

Marketing Secrets of Top Dermatologists Revealed

Simple ways to grow your practice and to be 'always overbooked' without having to pay for advertising.

BY JOHN R. BELL
Associate Editor

Although writing a book, hosting a Web site, and developing your own product line can be big practice-builders, there are several simple steps that can be taken to help keep the patients you have, motivate them to refer other patients to you, and increase the number of procedures your practice performs, according to dermatologists who have had much success in these areas.

Dr. Leslie Baumann, director of cosmetic dermatology at the University of Miami, faced an enviable problem when her practice took off after her consumer book, "Skin Type Solutions," made the New York Times' best seller list.

"After the book came out, I had a 2-year waiting list for appointments, so my problem was not marketing. Our problem became how to get the patients to see another doctor in the practice. That was not easy. What we did was add doctors of other aesthetic specialties, such as oculoplastic surgery and facial plastic surgery. This was [an added value] to patients, because they would benefit from the increased knowledge of having various specialties with various expertises see them."

Dr. Susan Weinkle, a cosmetic surgeon in private practice in Bradenton, Fla., shared a similar tip: "You can also convert your medical dermatology patients into aesthetic patients," she noted. "Patients bring their child to your office for acne and then realize, 'Oh, you're doing all these cosmetic things as well. I didn't know that.'" Patients usually find out about available cosmetic procedures via word of mouth from other patients, she said.

Other office marketing tips noted by interviewed dermatologists included:

► **Talk to the media so that your local community knows you as an expert.** In Dr. Baumann's view, advertising a dermatology practice is counterproductive. "When we began 10 years ago, the best thing we did was never to advertise. We focused on public relations instead.

"Consumers are more likely to make an appointment with a doctor quoted in an article than with a doctor that they saw in an advertisement," she added.

This view is shared by Dr. Doris Hexsel, a dermatologist and cosmetic surgeon in Porto Alegre, Brazil, who helped pioneer the use of subcision for the removal of cellulite. Although she advertised her services when she first opened her practice, she has not done so in some time.

"Something that I think helped a lot to improve my practice was to give interviews for the media. I still give three or four interviews for magazines, newspa-

pers, and TV every week. I now have more patients coming into my office than I'm able to see," she said. "I'm always overbooked, and my [practice] colleagues also have full schedules."

A cosmetic dermatologist in Vienna, Dr. Doris Grablowitz, said she has in her nearly 20 years of practice never paid for press coverage or hired a public relations agent. But times have changed, she said—at least in her part of the world. "Today, if a young dermatologist wants to become well known, [advertising] is the norm," she said.

Her practice, which is now in a renovated home near St. Stephen's Cathedral, began in one room of her home. She credits talking with a TV reporter and then answering skin care questions in a column in Austria's largest daily newspaper with helping to grow her practice.

Dr. Grablowitz estimates that 50% of her patients come to her from her media exposure, 20% from her Web site, and 30% from word-of-mouth referrals.

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She emphasized that in cosmetic dermatology, it's important to train the staff, because patients will often ask the staff what they think about a particular procedure or product. "It's very important that the staff and doctors are giving out the same information to the patients, because the patients ask everybody in the office.

"Cosmetic patients are very educated consumers. They come in, and they have articles and clippings." Thus it's important that the office staff be at least as familiar with the basics of each procedure as the patients are, she added.

► **Surprise patients with how accessible you are.** Dr. Weinkle gives her home phone number to her patients. "You have to be available," she said. "When I operate on a patient, I always give them my home number. But you know something? They rarely ever call me. But they love that I give them my number."

She added that her number is in the phone book, but the act of giving her number to the patient makes a strong impression. "I give them my number because I like them to know that I'm genuinely concerned—that if they have a problem, I'm there for them."

Although she has given her e-mail address to some patients, "I prefer to keep it to phone calls, but I do have patients who e-mail me when they travel abroad."

► **Make sure your office staff are reading from the right script.** Dr. Baumann's nurse-specialist, Susan Schaffer, said that she has seen Dr. Baumann's practice mushroom over a 10-year period,

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Dr. Baumann, shown above administering Botox to a patient, attributes her success to the cross marketing of her consumer book, Web site, and now blog on Yahoo! Health.

A team approach is especially important in an aesthetic practice, Dr. Weinkle advised. "The first posttreatment day ... I have one of my assistants call to check on the patients and see how they are. ... Care and concern for the patients you've treated are very important, so that the patients feel comfortable in coming back to see you."

► **Respect your patients' time.** Dr. Weinkle went on to note that timely scheduling is another important aspect of retaining patients and getting referrals. "We abuse our patients' time. They sit in our offices across the country, waiting to see the doctor. ... I've been in practice for 25 years. If I [were] a dermatologist starting my practice, I would try very diligently not to make patients wait."

This can be difficult, she acknowledged—especially for surgeons. "You can't always totally predict how much time a surgery is going to take ... [but]



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cosmetic procedures take longer than most dermatologists think. We're used to scheduling a lot of patients a day in dermatology—[it's a] high-volume practice. But as you transform your practice into a more aesthetic practice, you have to be aware that these procedures are more time consuming."

She noted that the injection of fillers tops the list of time-consuming procedures. "You have to take your time to do it, and the consultation [takes time], in terms of explaining and understanding what the patient's wants and desires are, what their needs are, and what you see, what you can offer to the patient—those are all important considerations."

► **Try to keep pain to a minimum.** Another key to building a successful practice

is taking every measure to minimize patient discomfort, Dr. Weinkle noted. "The less you hurt patients, the more they're going to look forward to coming back to you. ... Do any of us look forward to going to a dentist?"

► **Let patients know you're on the cutting edge by staying up to date on the latest research.** Dr. Hexsel believes that the cachet of offering cosmetic procedures can benefit the rest of the practice. "When I started my practice, I started as a general dermatologist. And I believe that the cosmetic procedures increased the dermatology practice," she said.

She emphasized the importance of letting patients know that their dermatologist is up to date on the newest procedures and research. "We let patients know that we go to the meetings and that we are doing only the procedures that we are sure are safe and that can give them good results."

Dr. Baumann agreed. "A great way to build a practice is to do research projects. ... A clinical-trial business helps increase your visibility by generating interviews on new technology. Patients realize that you are cutting edge when you perform the clinical trials that lead to FDA approval."

The same sentiment was shared by Dr. Grablowitz, who noted that she spends a great deal of time traveling to medical meetings—which is stressful but necessary to become well known among your peers, she said. For her, this professional renown has led device manufacturers to come to her with new products so that she is often the first in her area to offer a new procedure—another factor, she believes, in bringing new patients to her practice. ■

For more information on DR. BAUMANN'S book, "The Skin Type Solution," and her consumer blog on Yahoo! Health, visit www.skintypesolutions.com. To visit DR. HEXSEL'S Web site, go to www.doris-hexsel.com.br. And to visit DR. GRABLOWITZ'S Web site, turn up your volume, and visit www.grablowitz.at.