

The day to day running of an aesthetics clinic

With the booming aesthetics industry expected to continue growing at the rate of 10% per year, the move into setting up and running your own aesthetics clinic may seem increasingly tempting. *PMFA News'* very own **Victoria Smith** takes you through the challenges and rewards involved.

BY VICTORIA SMITH

I have not found a good manual on how to run an aesthetic clinic, and from personal experience, I can state that it is very naïve to think that it is easy. After over a decade, I have no regrets about setting up my clinic as it has been very rewarding and also, I am passionate about the industry and the service that we provide. For anyone who shares this passion and is considering setting up their own aesthetic clinic it is important to understand that the change from working as a practitioner in a clinic to owning and running a clinic is profound. When you are responsible for the overheads, business strategy, staff, finance and generating the income, you find a great many different pressures.

To have a successful aesthetic practice does not mean you have to own or run a clinic. There are many recognised professionals in the industry that are visiting practitioners and have practising privileges at other clinics, mobile practitioners who go to homes or hotels, and those that set up a treatment room at home. These methods are often a preferred method to keep overheads and running costs low. It can, however, be more challenging to expand and being a sole trader can have its limitations, particularly with holidays and unplanned sickness.

However, long before you decide how you might practise, it is essential to answer the most basic question in business: "Are you looking for a lifestyle business or an exit strategy?" This is not a question with a right or wrong answer but really what you want from you career, business and life.

A lifestyle business is designed and set up by the owners to generate income to support their life and chosen

lifestyle or provide a foundation to be able to do this. With no planned intention of selling the business, it does not require a business infrastructure for it to run, but can be managed and organised around your lifestyle giving a pleasant work life balance. The overheads of a lifestyle business can be kept to a minimum, if required, as there is limited need for scalability. Lifestyle businesses can be, and are, successful and are perhaps more suitable to sole traders or small groups such as husband and wife teams [1].

An exit strategy is designed to obtain all of the rewards at the exit, and the whole function of the business is to gain value up until that point. Typically the owners work evenings, weekends and have few (if any) holidays, sacrificing lifestyle for the business. The strategic plan of an entrepreneur is to sell the company that has been founded, working to increase the value maximally to sell it for the highest profit possible. Therefore, an exit business is developed and grown with this in mind, constantly adding value and making it appealing for potential purchasers or investors [2].

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The two sorts of business are mutually exclusive and you cannot change from one to the other once you have launched. The type of business you choose to develop is a personal choice, but it is important to take into consideration what you are hoping to achieve and your lifestyle choices.

Aesthetics industry

The aesthetics industry is fast growing and we have seen a significant change in the types of procedures available, as well as patients' perceptions of and requirements from non-surgical and surgical aesthetic procedures.

The Global Aesthetic Market is expected to exceed 5.5 billion USD by 2020, growing at the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of nearly 10% according to a report by Technavio. According to Amber Chourasia, a Lead Analyst from health and wellness research at Technavio, "The global facial aesthetics market is growing at a steady rate due to the rising beauty consciousness among consumers and a shift in preference from invasive to minimally or non-invasive procedures[3]."

This growth is mainly driven by the acceptance of non-invasive and minimally invasive aesthetic procedures, an ageing population, increasing awareness among customers, advances in technology and a growing increase in male patients [4].

As a business owner these statistics are encouraging when you are developing your clinic. However, to have a successful business, you need to ensure you participate in the market and your services are desirable by potential patients. Hence identifying your niche (or Unique Selling Point – USP) is important.

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Services offered

When setting up your business, the selection of treatments or procedures that you are going to offer needs careful consideration. In an industry where there are so many choices, it is easy to get carried away and attracted by new technology and the claims made by manufacturers and distributors. A classic trap to fall into is the typical sales technique of being told the ‘number of treatments you need to sell before it becomes profitable’. As a business owner you need to consider the running costs, depreciation and ongoing maintenance and servicing, and also whether you have got the patient footfall or, whether enough of your patients would be interested. You also need to consider whether you have time to perform the required number of new procedures with your other commitments.

Try to be selective in your treatment choice, making sure that the procedures you offer complement each other and maximise your skills and those of the team you work with. Sometimes it is best to be a specialist in one area rather than have minimal knowledge of a whole selection of treatments. Your location, business style set up and budget will play a huge part in this decision. Are you going to focus on the face, body, injectables or machine-based treatments?

It is worth researching treatments and looking at clinical and scientific data, confirming their efficacy and the realistic results that can be achieved. It is easy to be influenced by the press and the different ideas that are publicised and promoted by companies. In practice, it is often hard to not be influenced, especially in the heat of the moment and when on the end of a ‘hard sell’ interview or event. After some time in the industry and after learning from your mistakes you can stand and look in your store cupboard which has turned into a machine graveyard and on reflection think ... “if only I had known then what I know now!” Therefore stick to your core business and avoid getting distracted – start small and build on your successes.

Getting these key decisions right and clear in your head will make the day to day running of your clinic easier and

more focused for you and your team. With so many aspects to managing and running a clinic, and being a figurehead for your business, you have to keep a number of plates spinning at the same time. However, there are several key areas that I believe are crucial in contributing to the success of your clinic.

The team

Establishing a strong and reliable team is crucial to your business. It is essential to employ staff who share your ethos, values and beliefs; not only to maintain the level of service that you want but also to work with you as the company grows. As a clinic owner you will have a business plan and goal that you need to achieve over a set period of time, with targets along the way. It is not appropriate to share all the details of this plan with the staff, but giving them ‘headlines’ or an overview will help them understand your decisions and make them feel involved and part of the future plan.

It is key to select staff with different skill sets and personalities which complement each other when forming a team. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses (including yourself!), but with a strong group with mixed skills, a more successful team can be formed. When selecting my senior team the use of the Belbin Team Inventory (www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles) or the DISC Personality Testing (<https://discpersonalitytesting.com>) have been invaluable tools in aiding the selection criteria. These are behavioural tests to measure you and senior staff, helping to identify the different team roles and thus allowing you not only to select what you need to achieve a balance but to help individuals fulfil their potential, through identifying their key strengths.

With your chosen team in place, you then have to allow them to succeed or fail (hopefully not) as you cannot do it all. However, with keeping a ‘finger on the pulse’ you can provide support or intervene when necessary, giving you the chance to work ‘on the business’ and as well as ‘in the business’ as a practitioner.

In a clinic, training for all staff is very important. Most employees (clinical or administration) will have areas they want to improve or develop in

the workplace. By facilitating this and allowing them to strengthen their skills, motivation is increased. Equipping staff with training and education, whether it be in-house or through suppliers, is key to improving day to day running. To be able to provide a safe and effective service, staff need to be fully up to date with what they are providing and promoting. Staff that are competent, confident and current with industry changes, as well as the products and services offered by your clinic, will strengthen your position as a clinic. A business is built on reputation and the information and service that the patients’ experience will be the major part of building a good reputation.

Managing your patients

When a patient has had a good experience in a clinic, they might tell their closest friend or a family member about you. Conversely a bad experience is more likely to be publicised and patients will not think twice about who they tell. Whilst every clinic will experience complications and complaints the key to managing these successfully is how the patients are managed throughout their journey with you.

Although adverts or a website might bring a patient to you, the start of the patient journey begins from the moment the phone rings. A good first impression is one of the most important factors that will affect your business growth and development. At every stage of this journey there needs to be systems put in place to ensure the pathway is smooth and exceeds patient expectations.

Effective organisation is key in achieving this:

- Preparing for a patient’s appointment – such as preparing the notes. Do they need to fill in any registration or consultation forms? Do they need consent forms?
- Has the patient got to follow pre-procedure instructions?
- Do they need local anaesthetic cream prior to the treatment?
- Do they have adequate knowledge of any down-time or postoperative regimes?

All of these preparations need

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to considered and arranged well in advance of their treatment.

Compiling and effective use of the information collected from your patients will help enhance your service and manage patient flow in the clinic. A good clinic management system will assist in managing your practice and the day to day running. The data you collate can be used as a tool when analysing your patients; e.g. the average spend, procedure popularity, etc. It can be used to create a loyalty scheme, send birthday vouchers to clients, or advertise events.

Every patient will have expectations on how they expect their clinic experience to be, so on arrival a pleasant welcome with a smile and an offer of refreshments will create a friendly atmosphere that is both appreciated and essential. Making a connection with a patient and building that rapport by asking about a recent holiday, family wedding, etc. brings a very personal feel to the patient experience. Engaging and showing an interest in their life goes a long way and shows the patient they are valued. Explain to the client if their practitioner has been delayed or if the clinic is running slightly late before they have to ask, so the patient understands that you are aware of the situation and you are doing all you can to meet their needs.

The charges for the services you offer should reflect the level of service you provide, if you are pitching yourself as a premium clinic, the service needs to reflect this.

After the treatment or procedure the patient needs to be briefed and aware of the aftercare required, what to expect following the treatment and when they need to revisit the clinic. A branded aftercare sheet with an out of hours number is always reassuring and even a follow-up call the next working day shows extra care and thought.

If a patient is happy with the service and experience at your clinic they will be a patient for life, very often starting with a lower level procedure and progressing to larger and more invasive procedures. It is easier to

retain a patient than gain a new one. This happens over time as the patient's trust grows and you form a professional relationship with your patient. I once heard someone say “you trust your doctor or aesthetic practitioner more than you trust a partner, as they are making changes to your appearance.”

Marketing and promotion

Continuing to show a growth year on year is hard, particularly as there are more practitioners and clinics in the market. As the market becomes more competitive it becomes harder to gain new clients and so patient retention becomes even more important. The natural response is to try and generate new patients and business through upgrading your website, improving your search engine optimisation (SEO), producing newsletters, giving free consultations or even doing special offers such as through Groupon.

Having worked so hard to develop your brand and the way you are perceived by clients, you need to think carefully whether the chosen marketing reach is in-keeping with what your clinic represents. If you are pitching yourselves as a first class premium clinic, maybe Groupon or other discount vouchers do not reflect the brand in a positive way, and may even make you look desperate for business. Brand and reputation, which takes time to develop, can be destroyed very quickly with some ‘quick buck’ ideas.

Whilst external marketing is important, look at your existing database and assess whether you can improve clinic retention through making simple changes to service, improving communication methods and spending time trying to understand who your patients are and rewarding them for their loyalty. Incentive schemes and loyalty cards can be successful, or impromptu gestures such as a free product or discount if a patient visits on their birthday help patients feel more comfortable with you.

When constructing your marketing plan, the amount of money and budget you are prepared to invest in this area

needs to be decided. From experience it is very easy to get caught up in the enthusiasm at the time and at the end of the month or financial year it is quite a shock if the invested money didn't yield the revenue you had expected or hoped for.

With your brand and reputation at the forefront of your mind at all times, consider new ways of communicating that are current, popular and can be cost-effective, and how they might work for you. Brand recognition and getting your logo visible to patients and potential new patients is wasted if you don't make it easy for them to contact you, or to obtain the information they are looking for. The internet and social media are the obvious places to start. Make sure your website is clear, current and mobile friendly. Consider using video or YouTube clips and consider incorporating the ability to order online from your website. Social media sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) are good and fairly inexpensive tools for getting messages out to the masses, but always make sure the message is engaging and relevant. To make these campaigns successful they need to be constant, and although you may feel they are repetitive, it takes numerous postings for people to register the information.

Don't necessarily rule out traditional paper marketing methods, as people still like to have something to take away or tuck into a handbag to read later. Having a presence in the local coffee table magazines, as well as producing information leaflets on procedures and having a paper price list, are all well worth considering.

The more expensive methods of marketing, which can be quite fun, need to be thought through carefully to be most effective. You can consider items such as radio advertising, local TV advertising, PR support, sponsoring local events or clubs, and even roundabout signs (something that we have done locally for many years!).

There is no secret answer to the best way to market your clinic and everything we have done has been through trial and error. However, what

we have realised is that if you are able to ascertain how patients find you, it is a good guide for how effective your marketing methods have been.

Summary

It is rare for a person to have both clinic and business skills at the outset of starting up an aesthetics business or clinic. Most people setting up such businesses come from a clinical background, and few have the experience, knowledge or contacts necessary to run it successfully from day one. Successful people tend to be those who can work in teams, or ask for help or advice.

Once you have sorted out the business basics, ensuring you give a positive first impression is paramount in an aesthetic clinic. Patients are the life blood of a business and without them you do not have a business at all.

Running an aesthetics business is far from easy but it can be extremely rewarding when it runs smoothly. However, when working with the general public the unexpected often

occurs and the trick is to be able to manage these 'curve balls' in a slick professional manner.

When I am asked whether I regret setting up Absolute Aesthetics, my answer is a resounding "no". However, I can honestly say that it has been a rollercoaster of a ride, with many low points, but these are vastly outweighed by the high points: the team that I have around me, my patients and all of the fun that I have had along the way.

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