

One Door Closes and Window Opens on a Fresh Start

Faced with a challenge, OD is determined to build a successful practice

Marcie Lerner, OD, had been practicing for nearly three years as an associate in an optometry office next to For Eyes Optical in Bethesda, Md., when her practice life took an unexpected twist. Dr. Lerner's employer sold the practice to a different corporation, taking all his records with him in December 2010. Dr. Lerner, refusing to feel defeated, started to rebuild the practice from scratch in January 2011.

First, she wanted to continue to nurture the relationship that she had created with patients by letting them know she was still there. As it turned out, many dedicated patients chose to stay with her and have helped spread the word about her services. While these were well-known patients to her, she didn't have the documentation anymore, as their records were sold.

She placed an ad in the local military newspaper so that her former patients could contact her, and she reached out to the community she formerly served in the decade she spent working in an optical location in the nearby Navy Exchange. She thoroughly enjoyed working with her active duty patients, and she left the office only because her contract was up and the location was in the middle of active construction.

One way she reconnected with former patients and is reaching out to new ones is through a practice web site, lernervision-care.com, and a Facebook page. Sometimes the simplest promotions are most successful. The practice is right on Wisconsin Avenue, a major thoroughfare into Washington, D.C., and only two blocks from a Metro station. Dr. Lerner keeps a sidewalk sign with her name and photo outside her practice when the weather allows so passersby can see it. Around Halloween last year, she tied a giant eyeball balloon to the sign, and the reaction was impressive. People stopped in to comment and had the opportunity to meet Dr. Lerner and learn more about her. "That brought in more business than many other efforts," she says.

After discovering the potential in the foot traffic outside her office, Dr. Lerner has



After initial plans fell through, Dr. Lerner came up with a new plan for practice success.

connected with other local businesses in hopes of generating a buzz. A future partnership opportunity is with the movie theater across the courtyard from her practice. The area is often busy and is a great place to advertise her services, which include helping patients who have trouble viewing 3-D technology.

Dr. Lerner upgraded the office's electronic medical record system to OfficeMate when she took over, hoping to gain more efficiency as she built up her patient base. She tracks her progress in a spreadsheet, monitoring her number of new versus existing patients. New patients are up 20 percent. She's on her first round of recalls for annual visits now since starting over.

In the next few months, Dr. Lerner hopes to analyze her insurance company relationships. "Some companies are paying me half of what I charge for an eye exam, so I need to know if there is enough patient volume to balance that out," she says, noting she also tracks how quickly these companies issue payments.

Dr. Lerner has worked in corporate-affiliated offices since her 1995 graduation from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry. "It's a great opportunity to be an independent optometrist without worrying about the retail optical responsibilities," Dr. Lerner says. "But you still deal with the business side of eye care, so it's important to gain practice management skills."

A liaison to the corporate office can provide advice and recommendations, which grants Dr. Lerner a sense of security as she's learning. "It is helpful and rewarding to work as a partner with For Eyes as opposed to opening a practice cold," she says.

Her patients pass through the For Eyes optical area before traveling upstairs to her office located on the mezzanine. Dr. Lerner appreciates this convenience for her patients. "It's advantageous for our staff members to work in concert with the For Eyes retail team because we help with their business, and their business helps ours." **WO**

Great Office Manager Goes a Long Way

Dr. Marcie Lerner is quick to give credit to the outstanding office manager who stayed on board with her even when her former employer relocated his office. The office manager was vital during the transition period, and he continued to help the practice grow during Dr. Lerner's first year in charge. One of his greatest contributions was helping her find a reliable staff of one full-time and two part-time technicians. "I didn't want to hire staff members who didn't have their heart and soul in it," Dr. Lerner says. The office manager's enthusiasm and business-minded approach led them to the right candidates. The office manager recently left to pursue his MBA degree, but by then, Dr. Lerner had reconnected with a colleague from the Navy Exchange optical who has joined the Lerner Vision Care family. **WO**