

THE WALLS DO TALK

WHAT YOUR PRACTICE'S APPEARANCE SAYS TO PATIENTS, AND HOW TO HELP KEEP THAT CONVERSATION POSITIVE

Mary Walker

How many times have you muttered to yourself, “*If these walls could talk...*” Well, guess what? They do.

The look, feel, and sound of your office speak volumes about your practice—loudly and clearly. And your patients are reacting and making judgments from the moment they walk through the door. Enhancing the appearance and operation of your office will help you provide superior patient care and operate a highly efficient and profitable business. Here's how.

GOD OR THE DEVIL—IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

As superficial as it may seem, your office tells a story—good or bad—about who you are, how you practice, and what you believe. We see your “stories” every day: Eyecare practices call my company, an optical dispensary management and consulting firm, to help them address often-overlooked details that, when managed appropriately, create good first impressions that provide customers with complete confidence in the care and service they are receiving. First impressions matter because they can build trust or, conversely, detract from it.

Here's what I'd like you to do. Take a step back and think about your office

from a patient-centric point of view. Consider the total experience. What are the first things your patients notice when they walk in? What is the waiting room experience like? Where does it go from there? How do your patients feel when it comes to buying their glasses from the optical dispensary? And finally, what do your patients experience as they get ready to exit?

Remember, marketing your practice isn't just about advertising, coupons, and website visits. Most patients spend an hour or more in your office. That's certainly more time than they'll ever spend on your website or reading your ads. That said, some of your strongest marketing messages are experienced during office visits.

Your challenge? To make sure those messages are a true reflection of your practice.

TEST RUN, PART 1

To hear what your walls are saying, set time aside to do an actual, objective walk-through. It's time for a test run.

I'm a tough tour guide, so let me provide some credentials before we start. In my work with leading eyecare practices nationwide, with the goal of providing turnkey, customizable management and consulting services while increasing profitability, our walk-through starts in the parking lot.

Yes, you heard right—the parking lot. Pretend you're a first-time patient. Park your car and find the entrance. Is it clearly marked? Is the front door clean or covered in handprints? Did it open smoothly or did you struggle with it? How does the area around the door look? Even if you don't own the building, you have some control over the appearance of its main entrance. Be sure to make the maintenance crew aware of any problems. Again, first impressions are important. If you have stairs, does your building offer clearly marked accessibility options, such as elevators, for the disabled?

Now pretend for a few minutes that you don't know where you're going. What's the first thing you see? Is there a directory? Is your suite clearly labeled? Make sure your building directory clearly shows both your practice name and each provider's name, as well as your suite number. Many patients know their doctor's name, but not the name of the practice.

Once you're in the door, is it clear where you should go? Can you see the front desk or is it blocked? Is there a glass window that must be opened before the patient is greeted? Or just a sign-in sheet with no visible human being? As a patient, you want to be assured that someone not only knows you are there, but cares and is glad to

welcome you to the office. You do not want the first thing a patient sees to be a sign that reads, “For routine eyecare your co-pay MUST be paid at time of visit or you will be rescheduled.” That may be your policy, but it’s not the way you want to greet a patient.

Now take a seat in the waiting area. Are the magazines current, in good shape, and appropriate for different demographic groups? Is the furniture clean and in good repair? How about the carpets? Are there relevant pamphlets related to different eye conditions that enable patients to educate themselves?

Finally, have a “listen.” Can you hear employees speaking? Is the TV playing something appropriate? If you utilize a “loop,” is it long enough that you don’t see and hear the same information over and over again during your wait?

TEST RUN, PART 2

This next part of our walk-through begins with this question: Can you see the optical dispensary from where you are seated?

Why is this critical? Gone are the days when your optical shop was there only for the convenience of the patient. Today, your dispensary is an important marketing tool and even more important revenue generator, if done right.

So let’s analyze the situation. Does your optical shop look open, inviting, and attractive? Can you see an employee working? Often, opticians are in a back lab area and not visible in the dispensary, which could deter a patient from walking in. It’s important to make sure an employee is visible at all times.

Now pretend you’ve been called in for your exam. Walk through the same way a patient would, taking special care to see everything as if for the first time. Are desks cluttered and overflowing with paper? Is there any HIPAA-protected information in clear view?

How about coffee cups or soda cans? Is signage taped to the front of every cabinet door?

Let’s move on to the exam room. This is the place patients spend the most time waiting for the doctor with nothing to do. Naturally, they’ll look around at everything in the room. At this point, their mindset is in “exam mode,” so this is an appropriate space to make available information about general eye conditions or any specials you may be running.

It’s time to walk to the check-out desk. Is the signage appropriate? Is someone there to greet you, and is he or she friendly?

Now let’s head over to try on a few frames in the optical dispensary. My work has taught me and my colleagues the importance of having a frame selection that speaks to your patient demographics. Do you have the right quantity of frames displayed—and equally important, the right variety for your clientele? Is there a good amount of variety in not only styles but also price point? Take a close look at the glasses. Are the lenses clean, frames straight, and screws tightened? Even “demo” frames should be bench aligned and in proper shape. Is the display pleasing to the eye? Is the signage bright or faded? Is there so much signage that you can’t see the frames?

Do a test. Ask your optician to show you one of the frames shown on the posters. Is that frame in stock? If not, that poster should be removed.

Have a seat at the dispensing desk. Can you slide in and move around without knocking over a mirror or counter cards? These desks tend to collect far too much clutter. This patient area should be neat and not overcrowded. Lens educational materials are appropriate, but having too many can be confusing. It would be much better for

the optician to present a pamphlet to the patient, along with an explanation.

DEALMAKER, DEALBREAKER

The last part of our experiment is the most telling. Take a walk back to your car and reflect on your experience. Then ask yourself—with your patient goggles still on—that most vital of questions:

Would I make a return visit?



Mary Walker (800-346-7486; www.visionassociatesinc.com) is director of operations for Vision Associates Inc., in Warren, N.J.

IN A BLINK

- Your office tells a story—good or bad—about who you are, how you practice and what you believe.
- Does your optical shop look open, inviting, and attractive? Can you see an employee working? Do you have the right quantity of frames displayed—and equally important, the right variety for your clientele?
- Your exam room is the place patients spend the most time waiting for the doctor with nothing to do. It’s appropriate to make available information about general eye conditions or any specials you might be running.



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