

The surprising psychology of medical aesthetics consumers: What motivates patients' choice of practitioner and how to make sure they choose YOU

As a medical aesthetics practitioner, you know that many variables factor into the consumer's process of selecting a provider. Your marketing resources -- budget and staff time -- are limited, so your goal is to maximize your impact in bringing the right patients to your practice.

It can be overwhelming to keep up with marketing trends. One day, we hear that social media is the key to attracting and building customer relationships. The next, blogging is all the rage. And of course, advertising, word of mouth, referrals, location and pricing play a role too.

Wouldn't it be great if you knew exactly what was going on in the minds of your ideal customers and how best to motivate them to choose you?

Well, we can't give you ESP, but we can come close.

A study published by the Journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons¹ compiled the results of a conjoint analysis that gathered, analyzed and weighted the relative importance of different variables in driving consumer choices in medical aesthetics. The study was done with a group of plastic surgery patients in the Netherlands, but the results are enlightening for aesthetics practitioners of all specialties in all regions.

The study found that two attributes were the most important in driving consumer choices – the experience of the practitioner and the method by which they were referred to the practitioner. Together, these two factors had a weighting of about 57 percent in the consumer's decision. Take a moment to let that sink in. That means if you nail those two aspects of your marketing message, you have an almost two-thirds likelihood of winning that customer, according to the study findings.

The profile of the "most preferred" clinic in this analysis was one with a practitioner who has more than 10 years' experience, is recommended by a primary care doctor, costs 15 percent less than average, is located less than 30 minutes or less from the patient and has an extensive online presence.

¹ Marsidi N, van den Bergh MW, Luijendijk RW. The best marketing strategy in aesthetic plastic surgery: Evaluating patients' preferences by conjoint analysis. *Plast Reconstr Surg.* 2014;133:52–57

That's the headline, but delving deeper reveals important nuances and actionable details on the psychology of aesthetics consumers. By taking advantage of these, you can best position your practice in a competitive marketplace.

Research methodology

Before we get into the details, let's first look at the study methodology. Researchers led by Dr Nick Marsidi and Dr Roland Luijendijk of the Netherlands used a quantitative marketing analysis tool known as conjoint analysis. This tool determines which variables patients value the most. Various theoretical scenarios were constructed that combine the variables in different degrees, and survey respondents considered the tradeoffs involved in each scenario.

This allowed the researchers to investigate the decision-making process of patients in choosing a clinic. Armed with an understanding of their responses, you can shape your marketing strategy to focus on the most important attributes and seek to avoid or counteract factors that weighed negatively.

Study background

The researchers recruited 150 participants who had submitted pre-visit information applications to 16 private aesthetics clinics in the Netherlands. They were surveyed before their visits to the clinics about six attributes: cost of procedure, travel time to the clinic, experience of physician in years, size of the clinic, method of referral and online presentation.

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The attributes were then segmented by levels. For example, for cost they looked at costs 15 percent less than average, competitive with average and 15% more than average. These variables were combined into 288 different scenarios, then reduced through statistical modeling to 18 primary scenarios.

Participants were then asked to evaluate the individual scenarios. The questions looked like the example below, reprinted from the study.

Study participants had a strong preference for practitioners with at least 10 years of experience. **If you have at least a decade in your field, employ marketing claims that focus on your experience and talk specifically about how many years you have been practicing.**

While the study did not probe the consumer mindset in greater detail, this finding suggests that patients use years of practice as a proxy for practitioner expertise. Patients want to know that they are in good hands and that they are assured of superior and safe results. It's easier to trust someone who has performed a specific treatment or procedure many, many times.

The weight given to experience in this study bodes well for marketing based on your outcomes, safety record, advanced training, certifications and familiarity with specific procedures. A prior study, a 2011 U.S. conjoint analysis on plastic surgery², adds weight to this view with its finding that board certification status had a mean importance of 39.7 percent.

Another lesson to draw from this finding is that it is in your best interest to introduce advanced and effective treatments into your offerings at the earliest opportunity. That way you can build a superior track record and be able to demonstrate your greater experience and expertise with them compared to other providers in your area.

At Venus Concept, when we introduce new products such as Venus Viva and Venus Versa, we observe that aesthetics practices that embrace them early in their life cycle have a marketing advantage over their peers. The partnership that Venus provides in terms of training, product support and marketing magnify this effect.

If you have fewer than 10 years in practice, you may feel you are at an insurmountable disadvantage. Don't despair. The study showed a negative effect of minus 0.5525 which can be counteracted by strengths in other areas.

In addition, you can still play on experience by partnering with practitioners with greater length of service, so that you can make experience claims for the clinic as a whole. You can also highlight if you have especially deep familiarity, training or certification in a specific niche.

2. **Nurture your referral pipeline from doctors** as well as current and former patients.

Method of referral was the second-biggest driver of consumers' choices with a weighting of 21.5 percent. The biggest bump came from a referral from a primary care doctor followed by a friend or family member. That fits our understanding that people trust the recommendations of

² Waltzman JT, Scholz T, Evans GR. What patients look for when choosing a plastic surgeon: An assessment of patient preference by conjoint analysis. *Ann Plast Surg.* 2011;66:643–647.

those such as their family doctor or dermatologist who they think are knowledgeable about health care and can expertly assess other providers.

There was also a smaller but still positive influence from recommendations from friends or family members. Consumers are swayed by people they know firsthand who have visibly great results or who talk favorably about their experience with a particular practice. This reinforces what many aesthetics practitioners have believed about the power of word-of-mouth.

Of course, this is also a cautionary tale about the magnified impact that complaints from a dissatisfied patient can have as well.

You can leverage referrals from doctors by actively seeking to build strong relationships with MDs in your community. Hold open houses, offer free treatments and seek one-on-one introductions through colleagues and mutual acquaintances. Build a network of these contacts on LinkedIn or Facebook and share valuable content such as studies and news.

The improved appearance that your patients achieve speaks for itself, and you can use that to build your practice by encouraging them to share their experiences with their circle. A tasteful message that doing so helps your practice (perhaps with a discreet sign at check-out or written in your newsletters) may be enough if your patients are loyal fans. Incentives and rewards for referrals that yield a new paying client can also be effective.

3. **Carefully evaluate the ROI from resources devoted to promoting your practice in online forums. Advertising isn't hugely influential.** The study found that, contrary to what we often hear, mentions on Internet forums were a negative factor and advertising on TV, radio and in magazines was also negative although less so. It's difficult to have good insight into these findings. It could reflect the slightly different media climate in the Netherlands where the study was conducted.

However, it does seem reasonable that people would discount Internet forums which generally are regarded as not high-quality information sources. In addition, some people are quick to believe that prominence on these sites may be attained through ad spending and that they lack credible gatekeepers.

The study authors countered that forums have high credibility because of the ability to generate empathy from other readers and are an easy way for patients to acquire anonymous information. They postulated that their results suggest patients are suspicious about referrals from strangers.

For advertising, many aesthetics consumers prefer practices with a bespoke air of quality, discretion and expertise. They have an instinctive distrust of a practice that is aggressively promotional since it can arouse suspicions that there may be a negative reason why the provider is so eager to drum up business.

To that end, if advertising is right for your practice, these findings would suggest that you choose the outlets and style very carefully and conservatively. If you become dependent on promotion and aggressive marketing, it can be hard to reposition yourself.

Venus Concept customers can benefit from our marketing support program which helps navigate these tricky nuances so that your clinic gains profile in your market without the taint of excessive promotionalism.

4. **Location matters but it's not everything** – The study found that travel time was the third most important variable in consumers' choices at 14.2 percent. Travel times of an hour or less had a positive effect while travel times over an hour were penalized.

However, the earlier 2011 study we mentioned that was done in the United States found that closer clinics were less preferred than those far away. It also weighted distance as third most important attribute at 13.2 percent.

The opposite outcome may reflect a belief among U.S. patients that a practice that is less accessible might be better or a general willingness to travel further for better quality.

It's also important to note that the Netherlands where this newer study was conducted is a small country, and travel times of an hour can easily put the consumer over borders into other countries including Belgium and Germany. So the preference for nearer clinics may reflect a desire to stay within the home country.

The takeaway for your clinic is that segmented marketing by location is worth considering. Your local consumers can easily come for consultations and open houses, so don't ignore that opportunity. But if you are a practice with a premium reputation and have the ability to attract distant clients, do so. Carefully targeted advertising, customized landing pages and other segmented approaches can be used to reach out to this audience. Again, talk to us for more information.

5. **Your pricing strategy must be based on research.** Cost was the fourth most important variable at 12.9 percent, but the researchers found it was highly influenced by the socioeconomic status of the respondent. Prices that were average or 15 percent less than average had favorable impact on consumer choice.

However, many other variables need to go into your pricing. Your pricing should of course reflect your actual costs as well as the pricing climate and average costs of your geographic market. Pricing is also a reflection of your market positioning. Are you aimed at the high-end, middle market or value conscious consumers?

The most important takeaway is it is imperative to know who your ideal client is and how much they are willing to spend on your services. It's critical for you to research what they are used to

paying, what others offering similar services charge and what the market will bear. These are concrete realities that outweigh the importance of the pricing findings in this study.

Practitioners who partner with Venus Concept can call on our industry-leading expertise and practice enhancement to gain visibility into these important marketing questions.

6. **A professional and informative online presence is a basic requirement.** Online presence was not very influential at 9.7 percent, but patients had a preference for an extensive online presence. Other studies³ show that websites and social media are becoming more important. One study of breast augmentation candidates⁴ found that 52 percent found their decision was influenced very much or extremely by the surgeon's website.

"An extensive online presentation can be used as an effective tool; however, the information stated on the website should be chosen carefully," the Dutch study stated.

In our view, the message of these findings is that the impact of online media is still evolving. Having a solid online presence is now a prerequisite for aesthetics providers. If you need guidance in this area, Venus Concept offers complete marketing packages to our clinic partners including a custom website, clinic video and other resources, another benefit to working with the industry's most innovative energy-based device manufacturer.

The study concluded that patients attached the least importance to whether a clinic operated only locally with one outlet or was a nationwide chain.

Conclusion

From a marketing perspective, the most important takeaway from this research is that experience is consumers' top consideration in choosing an aesthetics practitioner. If you have at least 10 years' experience, make that a focal point of your positioning. It's also important to keep your service offerings at the cutting edge so you command a reputation as an early adopter who has the most extensive experience with the latest treatments.

Your other priority should be behind-the-scenes nurturing of relationships with doctors because their referrals are highly influential for consumers. Furthermore, redoubling efforts to promote word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied patients will pay dividends.

Some of the other findings require more nuanced judgment to act upon depending on your specific geography, clinic demographic and brand positioning.

If you would like help navigating these and other challenges in competing effectively in today's aesthetics marketplace, we invite you to get in touch. Venus Concept offers the best

³ Nassab R, Navsaria H, Myers S, Frame J. Online marketing strategies of plastic surgeons and clinics: A comparative study of the United Kingdom and the United States. *Aesthet Surg J*. 2011;31:566–571.

⁴ Walden JL, Panagopoulous G, Shrader SW. Contemporary decision making and perception in patients undergoing cosmetic breast augmentation. *Aesthet Surg J*. 2010;30:395–403

support in the industry to our partner practitioners. Learn how our practice enhancement, marketing support and unique subscription business model can strengthen your practice.

Sincerely,

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