensure that you have based your business on a very strong foundation built on research and knowledge. With this in mind, there is a wide range of things that you can do and work on to ensure that your clinic stays ahead of the competition.

Laying these foundations involves being knowledgeable about your existing clients, potential new customers, and what your competitors are up to.



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The research that I will go on to suggest is something that you can do for yourself, or, if you are struggling to find the time yourself, you could delegate to an employee, friend or relative as the steps are fairly simple to carry out. The important thing here is that you acquire the information needed to help influence your business decisions.

### IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET MARKET

Are you clear about who your target market is? You need to consider who you want to attract to your practice by taking into account their age, gender, treatment preferences and spending habits. I would suggest that you undertake some research into different age groups, their communication styles and buying habits. For example, how do Millennials differ from Baby Boomers? Have you heard of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1976)? You will benefit from having a basic understanding of the changing generations, what influences their choices and how their buying habits differ. You can find lots of information online through a quick search.

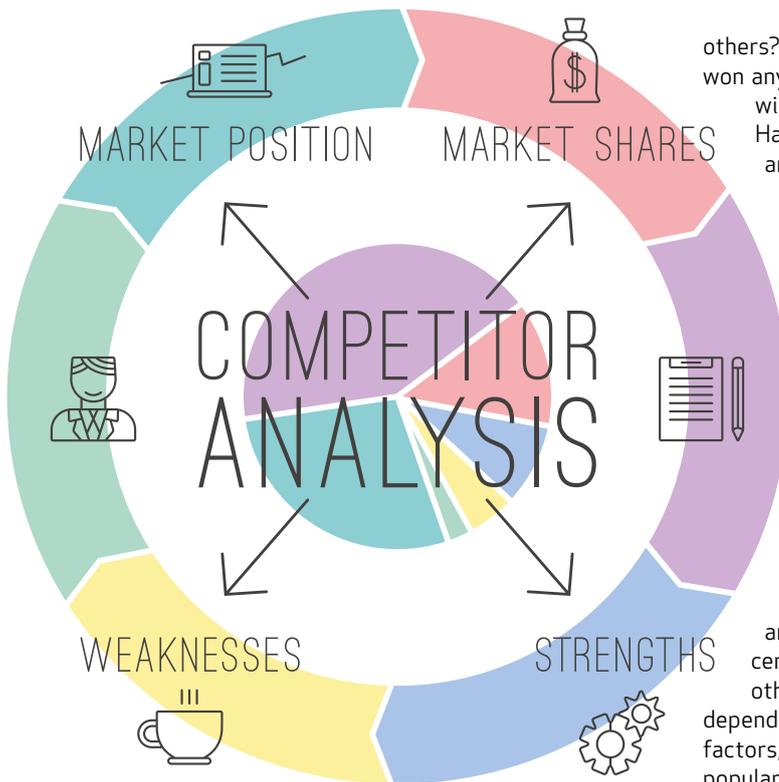
Within this kind of research you should also consider your treatment portfolio. Which treatments do you currently offer, or what are you planning to offer? What is currently trending in the media and amongst your existing clients? What are your strongest competitors offering and promoting? What industry research is available? Look at your target market and link the treatment trends with them. What treatments are Millennials undertaking? What procedures are the most popular with Generation X?

You need to consider where your practice is located: are you in an affluent area? Based in a town centre? On a high street with a shop front? In a home clinic in the suburbs? Differing locations will require slightly different marketing messages to attract potential clients.

### SO WHAT WILL DIFFERENTIATE YOU FROM YOUR COMPETITION?

In today's busy marketplace you have to have something to give you the edge. So what is there about you and your practice that makes you stand out from your competitors?

Here at AR we talk a lot about USPs (Unique Selling Propositions), but this is because they are so important to your business and we truly believe in them. A business's USPs are features or characteristics that set the business apart from the >



competition, in other words – what do you have that your competitors don't?

Identifying your USPs can take a lot of thought and consideration. With this in mind a good place to start would be to try to identify your competitors' USPs by looking at their websites and promotional materials – we will cover more on this later in the article.

For your own USPs, you can think about breaking them down into three Ps: Practitioner, Practice, and Procedures:

#### **Practitioner:**

The identity of the person administering aesthetic treatments is important to clients. They want to know who is treating them, and about their relevant experience in order to establish trust. As the practitioner, you should think about identifying at least four key USPs for yourself. These could be based on fact or feedback. An example of a fact would be to state how many years' experience you have, or what qualifications you hold. Feedback, on the other hand, comes from any testimonials and reviews where clients have commented on you as a practitioner.

#### **Practice:**

The place where clients receive their treatments is crucial to potential customers. Think about where you are based: what are the best things about the premises and the area? Think about the building in which your clinic is situated. For example, if you practice from a beautiful listed building, you should promote it! Again try to look for four key USPs using facts and feedback. Has anyone commented on the environment or the atmosphere in clinic? Use any good feedback to your advantage.

#### **Procedures:**

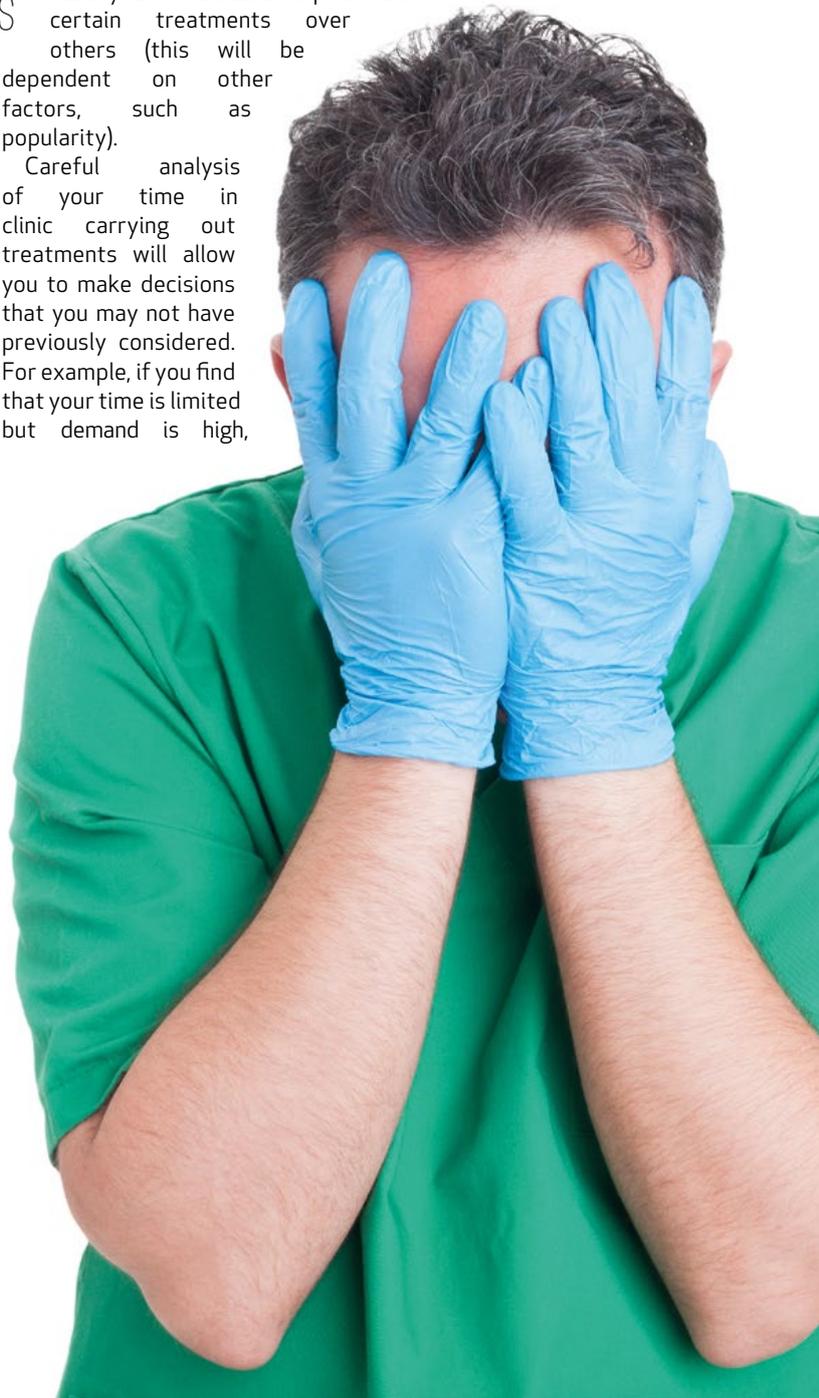
Finally, the treatments you offer can also be used as your USPs. What makes the treatments you offer better than

others? Think again about fact and feedback: have you won any awards for your treatments? Do you use award-winning products? Work with award-winning brands? Have people commented on the types of treatments and products on offer in your clinic? Remember that clients will come to the clinic with a specific treatment in mind – it's up to you to showcase your work.

#### **ASSESS AND PLAN YOUR PORTFOLIO**

Keeping procedures in mind, it's important for you to consider your most valuable asset – your time. If you want to stay ahead of the curve, you will need to make sure you are making the most return possible for the time spent treating patients. If you assess the average appointment time for each treatment you offer you should be able to allocate the cost of the treatment and products. This will allow you to see which has the best hourly return, and you will be able to prioritise certain treatments over others (this will be dependent on other factors, such as popularity).

Careful analysis of your time in clinic carrying out treatments will allow you to make decisions that you may not have previously considered. For example, if you find that your time is limited but demand is high,



increase your prices! Similarly, if you have ample time you might want to consider lowering your prices so that they are more competitive and may attract a higher number of clients. Again, you need to find what works best for you.

If you find that you have a lot of people not attending booked appointments (a high DNA rate), I would suggest introducing deposits or holding fees for bookings to ensure your valuable time is not wasted. Further to this, if you do indeed find that demand is outstripping your clinic time you could consider charging a non-refundable consultation fee.

Reviewing your time on a regular basis will allow you to make these decisions and will aid the success of your clinic in the long run.

### KNOW YOUR COMPETITION

I have already touched on the benefits of identifying your competitors USPs and the goal here should be to cast a wide net and get a comprehensive view of the competitive landscape. Most of the information you will need is online, so spend a little time searching clinics and practitioners within a 30-minute radius. It would be useful for you to log your competitors' information on a spreadsheet so that you can refer back to it and track changes. Consider who would be a direct competitor (primary competition), and who offers similar products, but in a different price range (secondary competition).

Once you have done this you will be able to look at your competitors in more detail. Look at their website: how clear are their messages? Are their USPs obvious on their website? Consider how easy their site is to navigate: will potential clients be able to contact them easily? You should also look for any social media links, or calls to action. Is the phone number or email address more dominant? Ask yourself, if you were a first-time customer, would you get in touch with them based purely on the website experience?

This kind of information will be very useful if you are in the process of setting up a new clinic. However, if you haven't already done so, it will also be good for you to do this research to support your business at whatever stage you are at. To ensure you are able to gather as much information as possible, make sure you sign up to their newsletter and follow them on social media. How do they engage with their clients on social media? Are they friendly, very casual or more professional? Look at how frequently they post and whether you need to step up your social media activity or draw it back if it's not working.

To take it a step further and get a real insight into their customer experience, mystery shop them. Call them up as though you were a first-time enquirer and see how they

handle your enquiry. Try emailing an enquiry and look at the response you receive (if they send one at all!). Is it welcoming and warm? If you were a potential client, would it encourage you to book? If the response is impressive, relate it back to your own – is there anything you could emulate?

Another thing to look for with your competition is their pricing. If you are a new practitioner planning to start-up, you may be unsure where to start with your clinic fees. Looking at the competition in your area should give you a fairly accurate indication of what people are willing to pay for treatments. If you are an established clinic, this information may encourage you to alter your pricing. Be careful, however, not to compromise on your fees as you must maintain profitable margins in order to keep your business running.

As a final way of gaining valuable insight into your competition, take the time to search for any testimonials and reviews about their services. What are clients saying about them? Are there any articles that promote their treatments? Look at their online presence as a whole, whether it's published by them or not. This will give you as clear a picture as possible about their business.

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### KNOW YOUR CLIENTS

In order to treat your clients, you should know them inside out. Put yourself in your clients' shoes and think about what you believe they really want. Do you think your clients simply want their finelines and wrinkles treated? In reality it's likely that they are looking for more than that. When people are "shopping around" for a clinic, there will be many things on their wish list, such as experience, treatment outcomes, quality, discretion, convenience, reliability, friendliness, cleanliness, customer service, and feeling valued and pampered. The price of the treatment will not be the only or most important reason as to why clients come to you for their treatments. You need to understand what motivates your clients' buying decisions.

You also have a reliable source of information right at your fingertips – your existing clients! These people are your best source of information. You should take time to ask them why they come to your clinic and what makes them come back to you for treatments. Once you understand what it is they like about you, you can use it to promote your treatments to new clients.

The key to success in this ever-fluctuating industry is to make sure you have carried out your research for every aspect of your practice. You need to lay strong foundations so that you can adapt as this vibrant sector grows and the steps identified here can help you to stay ahead of the competition. **AM**



**Gilly Dickons** is the managing director of Aesthetic Response, which provides an award-winning, expert enquiry handling and diary management service to UK aesthetic practices. Dickons's 30-year career in the aesthetic arena has provided experience in multiple roles, including client facing, marketing, and clinic management. AR's management of more than 150,000 calls a year on behalf of aesthetic practices across the UK and Ireland enables Dickons to share a unique and valuable insight into the constantly evolving aesthetics sector and the challenges business owners face in this increasingly competitive marketplace.