THE VIABILITY OF LASER HAIR REMOVAL TO A MEDICAL-AESTHETIC PRACTICE

There’s demand and opportunity, but practices must do more than just acquire a device and hope for the best.

BY H.L. GREENBERG, MD

founded Las Vegas Dermatology in 2007. An advocate for patients, Dr. Greenberg was instrumental in getting an under-18-year-old tanning bed ban in the state of Nevada through his advocacy role with the ASDS. As an avid videographer, Dr. Greenberg has made over 40 videos, one of which won an award for the ASDS video contest in 2013. Considered a social media and practice management expert, Dr. Greenberg lectures extensively.

The hardest part of any business is getting people in the door. How are you going to turn your laser hair removal machine from a doorstep into a productivity powerhouse? There are few things that I find more frustrating than having a patient say something to me like, “I didn’t know you had laser hair removal here, I’ve been getting it done someplace else.” Or, “I had my laser hair removal procedure performed someplace else, but was wondering if you would be able to treat the complication (burn, folliculitis, hyper or hypopigmentation) I received from their machine?” Every patient who enters my practice should know that we offer laser hair removal.

What is a reasonable strategy for your laser hair removal business? First and foremost, you need excellent technology. At Las Vegas Dermatology, we have two lasers for hair removal—a 755nm Alexandrite Laser for light skinned patients and a 1064nm Nd:YAG laser for darker skinned patients—both by Cynosure. Some people like an 810nm diode machine and others like IPL devices for hair removal, but I don’t find them as effective as our machines.

A VIABLE OPTION

Is laser hair removal viable in a medical-aesthetic practice? Absolutely, yes! Does having a laser hair removal machine mean that it is going to be instantly successful and pay for itself? Absolutely not! You need a strategy to feed your machine and generate revenue. Nothing makes me happier in my practice than when I want the laser aesthetician to join me in the room for a consult and she is unable to do so because she is busy firing the laser. My vision is for the lasers I own to be firing all day long; we are not yet at goal.

BOTTOM LINE

Laser hair removal is viable in a medical-aesthetic practice. Remember that hope is not a strategy; so if you don’t have a plan to get people through the door and to have them obtain services while in your office, then don’t purchase a laser.
Now that you have chosen your technology, you need to focus on how you will get patients through the door and make them aware of your services. Internal marketing is essential. Despite us having laser hair removal posters and brochures throughout the office and in exam rooms, many of my patients remain unaware that we offer laser hair removal services. Each new patient and any patient who hasn’t been seen in the past year fills out a cosmetic interest questionnaire, which includes a question on laser hair removal interest. If you’re not prepared to follow up on the question, don’t ask it. My staff is getting better at following up on our questionnaire, leaving a laser hair removal brochure and price sheet with the patient while they are waiting for their regular medical appointment when the laser hair removal interest box is checked.

Next, you need to choose your laser hair removal candidates wisely. It is easiest to deal with already educated patients who have seen a video on or read about laser hair removal. Once the pump is primed, and the patient is more aware of how lasers work, I will briefly discuss the technology of laser hair removal with the patient including the proper length of hair for the procedure and emphasize that it is permanent hair reduction, with most patients requiring six treatments for most treatment areas, but others requiring more treatments depending on their individual body’s response to the laser.

Additionally, I make people aware that even when treatments are complete, there may be the need for additional touch up treatments for that occasional, “Wolf-woman/Wolf-man” hair that pops up. I like telling people that only Midas mufflers can give a 100 percent guarantee, but the human body does what the body does—there are no guarantees.

**PROVIDING TREATMENTS**

I screen every patient who receives laser services at Las Vegas Dermatology prior to their initial treatment. If there is ever a problem, I can always say that I have at least seen every laser patient treated in my office. At every visit, someone being treated for a laser service in my clinic fills out a half page questionnaire asking if, among other things, they are taking any new medications, have been tanning recently, are pregnant or have a history of HSV in the area being treated. It is important to identify problem patients with unreasonable expectations and high-risk patients who are poor candidates prior to treatment.

As for the nuts and bolts of the laser hair removal practice, a laser aesthetician, nurse, or technician actually fires our laser depending on availability. We have compensated laser technicians in multiple different ways: sometimes with a higher salary and no bonus; other times with a lower salary, but a bonus based on productivity. When we were paying off the lease on the laser hair removal machine, we made it so that we would bonus the technician only if they earned more than the lease payment for the month in treatments (approximately $5,000, bonused at 10 percent over that rate). Whatever you do in regard to your laser hair removal business, expect that you will spend around $100,000 for a new machine and your yearly costs will run approximately $2,000 for upkeep if you don’t have a service contract. Remember that you will need two machines if you want to treat light and dark skin types (1064nm and 755nm), unless your laser company has both wavelengths in one device.

When purchasing a new laser, do your best to negotiate for a longer service contract. I’ve financed lasers in the past but am no longer willing to finance, so if I can’t afford the machine, I don’t purchase it. Your laser can and will go down. I don’t have a service contract, so each time it goes down I pay for the service. Once a year I pay to have the machines evaluated to assure they are properly working.

**MARKETING AND ENGAGEMENT**

We have tried all kinds of advertising to grow our laser hair removal business: magazines, certificates at charity events, Tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram, Periscope, Pinterest, YouTube videos, word of mouth, Google Ad Words, and VIP discount cards. I can’t point to any one thing that worked better than anything else. I can tell you that we made the same amount when we spent $20,000/year on advertising that we did when we spent $10,000/year. The more I do as a business owner, the more I realize luck and timing make a huge difference in the bottom line. I’m not sure exactly what works to get people in the door, but I can tell you what does not work: Lowering your prices in an effort to gain business. For the most part people don’t know the price of any product or service. An example of our pricing is $75 for an upper lip and $150 for a bilateral axilla laser hair removal treatment. Offering a discount for a package of treatments seems to be a winner, especially since we let people know that on average it takes six treatments to remove almost all of the hair. We sell packages at a 10 percent discount for three and 20 percent discount for six. Pricing isn’t the issue. Awareness of the service offering is the issue.

We have a post-laser kit available for purchase that includes a wash, 1% hydrocortisone and a sunscreen. It’s not a huge moneymaker, but it is nice for patients to have a known product to apply to their skin to achieve a maximal result. Laser hair removal patients may be interested in other services, and the aesthetician is encouraged to ask the patient if they would like a Visia imaging study to better evaluate their facial skin. Once a photo is taken, they are asked if they would like to try a peel, microdermabrasion or other cosmetic service or product. You have to ask for the sale. “Would you like to add a lip treatment to your axillary laser hair removal service?”

Remember that hope is not a strategy. If you don’t have a plan to get people through the door and to have them obtain services while in your office, then don’t purchase a laser—lest you have a $100,000 doorstop.