

Cosmetic Dermatology in a Down Economy

There is, at the present time, debate about whether we are in a recession, depression, or cyclical down market. The unemployment rate is above 6% and in many parts of the country it is higher.¹ Gas is now something that people have to budget for and a trip to the gas station is something that is often at the expense of another piece of the family budget. Whether or not cosmetic dermatology patients are directly affected by these factors, they are feeling them. Despite assurances from the vendors of cosmetic products and devices, the economy is not faring well and cosmetic dermatology patients are feeling it. Therefore, what is a cosmetic dermatologist to do in a down economy? There are a few answers to this question that can help cosmetic dermatology practices and patients weather the storm.

The first part of the answer is to focus on the question. A good cosmetic dermatologist is still a dermatologist who sees patients with skin cancers and general dermatology problems. Most cosmetic dermatologists do this because it is what we spent the majority of our lives preparing to do, it is interesting, and we enjoy helping people who are sick. When cosmetic dermatology patients are financially squeezed and the practice costs are going up, it may make sense to make more scheduling options available to patients who have general dermatology issues. This will accomplish a few things.

To begin with, it will fill empty schedule slots and keep the physician and staff busy. A busy schedule helps to pay overhead and avoids idleness which can breed a self-fulfilling downward spiral. General dermatology patients may not generate the kind of revenue that some cosmetic dermatology patients will generate, but they do not have the same expenses associated with them either. As some general dermatology patients flow through the office, they may be interested in some of the types of cosmetic procedures that are offered to them. General dermatology patients are most likely to become a new source of cosmetic dermatology patients, and although they may not be able to sign up for a \$20,000 face-lift, they may want and need a treatment with botulinum toxin type A (BTX-A) or hyaluronic acid. Each of these treatments is still within the reach of most budgets and, in a down economy, patients sometimes like the smaller treatments to regain a sense of control and improve their self-esteem.

Displays and information about low-impact procedures should be available for general dermatology patients, and employees should be educated about interactions regarding these procedures. Educational sessions with employees should focus on marketing and management in a down economy. Frequently, a cosmetic dermatology practice will be able to treat general dermatology patients, with some patients becoming cosmetic dermatology patients. Thus, it is possible to actually do well while doing some good. For the patients who do not have the ability to become cosmetic dermatology patients, it is still nice to perform some general dermatology procedures and skin cancer surgery. I do not envision ever abandoning these aspects of my practice.

Finally, some of the best ways to deal with a down economy are to confront situations head on. Discuss

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financial issues with your employees because some of them may be struggling and may appreciate an incentive program. Some employees may want to use the opportunity to grow professionally and can help implement a marketing program. There will be employees who want to learn about cosmeceuticals and maybe they can help you increase product sales. Product sales are one facet of a practice that is a win-win situation. Patients are frequently spending more money on products that are of lower quality and receiving no support other than a free sample size of perfume at a department store. If great products can be delivered at a reasonable price, it will ultimately help patients. Furthermore, when patients start to see results from the regimen prescribed, they may want to inquire about other things the office can offer them. Thus, even the patient who is only spending \$20 in a down economy may migrate up the cosmetic scale to BTX-A or other fillers as they become more comfortable with the practice. In a down economy, it makes sense to try to engage patients at a lower point on the cosmetic dermatology pyramid. This can be achieved with treating

GUEST EDITORIAL

an area with BTX-A, an intense pulsed light treatment, or with a cosmeceutical regimen.

A down economy can be a challenge for physicians, employees, and patients. It is worse to simply drift along without a plan. My suggestions are to figure out one's position in a marketing plan, what the goals are for the next few quarters (which are likely to be worse), and if changes can be implemented. Internal marketing, patient education, and employee investment are the cornerstones

of a good practice in any environment. In stormy weather such as this, they are essential to survival.

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Reference

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Labor force statistics from the current population survey. <http://www.bls.gov/CPS/>. Accessed September 17, 2008. ■