

# Keeping your finger on the pulse of your business: now is the time for a practice health check

Gilly Dickons details the steps that clinics should take to carry out a full health check and ensure that they are making the most of their business moving out of the COVID-19 pandemic

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*Clinics should compile information, including the number and type of queries, to conduct an effect health check on their business*

**H**ere we are in the autumn of 2021, still on a rollercoaster ride that began in early 2020. Having been asked to write this article, I found myself almost hesitant about getting started, despite the situation now being more stable—please note that I am avoiding use of the word ‘normal’ here, as we have all been left wondering what normal actually is. Life in 2021 is about being able to adapt as never before. Aesthetic practitioners have to stay on their toes as they continue to learn to live with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their

businesses. In short, no one can afford to take anything for granted.

So, now it is several months since the last UK lockdown ended, many practitioners have their appointment slots fully booked and are experiencing greater demand than ever before. After all, practitioners have worked hard to ensure that they retained their patient base throughout the lockdowns. My hope is that practitioners did keep in touch with valued patients, reassuring them that they were looking forward to seeing them again and not taking it for granted that they would find their way back

once clinics reopened. What makes me say this? I have seen the result of clinics that have been dormant for months. Some clinics that assumed their patients would return once lockdown measures eased were sorely disappointed.

Now that the initial stampede is over—the phones have stopped ringing off the



**GILLY DICKONS**  
 Founder,  
 Aesthetic Response  
 E: [g.dickons@  
 aestheticresponse.co.uk](mailto:g.dickons@aestheticresponse.co.uk)

hook and some of the pressure on clinics' appointment slots has been released—it is a good time for practitioners to reassess their patient base and look ahead. The increased demand should be levelling now, so, as practitioners look back at the treatments that they have provided over the past few months, it may be a good time to conduct a thorough audit. I suggest that this includes a review of the following:

- ▶ The number and type of new enquiries that have been received
- ▶ New patients booked for consultations, and also those who have gone on to be treated
- ▶ Existing patients booked and treated
- ▶ Pre-COVID-19 regular patients who have not yet returned
- ▶ Average spend per patient—a comparison pre-COVID-19 and now
- ▶ Treatment choices: when comparing patient treatment plans pre-COVID-19 and now, is there a shift?

By compiling this information, practitioners are undertaking an effective health check for their practice—taking its temperature, so to speak.

Let us break some of this information down and consider their relevance and importance.

### The number and type of new enquiries received

The aesthetics sector has seen a surge in new enquiries across the board—are you benefiting from this? Have you spoken to many new enquirers in the past few months? If not, ask yourself why not—new enquiries are the lifeblood of any clinic.

Have any new enquiries been missed as a result of being too busy to pick up the phone or respond to emails and social media messages? If the answer is yes, the gap needs to be plugged quickly. Any additional staffing support should pay for itself once it has been ensured that any new opportunities are not being missed.

Is your current treatment portfolio able to offer the procedures that people are enquiring about? If not, is there room to expand your range of

treatments in line with your confidence as a practitioner?

The quality of recent new enquiries should be noted. For example, are callers engaged? Do they appear to be shopping around? Does it take a lot of work to get them booked in? Has there been a shift in the nature of these calls pre-COVID-19 and now? If so, consider how new enquirers can be engaged with and encouraged to book into the clinic, rather than going to a competitor.

*» As a result of lockdown, there has been a shift to purchasing items online, so many people will not be seeking advice in the same way that they did before. This gives aesthetic clinics a great opportunity to be a go-to place for facial products«*

### New patients booked in and treated

Of the new enquiries that have been received, note how many have gone on to book appointments and how many of those who have attended the clinic have been treated. Is your booking from initial enquiry to appointment attended the same as it was prior to COVID-19? If it has dropped, moving forwards, allow for the fact that a higher number of new enquiries will be needed to compensate.

### Existing patients booked in and treated

Many clinics have had to run extended clinic hours to cover the initial surge in bookings, and to prioritise and take care

of existing patients. Waiting lists have been cleared and treatments are now up to date, so practitioners will now need to monitor the timing of the next treatment. Note whether patients are leaving longer intervals between treatments, eking their cosmeceuticals out or, perhaps, are having more procedures than before. Again, the answer to these questions will help practitioners to build a picture of how their clinic is doing.

### Pre-COVID-19 regular patients who have not yet returned

Over the past few months and weeks, have the valued patients who may not have returned been considered? I believe that it is incredibly important to take the time to do this, especially for those practitioners whose practice took a long time to build before the pandemic, as they may have ground to make back up now things have had time to settle. There are a number of reasons why patients may have fallen away, including their financial situation, family circumstances, health, commuting habits, home-working. Alternatively, they may have gone to another clinic.

I have seen a number of patients who have moved clinics. Some decisions are based on price, and others on the convenience of the location. For example, choosing a clinic that is closer to home instead of the one near the office. Some patients have moved simply because they could not get re-booked quickly enough at the end of lockdown, so went elsewhere.

I suggest that practitioners look at the records of these patients and consider what their value was as a regular visitor to the clinic. Then, pick up the phone and try to re-engage them. Ask them if they want to book an appointment, and, if not, why not? Have an enticing offer ready for them.

### Average spend per patient

I suggest looking at the average spend per patient to see if it has increased or decreased since before the pandemic. A decreased average spend means that more patients will be needed to have the same income. This will require working harder and booking more appointments.

If the spend has increased, fewer patients may be seen, which enables more time for other activities. Are people spending in the same way and having the same treatments as before the pandemic? It is important to track and have a clear picture of whether patients' habits have changed.

Look at the current average spend of new patients. Has this changed post-lockdown? Again, if it is lower, more new patients will be needed, and, if it is higher, you are in a stronger position.

### Treatment choices

Are patients interested in the same packages as before, or are they asking for other treatments? There are articles suggesting that spending time on Zoom has resulted in more people being concerned about their neck area (Livingstone, 2020). Alternatively, what about cosmeceuticals? Are patients interested in purchasing products? As a result of lockdown, there has been a shift to purchasing items online, so many people will not be seeking advice in the same way that they did before. This gives aesthetic clinics a great opportunity to be a go-to place for facial products. Again, it is about taking time to reflect.

Consider how you may fare when this health check is carried out on your business. You may be surprised at what arises.

### Conclusion

Patient retention is key to running a successful practice—you do not want a

sieve! Generating new enquiries is costly, and it is a numbers game. It is not just receiving the enquiry; it is ensuring that they are responded to appropriately and are converted into an appointment, taking both time and effort. Gaining and retaining patient loyalty is key, especially after the challenging past 18 months that everyone has experienced. If an old, valued patient is spoken to, and it emerges that they have been elsewhere, ask them to consider coming back. Be gracious and accommodating.

The pandemic has led to examples of the best and worst in customer service across practices in the UK. Some clinics closed their doors and shut most communication down, going into hibernation throughout lockdown periods, while others kept in touch with patients on a fairly regular basis. However, it has to be recognised that it has not been the same for all practitioners, as some Care Quality Commission (CQC) clinics were able to stay open for certain treatments.

For those admitting to being a hibernator, you may find that you are now feeling the consequences. I suggest sitting down with your customer relationship management (CRM) system and begin to look at the data that I have detailed. Lapsed patients should be noted, and you should think about why they want them to re-engage. Think about a gesture to tempt them back, and then pick up the phone.

In the coming months, another critical benchmark will be to see if patients return for treatment as frequently as before the

pandemic, or if they are more relaxed about going longer between treatments. Again, take time to monitor repeat bookings and get in touch with patients who are overdue their next treatment. It is still not entirely clear whether people's buying habits have changed in the long term, but, interestingly, there are articles talking about people not rushing back to spend money in the same way as they did prior to lockdown. These articles highlight changes in spending habits, suggesting that people are spending more on DIY and their homes, as well as looking to holidays, as their key priorities (Frost, 2021; Newlands, 2021). Keep in touch with patients and remind them why you are necessary, too.

On a final note: simply, be prepared to adapt. In the months to come, there will be new obstacles to overcome and, as the past 18 months have demonstrated, it is essential that you can continue to be flexible, while keeping your finger on the pulse of your business. ◀ JAN

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e: [jasmine.callaghan@markallengroup.com](mailto:jasmine.callaghan@markallengroup.com)  
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