



THE BETTER BODY BUSINESS

The Retailing Of The Cosmetic Medical Industry

by Michele Kent, with contributing writer Beth McCauley

RETAIL MEDICINE. MEDICAL SPAS. LASER BOUTIQUES. TERMS LIKE THESE ARE BECOMING COMMONPLACE AS THE INDUSTRY DESIGNED TO IMPROVE OUR LOOKS IS DEVELOPING A NEW FACE OF ITS OWN. PEOPLE WHO WANT TO COMPLEMENT THEIR EFFORTS IN TOTAL BODY MAINTENANCE ARE TURNING TO THE MEDICAL INDUSTRY WITH THEIR APPEALS FOR COST-EFFECTIVE, SAFE, QUICK, AND RELATIVELY PAINLESS WAYS TO MEET THEIR GOALS; AND THE INDUSTRY IS RESPONDING IN FULL FORCE. A CLOSER LOOK INSIDE THE MEDICAL AND COSMETIC RETAIL BUSINESS MODEL WILL SHOW YOU HOW THE DEMAND IS GROWING, WHY BUSINESSES ARE STARTING UP, WHAT DRIVES THE COMPETITION, AND HOW IT BENEFITS THE CONSUMER.

A QUICK EVOLUTION

Only a few decades ago, plastic surgery was generally reserved for people with dire medical needs such as malformation or injury. Then, celebrities started going on “vacations” and came back looking younger and more refreshed than ever. The public took notice and requested ways for the industry to provide the masses with those services, too. Plastic surgery soared, and soon medical retailers followed suit and introduced cosmetic alternatives in an attempt to mimic the effects of plastic surgery. These procedures have since been coined “cosmetic medicine.”

GROWTH OF AN INDUSTRY

A drive in any direction will reveal the large number of affluent professionals who have moved into North Fulton and Forsyth counties in the past decade. Knowledgeable business investors have followed their target market straight from Atlanta’s major medical centers to suburban strip malls, gyms, and spas in hopes of catching the eyes of their consumers.

Aside from creating easier accessibility, medical retailers are also creating spa and country club-like atmospheres unlike the traditional doctor’s offices of yesteryear. They are training employees to be gracious and welcoming instead of simply conducting business as usual, and are carefully tuned in to the desires of their patients, much like a concierge service.

INDUSTRY INFLUENCES

Internally, doctors and retailers are responding to the demands television shows like *Extreme Makeover* generate. Reality shows like this physically transform a person from head to toe and detail the surgical steps involved in doing so.

television. “Consumers are more educated; not only do they know what they want done, they know which procedure they want us to use to accomplish it,” he says. Savvy consumers walk in armed with information—and questions.

Questioning a person’s credentials, training, and experience is essential prior to any procedure, according to Patti Currin, R.N., founder of Laser Lights Cosmetics Center.

“This modern business model allows for a retail market virtually any player can join. In fact, the state of Georgia carries no requirements whatsoever for businesses to perform laser treatments,” she says.

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Dr. David M. Whiteman, chief of plastic surgery at Gwinnett Hospital Systems says there is another reason consumer research is a good practice. “Since demand breeds competition, we would urge consumers to be wary when it comes to price-cutting plastic surgery. A surgeon should be selected based on qualifications, experience, and reputation.”

WHAT MOTIVATES BUSINESSES TO START UP?

“The low risks and high rewards of cosmetic enhancement are very appealing to those in the business of medicine,” says Dr. Robert Richard, a surgeon at Vein Solutions of Cumming. “Doctors are not incurring high premiums on malpractice insurance because these procedures typically involve minimal risk to the patients. Additionally, practices do not have to staff personnel to handle insurance matters since these services are typically an out-of-pocket expense for patients,” he says. The convergence of ser-

STRENGTH IN COMPETITION

Ghassan Barazi, CEO of ImagePlus Cosmetic and Laser Eye Centers, found that combining services was a positive solution and introduced it into his business models. Barazi builds laser vision correction centers all over the world and points out one problem his industry experiences. The results of laser correction last from many years to a lifetime, and ultimately the patients have no reason to return for services.

Realizing patients who elected vision correction often proceeded to obtain other cosmetic treatments, Barazi decided to add adjacent services to his clinics.

“This benefits the consumer because we already have an established relationship with them and they have developed trust in our establishment. It allows us to keep rates reasonable because the cost to market to the consumer becomes less as we see repeat business,” he says.

Barazi has found strength in the competitive business model, and realizes it compels others to offer value in their practices. He contends competition is important to serve the consumer, and has resulted in more affordable choices for eye surgery patients.

ATTRACTING CUSTOMERS

What are doctors and service providers doing to distinguish themselves, and how are they attracting the coveted repeat customer?

We see the industry including value-added services to treatments in an effort to please customers and earn repeat business. Barazi points out that the more people experience the ease

available to try. Dr. Kumar, a board certified plastic surgeon at Riverside Plastic Surgery Center in Duluth, notes that he finds "Botox® Parties" (a gathering hosted by a private individual where guests receive Botox® treatments) are beneficial for both himself and the patients as a stepping stone toward building a long-term patient-doctor relationship.

Aside from building relationships with their clients, many businesses also seek to differentiate themselves in terms of public perception. A close look at the titles and descriptions of some facility's treatments will reveal a private labeling system. It is where a general medical or cosmetic treatment is slightly changed and then aptly titled to create brand-name exclusivity and drive the demand for it. It can make it tough for consumers who are new to the market or unfamiliar with its jargon to comparison shop, but it does help businesses differentiate themselves from others and encourage product interest.

Many of these businesses say they walk a

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fine line. Introducing new procedures requires a lot of forethought and detail on the part of retail medical establishments. Jump too soon and they run the risk of winding up with an industry fad. Wait too long and they may lose customers who leave to seek the treatment elsewhere. Adopting new procedures is not as easy as nodding to a doctor's office sales representative and putting up new signs. Doctors and providers typically have to obtain new equipment, certifications, education, and experience to introduce a new service, adding to the demand it takes to remain on the industry's cutting edge.

SHARING THE MARKET

As little as 15 years ago, plastic surgeons were the sole producers of cosmetic enhancements in the medical arena. Now they are seeing a lot of that market share move away from them as medical retailers enter the mix.

Some plastic surgeons take exception to newer models. Dr. Whiteman notes his concern for people who are sold on the notion they can achieve plastic surgery results without seeing a plastic surgeon to perform the work.

Cosmetic treatments are subject to fewer regulations and are more readily available. The procedures are generally less invasive, which means little to no downtime. Many services can be obtained during a person's lunch hour and become instantly gratifying. They serve an ever-increasing client base looking for minor adjustments versus major change.

PLASTIC SURGERY OR COSMETIC PROCEDURE?

There are distinct differences and people need to decide for themselves how dramatic they want the end result to be. Dr. Richard advises patients to factor in cost, downtime, pain, and risk, as well as how long the results are intended to last. While there are pros and cons to each treatment, the reason the industry offers such a wide variety of choices is because everyone's needs differ, and there is no one magical treatment that is designed to be right for everyone.

"When people want to correct a major, life-long issue, they tend to view plastic surgery as

the step that will bring them the best results," says Dr. Kumar. Additionally, plastic surgery can serve dual purposes, treating both medical issues and cosmetic concerns. For instance, a person can correct a deviated septum (sinus surgery) and cosmetically perfect a nose through rhinoplasty at the same time.

Cosmetic procedures are a great fit for people who want a minor enhancement, perhaps in preparation for their high school reunion or wedding day. Procedures such as teeth whitening and micro dermabrasion are often used to refresh a person's appearance without the commitment and expense of plastic surgery. But what exactly drives the desire for these changes in the first place?

WHY THE BIG DEMAND?

The industry responds to all kinds of reasons for self-modification, from lingering effects of childhood teasing to undesired results of aging. Whether consumers are dealing with skin imperfections, a stubborn bulge, or thinning or too much hair, the fix is in, and it's less expensive than ever to obtain these body enhancing

The American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery in Medical News Today. The industry is hoping to tighten that gap and generate more interest among men.

One relatively new treatment medical retailers hope will succeed in doing that is HGH, or Human Growth Hormone injections. It is currently gleaming a lot of interest from medical businesses and consumers, touted for its anti-aging effects. HGH is said to work from the inside to replace naturally occurring hormones as they diminish with age. Some effects HGH claims to provide are increased memory function and stamina, stronger physical endurance, and reduction in disease. Proponents say it essentially re-establishes the hormone balance people had when they were younger and restores youth and vitality, turning back the hands of time. Many retailers in the industry, like Barazi, would like to offer HGH in their clinics, and many consumers are specifically seeking it out, lending to the question: Is it the industry perpetuating the notion that 50 is the new 40, or do

consumers have the reins?

We'll find out as consumer demand ripens and more people are comfortably and affordably enhancing their bodies. Today's industry is aligned to capture consumers' attention and provide them with new technology at very competitive prices. The answer to who will win the opportunity to sculpt us into younger, stronger, and healthier individuals will evolve through "natural consumer selection." With a better understanding of the structure of retail medicine, consumers will be ready to navigate the industry to obtain the body of work they have always desired. ■

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Because it is not an “apples to apples” industry, the responsibility goes back to the consumer to interview several facilities, ask procedure-specific questions, and examine the provider’s qualifications. Consumers need to understand the correlation between pricing and depth of the services provided to effectively shop the market.

The challenge then goes to the consumer to differentiate between the types of services and determine the best match for their specific needs.

How do people choose between plastic surgery and cosmetic medical enhancement?

“Plastic surgery is a more serious undertaking, typically involving more money and downtime for the consumer, and more expertise on the

services. Dr. Marcia Byrd, a cosmetic surgeon at Byrd Aesthetics in Roswell, notes she sees people as young as 20 obtaining “preventative maintenance” from the anticipated effects of aging. As almost all facets of service become more convenient, widespread, and acceptable, we may see the next generation tapping into retail medical services throughout their whole lives with as much ease as today’s society colors hair and whitens teeth.

LOOKING AHEAD

In 2006, 79 percent of cosmetic surgery patients were women

