

## Marketing Mishaps

# Promise and Deliver

It all boils down to expectations.

BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI



*Expectation* is a powerful word. Words like *anticipate*, *probable*, and *certain* help define what it means when one expects something to happen. Take a moment and recall your reaction to some recent news, event, or experience. Whatever your reaction was, it generally followed your own expectations.

### MEASURING SUCCESS

The term *setting expectations* is probably the single most influential action step in the world of refractive surgery. The term permeates thinking at corporate, provider, and patient levels. It is so powerful because it gives the audience a basis for judging performance, with a clear end result: "we are satisfied, because expectations were met," or, "we are dissatisfied, because they weren't."

At the corporate level, executives are known to guide Wall Street analysts in forecasting a company's ability to generate a profit. The key measure is earnings per share; if the company meets the target, "the street" typically reacts positively. But, if the forecast isn't met, watch out! Investors don't like surprises of this sort, and the disappointing earnings report can show up immediately in the company's stock price.

At the provider level, doctors often use procedural vol-

ume as their yardstick. The doom and gloom mindset of many refractive surgeons developed largely as a result of not meeting their own personal expectations about how many eyes they treat per month or year relative to what happened in an earlier time period.

At the patient level, individuals' satisfaction after undergoing refractive surgery is directly tied to their preoperative expectations, which relate to both outcome (how well do I see?) and process (how well was I treated?). Interview an unhappy patient, and often you will uncover a combination of unrealistic expectations about his surgical outcome and poor treatment by the provider.

### SETTING EXPECTATIONS

#### Room for Improvement

In addition to judging performance, expectation setting is powerful because of its ability to drive behavior. Table 1 shows that not meeting expectations typically has a direct effect.

Every day provides dozens of opportunities to witness expectation-setting events and learn from what we observe. Parents get mad when their teenager doesn't make it home by 11 o'clock. A weary traveler becomes frustrated when the hotel room isn't as clean as promised. And, the final bill from the auto repair shop can cause an extreme reaction when it is a lot costlier than originally discussed.



Parlayed into the world of refractive surgery, there is a lot of room for improvement in how expectations are set between providers and customers. In the doctor-patient transaction, managing patients' expectations is a top priority,

just below the need to reduce their fear. Patients enter your office with expectations that are the sum of everything they know about you and the procedure you offer. That sum is derived from other patients with whom they speak, what your advertising says, and how you counsel them during the decision-making process.

The challenge with refractive surgery is that there is no way for the customer to sample the product. The expectation you set is solely a promise of future performance. Meet or exceed customers' expectations, and you win. Fail to meet them, and you lose. It's that simple. And, because this concept is so straightforward, it tends to be taken for granted. Hyped advertising sets patients' expectations so high that it becomes nearly impossible to exceed them. Here, hype is defined as a promise of a specific outcome (eg, "no more glasses") or of a specific price (eg, \$149 per eye).

The irony is that satisfied patients focus on their new vision and all it does for them. They rarely describe it using our metric of visual acuity, and they almost never talk about how cheap or expensive the fee was. Instead, they often describe how their vision has improved their everyday activities, how surprised they were at how little of their fear was ever realized, and how glad they are to have spent the money. Other consumer marketers would kill for this kind of end-user satisfaction! Refractive surgeons tend to halt the momentum in building the refractive surgery category by either overpromising or underpricing their services relative to the benefits experienced by their patients.

### Rising to the Challenge

To meet the challenge of properly setting expectations for your customers, you need to ruthlessly examine your communications and define (1) the expectation that is being created and (2) whether or not you can meet that expectation with each and every customer. If you can't, then you shouldn't make the promise. Look at every touch point you have with your customer, including but not limited to:

- Advertising—can you live up to what the ad says?
- Phone answering—does a real person answer in three rings or less?
- Scheduling—does an arriving customer have to wait more than a few minutes?
- Surgery—do you keep the patient informed during each

**TABLE 1. THE EFFECTS OF UNMET EXPECTATIONS**

Level	Problem	Result
Corporate	Missed earnings	Investors flee and market value suffers
Provider	Perform fewer procedures	Doctor becomes grumpy
Patient	Unhappy with surgical outcome	Bad word-of-mouth and no referrals

step of the procedure?

- Postoperative care—did you answer all questions and concerns from the patient?
- Referrals—did you remember to say "thank you?"

In the manufacturer-doctor transaction, similar rules apply. One of the main reasons that new refractive procedures fail is because companies make promises about products that they do not keep. The refractive surgery industry is littered with devices that simply didn't work relative to the expectations set by company representatives. You should be concerned about product promises that state "better than LASIK." This, once again, is an expectation being set. And, better gets interpreted in a multitude of ways: better outcomes for the patient, more procedures for the doctor, and better profitability for investors. If any one of those promises is unmet, it's bad news, and that bad news affects everyone involved in the industry, not just the one who made the promises.

Superior providers, be they manufacturers or doctors, go out of their way to properly manage their customers' expectations. They believe that the success of their enterprise is directly tied to their ability to meet and exceed the expectations of their customers. In the short term, exceeding expectations translates to happy customers. In the long term, it translates to more customers and better business. At a global level, it also enhances the credibility of the profession and the industry. One unmet expectation can offset 100 satisfied customers. That's why even a 1% dissatisfaction rate among patients should not be tolerated.

### KEEPING YOUR PROMISES

This column addresses a weighty subject, and I suspect some of you might just want to turn the page. Improving your ability to set expectations is critical, because it affects your credibility. And, the business of refractive surgery is largely based on credibility. It reminds me of a tried-and-true saying: It's much better to *underpromise* and *overdeliver* than to overpromise and underdeliver. ■

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