

# Gaining an advantage in an increasingly competitive sector

In a sector that seems to be growing day by day, it can be difficult for new clinics to get off the ground, or for well-established clinics to hold on to their clients. In this article, Gilly Dickons explores several ways that business owners can assess the competition and assert their own brand

The past decade has seen huge changes across the aesthetics sector, with clinics springing up on every high street. Thousands of medical-trained professionals are now offering aesthetic treatments, and thousands more non-medics, such as aestheticians and beauty therapists, are also entering the field, ensuring that competition is growing year on year.

The Keogh Review suggested that the UK cosmetic procedures industry was worth £2.3 billion in 2010, and suggested that the figure would rise to an estimated £3.6 billion by 2015 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2013). However, there is a serious lack of data available showing the true value of the market, as well as the number of practitioners offering treatments in this area. What we do know is that the market continues to grow, and that clients are starting to have procedures from a much younger age. Further to this, my experience at Aesthetic Response shows an increase in clients 'shopping around' before choosing where to go for treatment.

Whether you are setting up a new practice or running a well-established clinic, it is clear that you cannot afford to sit back and assume that you will not be affected by the changes affecting the industry. Business owners need to work hard to protect and grow their businesses in this challenging market place.

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It may be that you have spent time working on your business growth plan and marketing strategy, have a good grasp on your competition and have correctly identified your target market. You may already be making the most of every new marketing opportunity that comes your way, and be confident that you have a very strong offering that is going to keep you one step ahead of the competition. However, if you have not had time to research your competition and your target market, or are concerned that you may be falling behind your competitors, now is the time to take action.

Over upcoming months, we will be taking a look at some simple steps that you can take to drive your business forward. If you think you have not got the time to look at this aspect of your business, the steps are so straightforward that you could enlist the help of a member of staff, friend or relative to get you started.

## Identify your target market

Who do you want to attract to your business? Can you profile your target clients' age, desired treatments and geographical location? It may be useful to do some research into the different generations and their characteristics, as this will influence their preferred method of communication and potential ongoing loyalty. There is plenty of information available online regarding baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964), generation X (born 1965 to 1976), millennials (born 1977 to 1994) and generation Z (born after 1994).

Consider the popularity of treatments that you are currently offering or are intending to offer in the future. What trends are you seeing amongst current clients and in the media?

There is also research that you can undertake to help you. In 2017, CCR produced research that identified some treatment trends and the age groups related (CCR, 2017). Realself produced the results of the UK Aesthetics Interest Survey (conducted online by The Harris Poll) in November 2018, which also offers insights into current trends (RealSelf Insights Center, 2018).

Consider the following: is your practice in a modest area or an affluent area? A town centre or suburb? Is it a high street clinic or home clinic? All of these options will require slightly different messages to attract new clients.

## Carefully assess and plan your treatment portfolio

As a practitioner, your most valuable asset is your time. With this in mind, it is important to consider the financial return you can achieve from each hour you spend in clinic. Whether you are a part-time practitioner injecting a few hours a week, or are running a full time, multi-room, multi-practitioner clinic, it makes good business sense to assess your potential return. Assess the average appointment length for each treatment you offer and allocate the cost of the treatment and products. Which of the treatments you offer gives you the best hourly return? Is this a treatment that you can specialise in and generate a high number of new clients for? Ask yourself whether this is a treatment that is needed on a regular basis, securing long term clients.

Think about the time you have available. If you have limited clinic time but enough demand, you may decide to charge higher prices, seeing less people, as your time is at a premium. It may be that taking a deposit



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or holding fee may be important to ensure that your valuable time is protected. Alternatively, you may have a large number of clinic hours available, so may want to keep your prices competitive in order to attract a higher number of clients. Each approach will influence the way clients view your clinic, so it is important to take time to assess what your goal is.

Once you have identified your target market and are confident about your treatment portfolio, the next question to ask yourself is: 'Do I want to ensure potential clients have a reason to pick me over everyone else?'. To help you to achieve this you need to dissect each potential competitor and understand their overall approach so that you can develop and sustain a competitive advantage. Here are some steps you can take:

### Find your competitors

Your goal at this stage is to cast a wide net and get a comprehensive view of the competitive landscape. Go online and identify the clinics and practices offering the treatments you carry out, within an approximate 30 minute drive-time radius. As you identify competitors, try to separate

them into two categories:

- ▶ **Primary competition:** These are your direct competitors, which means they're either targeting the same client group, and/or have a very similar product offering
- ▶ **Secondary competition:** These competitors may offer a high or low-end version of your product, for example an aesthetician offers £99 lip fillers from their beauty salon, when you, a qualified nurse practitioner offer Juvederm Lip from your aesthetic clinic.

Log the competitors you identify on a spreadsheet or database. To start with, you can simply track basic information, such as name of practitioner, name of practice, location, product offering and category of competition (primary or secondary).

Once you have established your primary competition, the next step is to identify their customer experience.

### Customer experience

Examine your competitors' websites to identify the following:

- ▶ How clear is their message? What information is included in their main front page banners? This may help you

start uncovering their unique selling points (USPs) and position within the sector

- ▶ How does their website look? Is it informative and easy to navigate?
- ▶ What do they say about themselves? Can you identify their USPs?
- ▶ Where are their calls to action throughout website? Phone, contact form, email - are they obvious and easy to action?
- ▶ Are they trying to build an email list by inviting you to sign-up to a newsletter? How prominent is this invitation?
- ▶ Where are their social media icons positioned? Follow them through and analyse their social media platforms in a similar way.
- ▶ Do they have a blog? How frequently are they posting? What type of information do they share?
- ▶ Is their site optimised for mobile phone and tablet use?
- ▶ Do they have limited hours for phone/reception support?
- ▶ How long does it take them to respond to email and contact form submissions? Test this out for yourself.
- ▶ How frequently are they running promotions and special offers? What

benefits do those promotions provide to their clients?

- ▶ Have they posted their prices?
- ▶ Do they have a good testimonials? How many are on their website? Are they written and/or video?

The goal of this exercise is to gain an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in order to help you to focus on your own direction. Once you have built up a picture, add your findings to your spreadsheet.

### Identify your competitors' market positioning

By identifying your competitors' positioning strategy, you'll start to get a feel for your potential clients' expectations. Take a further look at their website and their marketing messaging and ask the following:

- ▶ What are customers really buying from them? Are they choosing them for price, results or experience?
- ▶ How do you think your various competitors are differentiating themselves from their competition (including you)? What features and benefits do they highlight the most in their marketing copy/messages?
- ▶ According to them, what makes their product or service special or unique?

Asking these questions will help you to gain an understanding of who your competitors are targeting and how they are positioning themselves within the market, which will pay dividends as you work out how to position yourself against or alongside them.

To ensure that you have gathered as much information as possible, make sure you:

- ▶ Sign up to their newsletter: This will help to gain insight into their practice and examples of communication
- ▶ Follow their blog: See what types of content they are covering and what their tone, approach and style is
- ▶ Follow them on social media: Get a feel for how they communicate to their clients – is it their tone formal, casual, friendly, efficient, chatty or business-like?

- ▶ Mystery shop them: Call the clinic/practice and assess the quality of the first contact experience. Would you have booked a treatment with them based on this initial call?
- ▶ Send an email enquiry or complete a contact form: Assess the speed and quality of their response; ask yourself whether this would encourage you to book a treatment with them.

### Assess their pricing

Your pricing strategy is one of the most important aspects of your business, and can potentially provide you with a competitive advantage. There are several factors to be considered when setting prices for your treatment portfolio, some of which were raised earlier.

By assessing your competitors' fee structures, you will learn what potential clients may be willing to pay and obtain an understanding of what prices might work well for your own practice. It is important to note that your prices don't always have to be lower than those of your competition.

Look at the information you gathered on market positioning and figure out what it is you're actually saying to your clients. Your target market may be willing to pay more for peace of mind, your experience and skill, or the products you use.

Be careful not to compromise with your fees, as you must maintain profitable margins in order to run your business.

### Review their social media

Looking at your competitors' social media accounts has several benefits. You can get a good idea of how their clients feel about their practice and see what works well and what doesn't for engaging with your own client base. If a competitor is really good with their social media, it means that you'll need to step up your game to engage with your own clients.

Take a look at all of the social media channels you can think of, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, and ask:

- ▶ What is their social media presence like overall?
- ▶ Which channels do they use the most? Are they missing any social media channels and if so is there opportunity for you there?
- ▶ How do they speak with their client base?
- ▶ How often do they interact with their following?
- ▶ How frequently do they post something new and what are they posting about?

### Check their online reviews

Reviews provide valuable insight. Take the time to find as many reviews of your competitors as possible, from their website and social media, or even comments left on their blog. By reading these reviews, you can obtain an insight into their clients' experiences and how healthy and client-focused their business is. Are there any weaknesses you can capitalise on? Do they have strengths you need to aspire to? There may be an opportunity to let your customer service shine above the other practices in your area.

### On a final note

You don't need to watch your competitors constantly or let them keep you up at night, but you should keep track of how their business is changing and watch for new practices opening up in your area.

Having gained valuable insight into your competitors, the next step is to look at your own offering. The next article in this series will examine how you can identify and use your own USPs to enable you to stay one step ahead. ◀ JAN

### References

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