

## Marketing Mishaps

# Who Is the Competition?

They're closer than you think.

BY SHAREEF MAHDAVI

Last month's column focused on the need to differentiate your services as a LASIK provider in order to successfully compete in the refractive surgery market. This position implied that other providers are the LASIK surgeon's main competitors. Now, let me turn the tables on you, and say that your competition is not other providers at all, but actually prospective LASIK patients. That's right, your competition is patients, not doctors. In fact, the surgeon who

er in town offering such novel technology, we would want to see many other electric car dealerships and hope that the manufacturers promote these new vehicles. We'd treat those first customers like royalty. And we'd be glad every time we saw one of those cars on the road, regardless of who sold it. Why? Because all providers benefit as the consumer pool grows, the result of the most effective marketing of all: word-of-mouth from satisfied customers.



performs excellent LASIK surgery with few complications is your best friend. Those you think of as "competitors" are doing more to help build your practice than you'll ever appreciate or acknowledge.

## CATEGORY BUILDING

To illustrate my point, let's pretend we are all in the business of marketing the relatively new technology called the "electric vehicle" to American consumers, who currently own and maintain over 220 million automobiles that run on gas. We would all work very carefully to build a favorable image of electric cars and the benefits they offer. Far from striving to be the only deal-

Like the electric car, LASIK is a niche offering within a mainstream category. But unlike the electric car, LASIK marketing has not built solid foundations within the provider ranks, in part because most providers think of other "dealerships" as competitors rather than collaborators in building this new category. LASIK providers are too busy trying to outdo each other. There have been too many attempts to take nonmeaningful differences in technique or technology and bill them as "innovations." The result: too much confusion in the marketplace.

The truth is that you, the surgeon, are competing for a piece of the prospect's mind, a mind that has been

filled with all sorts of misinformation about laser vision correction. Yes, you are fighting for the ownership of part of a potential patient's mind and how it perceives LASIK and you as a provider. Compounding the problem is surgeons' biases about the average person's knowledge of refractive error or the available options to correct it. Even today, many people I speak with still don't know that their astigmatism or farsightedness can be corrected with a laser.

In these early years of refractive surgery, the industry's goal is to build legitimacy for LASIK. Ideally, refractive surgery would have the same place that the more established options, spectacles and contact lenses, already have in the minds of providers and consumers. It's important to accept that refractive surgery still has a long way to go to earn that place.

One way for LASIK providers to gain legitimacy is to recognize that typical questions such as "Why is it so expensive?" and "Can you guarantee that I'll have 20/20 vision?" are smoke screens that mask the real issues at hand. As I've said in earlier articles, the mind of the LASIK prospect is in conflict between desire and fear. It is the resolution of this inner conflict that drives people to decide either for or against undergoing LASIK. You need to respect this conflict and, in fact, address both sides of it. Here's a closer look at each of these two competitors:

### COMPETITOR No. 1: DESIRE

You are competing with other desires—the cost of having LASIK is right there with a nice vacation, a fully loaded laptop, a sub-zero fridge...an endless list of potential uses for those discretionary dollars. The benefit of better functional vision is competing with the promise of a sandy beach, the efficiency of faster downloads, and the status that accompanies ownership of the ultimate kitchen appliance. LASIK faces stiff competition from a whole host of competing consumer wants and needs.

### COMPETITOR No. 2: FEAR

You are competing with deep-seated fear—clearly, this is the fiercer of these two competitors. As an eye specialist, you know how much people value their eyesight. They will do anything to protect it, including keeping you from doing something that might permanently harm them. This competitor often wins by default, as refractive surgeons typically do little to squelch the concerns that prospective patients have about the procedure. It's emotionally much easier to resolve the inner conflict by letting fear rule the day and postponing surgery.

### PATIENCE VS. PATIENTS

Stop worrying about what the other providers are saying and doing, and begin focusing on how you're going to tame the real competition. Within this context, differentiation is reframed to mean separating what you do from all the misperceptions that prospective patients have received via bad advertising and negative publicity. It's rare that you run across someone whose mind is like a clean sheet of paper when it comes to LASIK. You may have to undo a good deal of negative programming before you see any sign of victory.

How will you know that you're winning the war against the true competition? Far more people will begin to inquire about LASIK and refractive surgery. The lead question becomes, "Where should I go to have it done?" rather than "Should I have it done?" That is what happened with the automobile, which has become indispensable to so many people that the decision process revolves around *where* to buy it rather than *if* it should be purchased. Clearly, LASIK isn't there yet. It has a long way to go to reach the mainstream of vision correction, currently a \$16 billion annual industry in the US.

Don't get me wrong. Competition is a good thing. It keeps us striving to do better. Our social structure and society are deeply rooted in the concept of winning, so competing with or against others is part of the game of life. But you need to ask yourself, would you rather have a large slice of a small pie or a small slice of a much larger pie? It's not a trick question, but the actions of most providers so far indicate they have been going after the large slice rather than helping to create the large pie.

It takes determination and guts to create a new consumer category...not unlike the strong stomach required from the first few million patients who are proving to everyone else that LASIK is indeed safe and wonderful. No one said it would be easy.

It will take a patient and determined community of LASIK providers to earn a significant share of the consumer's mind. The current course is not working out too well, as fear reigns over all but a small percentage of motivated consumers. Build legitimacy for the LASIK procedure, fulfill desires that exceed that of a vacation, and strive to reduce fear at every point of contact you have with those trying to learn more about refractive surgery. ■

*Each month, industry veteran, Shareef Mahdavi, looks at a different topic relating to the business of refractive surgery, exploring how mistakes from the past can be used by all providers for effective marketing. He was formerly the head of marketing for VISX and is based in Pleasanton, California. Mr. Mahdavi may be reached at (925) 425-9963; shareef@sm2consulting.com*