

PREMIUM PRACTICE

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TODAY

Enjoy a Slice of Premium Practice Pie

But first, define what it means in your practice.

By Rochelle Nataloni, Contributing Editor



Section Editor:
Shareef Mahdavi
Pleasanton, California

Editorial Advisors:
Matt Jensen
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
James D. Dawes
Sarasota, Florida

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Premium Practice Today is a monthly feature section in **CRST** providing articles and resources to assist surgeons and their staff in the pursuit of premium practice development to facilitate exceptional experiences for patients and business success.

Enjoy a Slice of Premium Practice Pie

But first, define what it means in your practice.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

What's in a name? For those of us working on this column every month (this is our 43rd!), Premium Practice Today illustrates what surgeons need to think about and do today in order to prosper tomorrow. This month, we reflect on the word itself, and it is simply awesome to see what practices around the country are doing to build and maintain premium status. I had a similar reaction at the recent summer American-European Congress of Ophthalmic Surgeons meeting in Deer Valley, Utah, while listening to surgeons describe what they are doing to stage memorable experiences. Staging is a required effort whenever surgeons want to command discretionary dollars for self-pay procedures from a consumer with high expectations. The common thread is focus on the customer. Each of the practices highlighted this month is doing just that and each in their own way. It is a daily and never-ending task that requires even greater attention to internal culture than to external marketing. And one last note: premium is a term for ophthalmologists to describe what they do and how they do it. Steve Coleman's got it right: if surgeons do it premium, patients will describe both their outcomes and experiences as outstanding. That is what will drive future business and, one hopes, convince physicians that the effort required is absolutely worth it.

—Section Editor Shareef Mahdavi

The word *premium* is a term that shifts meaning in the blink of an eye. When used as an adjective, it means “of exceptional quality or greater value than others of its kind.” When *premium* modifies *practice*, it can mean any number of things, but the vast majority of cataract and refractive surgeons would probably say that describing their practice as premium would be accurate.

What about your practice qualifies it for inclusion in the premium practice club? Is it tangibles such as free Wi-Fi and flat-screen TVs in a café-like reception area? Is it one-on-one personalized service from staff members who are truly engaged in their jobs? Is it the presence of a refractive coordinator who educates patients on all of their options? Is it the availability of leading-edge equipment and high-tech lenses? Surgeons and administrators interviewed for this article shared their perspectives on the premium label and why they think it applies to their practices.

AN INTENTION TO PROVIDE EXCELLENT CARE

Patty Casebolt, clinical director of Medical Eye Center in Medford, Oregon (www.medicaleyecenter.com), says a premium practice “starts with an intention to provide excellence.” This includes “exceptionally trained staff and physicians, state-of-the-art technology, modern décor in your building, accessible communication between patients and staff, and going above and beyond to deliver a first-class patient experience,” she says.

“I believe Medical Eye Center qualifies as a premium practice in the eyes of our patients and the community because of our exceptionally trained staff and our state-of-the-art technology,” Ms. Casebolt says. “For instance, all of the physicians in the practice are fellowship trained, our optometrists are residency trained, and our physician’s assistant is rated in the

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top 6% in the nation, according to Allergan's rating system." She explains that this is important because of the confidence that training inspires in patients as well as the referrals that it eventually generates. "We believe this training is important to our patients, but even more important is how the patient feels about his or her experience with the provider," she says. "We send a survey to all of our patients after their visit. Currently, out of 926 reviews, 788 gave us five out of five stars, and 97.7% would refer a friend or family member to us."

Offering patients state-of-the-art technology is a parameter that Ms. Casebolt suggests entitles Medical Eye Practice to a seat at the premium practice table. "Medical Eye Center was the first practice in our region to offer the Crystalens (Bausch + Lomb) technology, and we are the first practice to use the new toric version of the lens, the Trulign," she says. That said, amassing state-of-the-art technology simply to compete is not the goal. "It's all about best serving patients,"



All of the accompanying photographs are of Medical Eye Practice in Medford, Oregon.

Ms. Casebolt remarks. "Although our eye care providers believe in offering advanced technology, they carefully consider that technology before offering it to their patients. We have a 'patients first' mentality here, which centers around offering what's best for the patient."

WHAT MAKES ASSOCIATES IN OPHTHALMOLOGY TICK?

Associates in Ophthalmology in Pittsburgh is a modern, multispecialty, patient-centered, ophthalmic surgery practice that exemplifies the phrase *premium practice*. Deborah Holliday, the practice's manager of cataract care, describes what makes the practice special.

There is a strong team effort throughout the practice, from the pleasant demeanor of the staff at check-in, to careful attention to detail in surgery scheduling, continuing on to the professionalism of the ambulatory surgery center's staff.

We have a fully engaged and highly trained clinical staff, with opportunities and incentives for ongoing education and acquisition of specialized skills.

We employ dedicated patient counselors who educate all refractive and cataract patients on their surgical options as well as available financing options and the total process.

We provide concierge service from the initial consultation through the postoperative period. Patients appreciate having a familiar name and face-to-face contact. Concierge service includes follow-up calls after the first visit to answer any questions, confirmation of the procedure and IOL selection, finalization of the method of payment or assistance with financing applications, and ensuring that patients have their prescribed preoperative drops. On the day of surgery, each patient is greeted in the preoperative area by his or her counselor. On the evening of surgery, each patient receives a call, "Just checking in to see how you're doing."

We offer the most advanced technology available for both diagnostic and surgical devices (ie, LenSx laser cataract surgery, Constellation Vision System, WaveLight FS200 laser, and the Allegretto 400-Hz laser [all from Alcon Laboratories, Inc.] and LenStar LS 900 [Haag Streit AG]).

We offer the most recent procedures and treatment options for various conditions, such as new injectable drugs for macular degeneration and new devices for glaucoma surgery.

The tangibles include complimentary Wi-Fi, patient-education videos on the iPad (Apple, Inc.), a café staffed by a full-time barista, and flat-screen TVs, all of which enhance the patient's visit.

Each of the practice's seven offices has first-class finishing and interior design to create an environment that conveys premium practice as soon as patients and visitors enter our doors. The patient's first impression of the physical office is very important to creating a premium practice culture and brand.

We have skilled surgeons who believe in the technology that the practice offers, who listen to each patient's vision wish list, and who establish realistic expectations for outcomes.

Deborah Holliday may be reached at (412) 653-3080, ext. 1139; dholliday@aiovision.com.

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PATIENT-CENTERED CARE AT THE FORE



Patient-centered care is also what establishes Pittsburgh's Associates in Ophthalmology (www.aiovision.com) as a premium practice, according to cataract surgeon and glaucoma specialist John P. Nairn, MD. "[Ours] is a premium practice for many reasons, first and foremost because we make patient-centered care our primary focus," he says. "Patient-centered care means maintaining a standard of outstanding customer service and optimizing visual outcomes. These two components lead to an improved quality of life by improving quality of vision as well as achieving high levels of patient satisfaction."

Dr. Nairn stresses that the practice is committed to providing the best possible care for patients and to using state-of-the-art technology. As far as marketing goes, however, they generally avoid using the word *premium*. "We never want our patients who are not candidates for premium options, or those who cannot afford the out-of-pocket expense, to feel that they are receiving inferior services or products," he notes. "Every



patient deserves to feel like [he or she] received the best care available for [his or her] specific needs. When discussing IOL options, for instance, we refer to multifocal, accommodating, and toric IOLs as 'lifestyle' or 'specialty' lenses. What's more, we never presume who is or isn't interested in the premium services we have available. There is no prejudging."

Although the practice is committed to offering the

THE EXTRAS TAKE A PRACTICE TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Patty Casebolt, medical director of Medical Eye Practice in Medford, Oregon, describes how the little—and sometimes not so little—extras make all the difference.

"We moved into a new building 4 years ago," she says. "The design of this new building was extremely important to us, and we took 2 years in the design process. Our CEO worked directly with our managers to explore improvements for both patients' flow and overall experience and then worked directly with the contractors to create the design. Despite [its] being a very busy practice, we wanted to create a relaxing environment to promote a calm feeling throughout the office. We removed the large waiting room and instead have created individual pods. This prevents patients' feeling of being in a 'cattle call.' Patients do not realize how many other patients are in the building, and the result is a more tranquil environment for everyone, including our providers and staff. We upgraded the music system to play spa music in all patient areas, and we added gentle curves to the walls, ceiling, and front desk with the hope that this would soften the feel and counteract the traditional sterile clinical environment. Patients often comment that it feels like they are checking into a nice hotel instead of a medical office."

"Too often, patients can feel like they are lost in the shuffle," Ms. Casebolt continues. "A challenge for most

busy practices is being able to communicate with patients in a way that avoids having [them] feel like they are just a number. For the past 13 years, we have worked with an accountability coach. He works with the providers and staff to help decrease defensiveness [and] increase openness and accountability. An example of accountable communication with our patients is when we tell a patient that a technician will call them back by noon, and we make sure that happens. I wish I could say this happens 100% of the time, but it is one of our core values, and we are always striving for perfection. It is our intention to provide excellence in all areas, including communicating with our patients."

Ms. Casebolt concludes, "Going above and beyond means you are actively seeking ways to do whatever it takes to deliver exceptional service. You deliver more than what the patient is expecting. This may be as simple as offering a better line of coffee or adding fruit to the water dispenser. You might also offer to get water for the patient's dog that is patiently waiting outside. We get rave reviews from our patients for doing this as well as the larger, more [important] things."

Patty Casebolt may be reached at (541) 618-1480; patty@medicaleyecenter.com.

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gamut of premium IOLs, Dr. Nairn points out that the term *premium practice* should not be relegated to those that offer high-tech lenses. “The term *premium practice* can be applied much more broadly,” he says. “As a multisubspecialty clinic, we consider [our practice to be] a premium practice across every subspecialty that we administer, including glaucoma, retina, and cornea, in addition to cataract and refractive. We strive to offer the most advanced technology and treatment options for every subspecialty. This includes the implementation of the Constellation Vision System (Alcon Laboratories, Inc.) for retina and vitreous surgery, participation in clinical trials for new drugs and devices, as well as offering laser cataract surgery. Premium IOLs are only a small part of our strategy to establish the practice brand as a premium practice.”

MARKET LEADERS

Michael Lutz, the chief operating officer of Associates in Ophthalmology, points out that being associated with premium services helps the practice establish a brand as the leader in quality and service in its market. “Patients need to have the perception that the practice provides the best quality of clinical care and outcomes and a high level of service in order to make the strategy work,” he remarks. “The strategy has to be a part of the culture of the practice and exhibited by every staff member and provider. An investment in developing your staff to be highly trained in both clinical skills and customer service is very important to establishing this label. The challenge to the practice is to maintain this high level of quality and to be consistent with this brand throughout every aspect of the practice. All patients must have a high-quality experience if you are going



to use this strategy.”

Mr. Lutz says that marketing plays an important role in establishing the practice as a premium service provider and a leader in its demographic. “For example, in 2012, we conducted a comprehensive campaign to introduce laser cataract surgery to the greater Pittsburgh area,” he explains. Associates in Ophthalmology was the first practice in Western Pennsylvania to acquire the LenSx laser (Alcon Laboratories, Inc.). He continues, “The slogan ‘The Revolution in Cataract Surgery Begins Here’ was effective at establishing the practice as a leader in the field by offering the most advanced technology. Our positive reputation continues to grow by focusing on patient-centered care while achieving excellent outcomes—an overall exceptional experience. In addition, the ad campaign must be of a high quality and creative nature to portray the brand image as a premium practice. You cannot expect to establish a high-level brand image if the ads are not developed professionally by someone who knows exactly what you are attempting to accomplish with the campaign and strategy.”

Mr. Lutz points out that building and maintaining strong relationships with a referring optometric network expands Associates in Ophthalmology’s reputation as a premium practice as well. “We recognize the value in providing continuing education opportunities for these optometrists, inviting them to observe surgery, and developing comanagement relationships that are a win-win for both doctors and patients,” he says. “We also established a marketing/outreach coordinator who is very professional and knowledgeable about the practice. She visits our referring optometrists regularly, and her appearance and professionalism are consistent with our brand image of providing a high level of quality and service.”

“I’m happy to have doctors consider my practice as premium, but I’d rather have patients refer to the practice as excellent.”

—Stephen C. Coleman, MD

EXCEED PATIENTS’ EXPECTATIONS

Tony Sterrett, the practice administrator of the Price Vision Group in Indianapolis (📍 www.pricevisiongroup.com), stresses that the term *premium* conveys much more than that the practice offers certain IOLs. “Patients are learning to be more discriminating with their medical purchases, so the successful cataract practice must look for ways to exceed their expectations,” he says. “Each practice can use a different methodology, but it is important to identify ways to polish each step of your patients’ experiences. People don’t mind spending more money for a premium package, as long as they perceive an improvement in the product or service they are getting.”

Mr. Sterrett explains that, at Price Vision Group, the goal is to provide an experience that is not available to patients anywhere else. “From our own surgery center exclusively dedicated to ophthalmology to the latest in cataract and refractive technologies, we offer a cutting-edge experience that is second to none,” he says. “Of course, we recognize that only when technology is combined with the personal touch of engaged, caring staff [can] a practice ... truly offer a ‘premium’ experience to the patient. To that end, we blend comfortable, professionally decorated lobbies with well-trained staff members who spend time with the patients, actively [listen] to their needs, [answer] questions, and [make] them feel comfortable and at ease. That’s what ‘premium’ means to the Price Vision Group team.”

DO PATIENTS CONSIDER PREMIUM?



LASIK surgeon Stephen C. Coleman, MD, of Coleman Vision in Albuquerque, New Mexico (📍 www.colemanvision.com), says the word *premium* resonates more with providers than it does with patients.

“I really think that *premium* is a word that doctors, not patients, use to describe any given practice,” he comments. “For doctors, it implies state-of-the-art technology in a world-class setting that is memorable. I think it also implies that a practice offers some of the advanced IOLs that are gaining traction in the marketplace. This is, at least in part, due to the use of *premium* as an adjective when doctors hear presentations or read articles regarding these lenses. For LASIK, I’ve never heard a patient refer to my practice, or any other laser center, as *premium*.”

What’s more, says Dr. Coleman, there’s the likelihood that the term *premium* suggests a higher cost to the patient. “I think that this implies having to pay above and beyond what is standard and customary, as in ‘he had to pay a premium for his LASIK,’” he remarks. “I think, for a consumer, it can almost come across as punitive. I’m happy to have doctors consider my practice as premium, but I’d rather have patients refer to the practice as excellent. When an experienced doctor uses state-of-the-art technology with a staff that will comfortably go above and beyond for any given patient, all in a modern office setting, the likely outcome will be patients’ referring to their experience as excellent.”

CONCLUSION

Ms. Casebolt of Medical Eye Practice says that, when patients believe a practice is in the premium echelon, the bar is set higher, and it may take more effort to satisfy them. “Patients may believe that their out-of-pocket expenses will be higher to pay for services at a premium practice, or you may be more of a target from a medical legal aspect,” she notes. “However, if your intention is to provide excellence to your patients in all aspects of their care, you will be known for that and seen as the premium practice in your community.” ■

Patty Casebolt may be reached at (541) 618-1480; patty@medicaleyecenter.com.

Stephen C. Coleman, MD, may be reached at (505) 821-8888; sccvision@yahoo.com.

Michael Lutz may be reached at (412) 653-3080; mlutz@aiovision.com.

John P. Nairn, MD, may be reached at (412) 653-3080; jnairn@aiovision.com.

Tony Sterrett may be reached at (317) 814-2841; tonysterrett@pricevisiongroup.net.