

MARKETING MUST-HAVE: GREAT BEFORE & AFTER PHOTOS

BY TOM SEERY

Photos can create stronger connections than text. Plus, with modern technology, they're easier to consume and distribute. This is why people love sharing and viewing pictures on the web. This concept carries over to the practice of aesthetics. For prospective patients, photos are not just nice to have—they're a necessity. A recent RealSelf survey found that 83 percent of consumers researching cosmetic surgery said they would not consider a practice that doesn't have Before & After photos.

The Internet is a visually rich medium, so the quality of your images directly impacts the quality of your message. In other words, those grainy, blurry, off-center photos need not apply. There's no better way to grab people's attention, boost engagement, and encourage sharing than sharing rich, high-quality images. Just survey some of the recent stats about the rising use of photo-based social networking:

- 21 percent of online adults used Pinterest last year, allowing the image-based social network to surpass Twitter (18 percent) for the first time.¹
- Instagram is the world's fastest-growing social network, notching a 23 percent increase in active users this year.²
- On Facebook, "photo posts" receive 53 percent more Likes, 104 percent more comments, and 84 percent more click-throughs on links.³

Another survey found 49 percent of respondents citing social media having a direct influence on their consideration or decision to have a cosmetic procedure⁴ — just another indicator of the influence of photos in cosmetic surgery. One-third said selfies made them, well, more self-aware. And in an era dominated by the likes of eBay and Amazon, consumers have become accustomed to image-based shopping. People expect abundant visuals whether they're considering a pair of shoes, a piece of jewelry, or a life-changing purchase.

PHOTOS ARE POPULAR, POWERFUL, AND A PREREQUISITE FOR CONVERSIONS

Especially, it turns out, for cosmetic procedures. On RealSelf, for example, Before & After galleries get viewed

more often than any other type of content—42 million doctor-uploaded photos were viewed in the past year. Consumer uploaded photos were viewed 240 million times. And when we asked our website visitors which content was most influential in selecting a doctor, one in four indicated it was the Before & After photos. Only reviews are more influential, with 57 percent citing these as the key factor.

Lacking (or having too few) Before & After photos on your website or on trusted social platforms like Yelp and Google+ is not just a missed marketing opportunity. It's also a red flag for consumers who are left to wonder why (or why not). They'll most likely answer in one of two ways: Either you don't have photos because you don't perform that procedure very often or you don't have any good ones because you're not very good at it. Once that seed of doubt is sown, the likelihood of reaping new business will almost certainly die on the vine.

So, how many Before & After photos should you have? Unfortunately, there is no hard-and-fast number, but our research indicates that a doctor's profile on our platform is suboptimal if there are fewer than 10 photos uploaded. For doctors above this minimum, our models show that eight additional photos will net one new patient "lead." Factor in the diversity of aesthetic consumers and the reality that people considering cosmetic surgery want to see results on people who look like them, and it's safe to say that there's no such thing as too many.

QUANTITY IS GOOD, BUT QUALITY IS CRUCIAL

Perhaps the only thing worse than having no Before & After photos is having poor-quality ones. The former is essentially a sin of omission, so it's not surprising that consumers fill the gap with potentially unpleasant questions. The latter, on the other hand, is more like a sin of commission and will likely be met with an answer no doctor wants to hear.

And make no mistake: Aesthetic consumers are savvy. They know good and bad photography when they see it—especially when it involves anything that smacks of fakery, manipulation, or even small inconsistencies designed to enhance perceived results. Surgical paper panties in a Before photo vs. a lacy thong in the accompanying After. A relaxed belly vs. a sucked-in gut. Even a subtle change in makeup or a new piece of jewelry can spark online conversations about Photoshopping, false advertising, and other tricks that inhibit trust. Good photos showcase your work, consistent ones generate confidence, and paying attention to the fundamentals will help you accomplish both.

Here are a few tips to consider for capturing realistic, quality images:

Camera: Different cameras render colors differently, saturating some, washing out others. That can make someone look bright red in one image and deathly pale in another. Using the same camera—a good digital SLR should suffice—for all photos will help minimize the variation.

Lenses: A wide-angle lens may be good for close-ups of flowers, but it can subtly distort a person's features, making body parts closer to the lens seem larger than they are—not the effect you want when showcasing, say, a rhinoplasty. In most situations, a 105mm lens should suffice.

Lighting: Shoot one image with a flash and the other with ambient light and you'll likely get very different results. The former will often accentuate underlying structures while the latter can soften them. Sometimes, the differences stand in such stark contrast that viewers will doubt their veracity.

Angle: Picture a pre-operative patient facing the camera with their Frankfurt plane perfectly horizontal. Now imagine her tilting her head up or down ever so slightly during her After shot. Your facelift or blepharoplasty may have been near-perfect but subsequent viewers of your photo gallery may get a very different impression.

(Note: Once you've taken your photos, don't forget to get your patients' consent to use them. The best approach is to have them sign a "commercial consent" form, which will allow you to use the images on your website, in your marketing materials and on other websites.)

The bottom line is that maintaining consistent photo standards does more than minimize the visual differences in your Before & After galleries. It also quells doubts about their authenticity in the people who view them. The real goal, after all, is to showcase your surgical skills, not your photographic ones.

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Amidst the ever-increasing speeds of Internet connectivity, the prevalence of social media, and the proliferation of smartphones and other mobile devices, the challenge for aesthetic consumers is no longer about finding information about providers and procedures. It's about cutting through the terabytes and petabytes of digital clutter to find the right procedure and the provider best suited to perform it. In their time-pressed, multi-tasking haste, good photos help them do just that.

In fact, taking a more image-centric approach fits well with concurrent trends in the culture at large. In women's media, for example, dramatic, page-filling photos (aka "hero images") have long since supplanted reams of text and postage stamp-sized pictures. On smartphones and tablets, image-based "tiles" are giving users multiple options to choose from with a single tap. And e-commerce sites are utilizing 3-D imagery to show off products from every angle, a technique that forward-thinking doctors are already starting to apply to describe options and demonstrate results.

Ultimately, it's almost impossible to overstate the value of higher quality images. In addition to being among the most popular types of content around, they also help bridge the gap between doctors and potential patients who clearly approach the subject of cosmetic surgery with varied levels of familiarity. Given the appropriate attention, good photos help doctors explain complicated subjects even as they help patients make more informed decisions.

In that light, there's no way a picture is worth a thousand words—or even ten thousand. Pictures are priceless. ■

Tom Seery is Founder and CEO of RealSelf (www.realself.com).

Special thanks to Tom Bialoglow of imaging-services specialists Canfield Scientific Inc., for providing the above photography tips.

1. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/>

2. <http://www.slideshare.net/globalwebindex/gwi-social-summary-2014>

3. <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33800/Photos-on-Facebook-Generate-53-More-Likes-Than-the-Average-Post-NEW-DATA.aspx>

4. RealSelf consumer survey, September 2014

Modern Aesthetics INNOVATION

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