

(Not so Extreme) Optometric Makeovers

Some simple tools and ideas to help you sharpen up your business practice and performance

Practice looking tired? Staff not motivated? Profitability stagnant? Maybe you've started to notice that patients are not coming back?

It could be time to take a critical look at what you are doing with your business!

These few pages are designed to give you some ideas to help you revitalise your practice – and re-ignite your enthusiasm at the same time.

The first thing to do

is to put an hour or two aside and take a critical look at how things are going at present. Provided that you are honest with yourself, this will give you a great starting point to understand what needs to be done to refresh and revitalise your practice.

And remember – the process of renewal is a shared event – engage your partners and your staff in the process! They will have

perspectives you'd never dreamed of

and will very likely be able to make excellent suggestions that could convert into some very profitable changes!

Let's get going!



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Why are you here— in your practice—right now?

Why are you here – in your practice – right now?

This is the most fundamental question that you need to answer – everything else flows from it.

You are in business (or seriously contemplating going into business) for a reason – what is it?

“Being your own boss” is very rarely a good enough reason – you need to have in mind an

angle or advantage which, when you apply it to the market, will help to differentiate you from other, similar businesses and as a consequence will help to attract people to your business and away from similar competitors.

This is often called your USP – Unique Selling Proposition.

What is it about your business/practice that will set it apart from your competitors and entice people to choose you rather than someone else?

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Why are you here (cont.)

There are entire books written on USPs – here are just a few ideas to help you get started:

Price - DO NOT use price as a USP. Anyone can match you on price – there must be something else.

Service – if you want to use standards of patient service as your USP (or part of it) then it must be truly outstanding. In every way and on every occasion, you must exceed a patient's expectations – just meeting them is not enough.

This is a cultural thing within the business that must permeate from the top down and requires constant reinforcement. It can work very well, but requires total commitment and ongoing investment to maintain.

Products – in optometry this is difficult, as most brands come through established distribution channels which you won't be able to influence. However perhaps there are new suppliers, particularly overseas, with edgy styles which you could tap into and which don't have strong coverage in the Australian market.

Equipment – making your practice a leader in equipment and technology can certainly work. However it again requires a genuine commitment (in large financial terms) and an image to back it up.

Style – this is a combination factor – high end products (Fendi, Armani, Issi Miyake and the like) with a distinctive and impressive shopfront fitout. This is the 'total experience' equation – putting together the best of everything – exclusive/top end products, exemplary service, distinctive image and top range equipment as well to create a package which people will travel to experience.

There are many other factors which can contribute to your USP:

Opening hours – if you practice in the city, why not open early (say 7.30am) to catch people on their way to work. Or maybe 12 noon – 8pm if you are in a commuting area to catch people on their way home.

Accessibility – if you are in an area with a large older population, make your practice highly accessible for wheelchairs and people with mobility problems. Make sure lighting is bright and eliminate trip hazards such as stairs, rugs and floor edges.

Occupational optometry – in an area with a lot of industry around? Why not offer services such as safety eyewear, onsite consulting in visual ergonomics and computer vision advice?

Don't mix your messages – if you do decide to specifically target a particular audience, don't try to be all things to all people at the same time. For example, if you decide to target an upscale, corporate market then it is probably unwise to also target young children. Busy, high-energy professionals may not mix well with busy, high-energy children!



And there are a great many more USP ideas besides these!

Let's take a walk around!

Having decided on your USP – what is going to set you apart from everyone else – let's now take a look at how your practice shapes up in terms of delivering on your promises.

Note that this section is all contextual – exactly what it means will depend on the context in which you intend to apply it. For example, "service" could be either

"friendly, cheerful service" or "efficient, precise service" – or something in between. Regardless of which it is, getting your particular model of 'service' right is what is important.



Right inside the practice

Let's start in the back room, so to speak – the infrastructure which holds the whole show together.

Staff

Nothing works well without good staff – they can make or break a business. Also, they are your most expensive investment, so it makes sense to get the best out of them.

So, your staff should be:

- Personable & friendly
- Well trained – invest in staff training!
- Knowledgeable to an

appropriate level

- Well presented & groomed
- Have a good telephone manner (the telephone is often your first point of contact and gives the first impression about your practice)
- Understand your business philosophy and be able to identify with it and support it
- Consistent with the image of the practice – if you are presenting a high-end, boutique image to a conservative market, having a receptionist with multiple facial

piercings and a coloured Mohawk is probably not your smartest move

- Adaptable – you run a small business – you need people who can and will adapt to your business needs. Look for people with adaptable skills and attitudes – especially attitudes!

Systems

Your systems are vital to the success of your business. Your business systems must be able to efficiently support the needs of your practice – from patient recalls to accounting and taxation information.

So, your business systems must have these attributes:

- They really should be computerised – with the cost of hardware and software today, there is just no reason why a practice should not be computerised.
- Adequate to the business's needs.

As a base line you need:

- accounting software such as MYOB
- a patient information package – Sunix, Optipro/Ocelot, Optimate, OAASys or something similar
- an office suite such as Microsoft Office
- either on computer or in hard copy, a detailed appointments diary
- Organised so that information retrieval is efficient and can be done in a timely manner
- Secure – both in terms of day to

day security (patients can't see other patients' data) and in terms of backup (ensure backups occur at least weekly and that a copy is taken off-site in case of total destruction by fire etc)

- They must facilitate patient contact – the whole purpose of a patient database is the enable you to keep in touch with your patients and to monitor their care to a level of detail which is both clinically and legally appropriate. If it doesn't allow you to do this then change it!

The Front Area

As a general rule, retail areas should be given a major overhaul every 5 years or so. Now "major" could mean a change of paint colour and some new display fittings or it could mean a rip-out and rebuild – it depends on your budget and your needs. However it does mean that whatever you do, it should present a fresh, new face to your patients every 5 years or so.

Now, get out of your chair and take a walk around the front of your practice – inside the practice

at this stage. Look for:

- **Clean windows**, mirrors, shelving, displays and stock – there should be no dust, dirt, dead insects, water stains etc visible
- Is the **carpet and flooring** in good condition – no holes or tears, secure, no loose edges, clean (when was the last time you had the carpet shampooed or the floors thoroughly & professionally cleaned?)
- Are **traffic areas** slip-proof, especially if they get wet?

- **Walls and ceilings** – paint in good condition, not peeling? Are the colours fresh and enticing or drab and uninviting?

- **Lighting** – it needs to be bright but not harsh, especially in areas where people are trying on frames. Tinted downlights can often add mood and effect for very little cost

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(Front area cont.)

- **Frame displays** – they should be accessible and changed regularly to keep the “new practice” feel. Security is an issue for frame displays – one of the best forms of security is to keep the display area open and readily visible from the front desk area – and to make sure that staff have been educated about what to look out for when people are intent on stealing. For high-risk products such as designer sunglasses, there are many locking systems which are unobtrusive but effective.

- **Point of Sale materials** (stand up cards for various products etc) – be cautious about using these. They often are little more than clutter and have little or no impact on sales – and they keep getting knocked off the desk or shelf! Only use them if you genuinely feel that they will contribute to sales or patient awareness of a particular issue (like MD or Glaucoma Weeks) – don’t use them just to keep a rep happy (even though we do love our optical reps!)

- **Innovate!** Don’t just go with four walls in stylish, off-white Gyprock! Some practices have made great use of corrugated iron and tree stumps to create

an absolutely fantastic effect as you walk in the front door – dare to be different!

- **Front window displays** – make them exciting and enticing – and keep them fresh! You don’t need to spend a fortune on front window displays, but they do need to be kept changing – at the very least with the seasons (so, 4 times a year or more!)



The Reception Area

In the specific part of the front area where patients wait for their appointment, take note of the following:

- **Clean and tidy!!** The reception area should be tidied several times a day and before the doors open every morning
- **Chairs** should be stable and comfortable
- **Magazines and books** – ensure that they are current – there are companies who can provide you with a subscription service to just-out-of-date magazines at very modest cost.

▪ **Toys** – if you have children’s toys, make sure that they are clean and in good repair. If they are broken, throw them out and replace them!

▪ **Children’s table** – if practical, have a small table available for children to play on. Coloured pencils and paper are a wonderful distraction for most children.

▪ **Television/monitor** in the reception area and running patient information materials such as the OAA’s Reception Room Area presentation



Consulting Room

This is your professional workspace. More than anywhere else in the practice, your patients expect this to reflect the highest standards of care and professionalism.

- **Clean and tidy** – always!
- **Hand basin** – if at all possible, have a hand basin in the consulting room. Moreover, make sure that you wash your hands **in front of your patients at the start of every consultation!**

▪ **Modern equipment** – equipment that is 30 years old may work well, but it does not convey an image of up to date professionalism

▪ **Profitable equipment** – strongly consider investing in equipment that will bring you a direct return. For example, retinal photography is a valuable patient recording and diagnostic tool and you can charge a fair fee for its use! There are other pieces of equipment which add genuine value to the patient’s consulting room experience and for which

fees can be charged.

Investigate your options!



Step Outside!

Finally, you need to step outside the practice and see how it looks from the outside – what impression does it give to the casual passer-by or to a patient who is coming to seek your professional service and advice?

Signage

- Is it prominent?
- Can it be seen by a patient driving past trying to find the practice?
- Is it visible at night?
- Clean and in good repair?

Front window

- Washed weekly?
- Enticing and appealing?
- Well illuminated?
- Frequently refreshed?

Access

- Wheelchair accessible?
- Easy access for people who are elderly and/or immobile?
- Are there handgrips or handrails in appropriate places?
- Are floor surfaces non-slip, especially when wet?

- Have steps been eliminated as far as practicable?



Marketing Gems!

We've had a look at a number of pieces of literature around marketing an optometric practice. Below are some of the ideas – put very succinctly – that we've gleaned from what we've read. Some of them reinforce what has been noted above – others are new:

√ **Differentiate your practice**, otherwise you will become a 'commodity supplier' – like salt or sugar

√ **Be obsessive about patient service** – be excellent, not just good

√ **Target a niche market**, for example

- Children
- Ortho K
- Contact Lenses
- Therapeutics
- Low Vision (a certain growth area for the future)
- Computers & vision
- Industrial consulting
- Nursing homes

√ **Technology** – some evaluation questions:

(With thanks to *201 Secrets of a High Performance Optometric Practice*, Levoy, 2002)

- How will it help your patients?

- How will it help your practice?
- How can you efficiently integrate it's use into your practice?
- How fast can you pay for it?

Can you test drive it in your office, not just at an equipment exhibition?

√ **Have knowledgeable, friendly staff** (Levoy, 2002)

- Are they competent in emergency procedures?

- Can they answer common questions such as

- Why do you dilate my eyes?
- Can I have a copy of my prescription?
- What does this instrument do?
- If I'm seeing fine, why to do I need to come in?
- Why shouldn't I order my lenses over the internet?

√ **Is your practice physically accessible**

- Ramp access?
- Protrusions?
- Trip hazards?
- Slip hazards?

√ **Does your practice have street appeal?**

√ Does your practice have internal appeal? Do a significant update every 5 or so years

√ **Office hours** – would it help if you varied your hours?

- Maybe 7am-2pm (if you practice in an area with lots of factories, for example)

- 12 noon – 8pm (if you are in a dormitory suburb to facilitate visits on the way home from work)

√ **Be on time with your appointments!**

√ **Be child-friendly and older-friendly!**

√ **If prescribing contact lenses**, ensure your patients have an after hours contact number where they can reach you if needed

√ **Be easy to do business with** (Levoy, 2002)

- If a patient calls with an "emergency" (real or perceived), simply have your receptionist ask "how soon can you get here?"

- If a patient calls seeking an appointment on the same day, make sure your receptionist checks with you first if the initial response is to refuse the appointment

- If a patients calls to change an appointment, even at the last minute, **just do it!** A long sigh or sign of annoyance accomplishes nothing. If patients have repeated difficulty in keeping appointments, ask them to phone on the day they'd like to come in – if you can then fit them in, that's fine, otherwise ask them to try again on another day

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- **Never quibble about handing over a prescription** – you are required to do so under the terms of your agreement with Medicare and nothing annoys a patient more than having to argue about something that they are entitled to

- **Ensure that your staff are helpful** to people who have VisionCare claims or any other type of administrative need

- **Do anything to please a patient** – or put another way – don't quibble over refunds or exchanges. A quote from Levoy's book:

"A patient who had spent \$600 on eyewear stopped in at the practice. She wasn't sure she had made the best choice in glasses. I offered to remake them for her in another expensive frame at no charge. Sure, it cost us something, but it brought us more. That patient is really happy now and she'll never leave us".

- **If a patient requests a refund**, it is generally worth your while to just give it. In all Australian states there are strong, generally pro-consumer fair trading laws. Even if you feel that you are definitely in the right (which you very often will be) the cost of engaging in the dispute process (especially if it gets to a hearing) will far outweigh any loss you might make on the transaction. And this doesn't even consider the negative stories which the unhappy patient is sure to spread around everyone they speak to!

√ **Improve your patient recall effectiveness**

- At the end of the consultation, state clearly when you next want to see the patient & why – just like a medical specialist does!

- Ask the patient how they would like to be reminded of the appointment – mail, phone, email, fax etc

- When you hand the patient over to your front-office staff (for frame selection assistance or to pay their account etc), again state that you would like to see Mr/Ms X in 99

- Train your front office staff to reinforce that message by saying, as the patient is leaving – “thanks Mr/Ms X – we'll see you again in 99 months/years”

√ **Reactivate inactive patients** (Levoy, 2002)



- Try this: have your receptionist call 25 randomly selected 'inactive' patients and simply say the following:

"In reviewing our records, I see that you haven't had a comprehensive eye exam since <date>. I'm calling to see if you'd like to make an appointment at this time?"

- That's all – if the patient says 'yes', then make the appointment – if they give any other response, just make a note of it, thank them for their time and end the call.

- Based on the responses you get from the sample, you can determine if it is worthwhile phoning more of your inactive patients

- The key to this is to ensure that your staff member is comfortable with making the calls and that they understand that they are only calling to open an opportunity for someone to make an appointment that they might have overlooked. There is no pressure on either the staff member or the patient to make an appointment.

√ **Talk to your patients about premium lens options** (Levoy, 2002)

Begin in the consultation room – make a recommendation to the patient and explain why you consider that recommendation to be important for their health and comfort.

Point out the health benefits – for example, why UV protection is important: “UV rays are potentially harmful to the eye and are a known cause of pterygium and cataracts. Just as dermatologists warn you to wear sunscreen if you're outside a lot, I recommend that you put UV protection in your glasses”

Anti-reflective coatings aren't just cosmetic:

- “Anti-reflective coating isn't just for making glasses look good. It improves night vision, especially important for older drivers”.

- “Progressive lenses aren't just to get rid of unsightly bi-focal lines. They provide major improvements in vision at all ranges”

- Provide information and recommendations but don't 'sell'. Allow patients to make their own choices about their eyewear without feeling like they are being pushed into something

√ **Use your database to contact specific patient groups**

- Coming up to Spring, you might contact patients who have seasonal allergic conjunctivitis to book in to see you before their symptoms start

- Patients who have (or are at risk of) diabetic retinopathy or glaucoma, for example, should be mailed regularly to ensure that their condition is well monitored and that they are referred promptly should that become necessary

- Don't ignore patients with dry eye – as the population ages it is one of the fastest growing ocular complaints

