

Marketing Mishaps

# The Technology Trap

Marketing your technology is risky business.

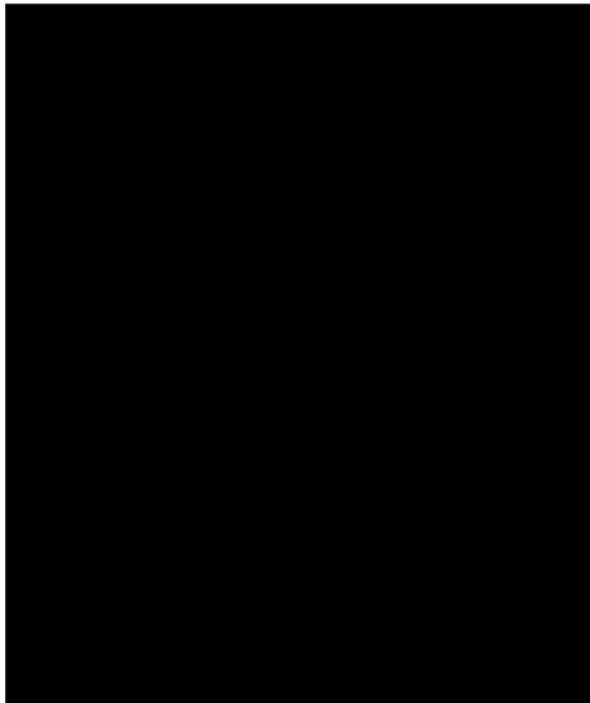
BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI

**T**echnology. Just hearing the word conjures up images ranging from *The Jetsons* and the electronic pet, Meow-Chi (one of my child's new toys), to the wonders of genome sequencing and nanomuscle motors. Technological innovation has kept millions of us enthralled with the newest, the neatest, and the next. When it comes to using technology to market refractive surgery, however, the idea brings back memories of that robot on the 1960s TV series, *Lost in Space*: "Danger, Will Robinson, danger!"

Too many refractive surgeons get caught up in the hype of new technology and what it can do for them. There are three main reasons why refractive surgeons adopt new technology: first and foremost, they are striving for better outcomes. Second, they may be seeking the marketing advantage of being the first to offer a new technology in their community. Third, they add the new technology in anticipation of attracting new patients. Let's take a detailed look at each of these reasons for upgrading technology in the ophthalmic practice; hopefully, we can sort out what's really happening when we market new technology, rather than what we hope will happen.

## BETTER OUTCOMES

Few medical specialties have enjoyed the amount of innovation seen within ophthalmology. For several decades, cataract surgery has undergone tremendous change, making it better and safer for surgeons as well as patients. The competition among manufacturers to develop new and better lenses and equipment has led to an evolution in technology and technique that has made cataract removal



and lens implantation the single most successful and widely performed operation worldwide. For the past decade, refractive surgery has been undergoing a similar transformation. This effort, too, will lead to better procedures and an array of offerings that will likely expand beyond today's excimer laser and microkeratome. And as long as technology drives better procedures with even better outcomes than we have today, we should expect greater market acceptance and penetration of refractive surgery.

## BEING FIRST TO MARKET

Many doctors believe that by being the first to offer a new refractive technology, they will gain what's called the "first mover advantage." They see it as defending their territory—keeping and attracting patients who might otherwise choose another provider to perform a LASIK procedure. This tactic may work, but only temporarily. If the first mover proves successful, other providers begin to fear that the new technology they didn't acquire may be the reason their procedure volumes are down. Seeing the first mover as "the competition" (which is an issue we'll explore in a future issue), other providers believe they must acquire the same technology in order to level the playing field and neutralize any advantage the first mover may have enjoyed. In the first 5 years that LASIK was offered in the US, this approach worked as the market continued expanding enough to justify the use of technology to attract new patients. However, as market growth slowed, it became evident that simply touting new technology wasn't necessarily going to bring patients in the door, and that doing so could actually

lead to other problems. The technology-marketing ploy was made by too many providers to allow any single provider to stand out, and the advantage was lost.

### ATTRACTING MORE PATIENTS

If unable to achieve “first mover” status, some doctors hold the belief that acquiring new technology will help differentiate their offering and automatically lead to more patients. Not always. In some cases, the problem is the technology itself. We have all seen procedures arrive and then disappear due to lack of patient acceptance. In most cases, however, the problem is the manner in which the technology is marketed and presented to patients. Rather than creating excitement, all the talk about the newest, the neatest, and the next can create anxiety for the patient. Making technology the primary reason that a patient should choose you as a provider gives the inquiring patient (who is already anxious and fearful) something additional to think about as part of their decision. For example, if a patient shows concern about holding his or her eye still, then by all means, talk about your eye tracker. But don't start the conversation with, “And did you know we've got a tracker on our laser?” It's very possible that the patient wasn't concerned about this feature and doesn't care. If you make it an issue, your prospective patient may actually perceive how “crude” the technology is, rather than how “advanced” you think it is.

Considering all the efforts made by refractive surgery providers to differentiate themselves based on technology, it's little wonder that consumers are confused! And when prospective patients are confused, they delay making a decision to undergo a refractive procedure. This is especially true

#### DEBT: THE DARK SIDE OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

Using technology as part of the marketing plan is an expensive game that is difficult for refractive practices to win. Recent interviews with some financing companies have revealed a growing reluctance to lend money for excimer lasers. Not surprisingly, some doctors have discovered they cannot survive after signing up for a second (or even a third) laser, having believed that incorporating new technology would mean automatic growth in procedure volumes. Apparently, some lawyers are advising these physicians to declare bankruptcy as a means of getting out of their financial obligation, leaving the bank “holding the bag” and with the responsibility to re-market the device. Unconscionable, yes—but it's happening. Unfortunately, this practice will make obtaining credit more difficult for surgeons trying to buy their first laser; and worse yet, it casts a dark shadow on a fledgling category of service that needs to build credibility in order to move toward mainstream acceptance.

with a heavily contemplated purchase such as LASIK. “When in doubt, postpone,” is the prevalent thought of many consumers.

### THE DISCONNECTION

Yes, people love technology. And for incurable diseases when the patient has no other choice, new technology offers hope. But in the context of elective eye surgery—in which the patient has multiple options—new technology can be perceived as experimental, unproven, and untested. For LASIK candidates, this causes a great conflict between wanting the best technology and wanting to make sure they aren't the ones proving it.

Don't be misled by the small percentage of patients who challenge and question everything you do. Technology should come into the marketing equation only as supporting evidence to confirm in the patient's mind that they have chosen a skilled provider who can be trusted to use the right equipment. One key to successfully leveraging technology in marketing is to make sure you describe the benefits and features in terms that nontechnical people understand. Physicians often try to make a patient understand the benefits of a particular feature from the physician's perspective. This is a mistake. You must re-cast the benefits of the technology from the patient's perspective to make them value what you are saying. Start with the benefits (safer, easier, faster, more accurate), and be prepared to back them up with data. Do not recycle the words and phrases offered by the manufacturer. Insist that manufacturers provide you with “patient-friendly” materials and/or messages that were developed using market research. This is important, because if the manufacturer doesn't provide a patient-friendly marketing message, you will have to figure it out on your own. And, you'll be paying for the privilege of conducting such market research from your precious marketing budget!

### BACK TO BASICS

My advice to those seeking a marketing edge through technology is simple: Get back to basics and focus on improving your level of service before improving your level of technology. I don't know of a single practice or laser center that does everything consistently right. There are leaks and gaps that can be filled that will boost volume. Technology bets are expensive, and making them part of your marketing message is like doubling down at the blackjack table. You can win big, but you can lose big, too. ■

*Shareef Mahdavi is a business consultant focused on helping clients improve their marketing. He formerly headed the marketing efforts of VISX and is based in Pleasanton, California. Mr. Mahdavi may be reached at (925) 425-9963; shareef@SM2consulting.com*