

Building the Rocky Mountain Vein Clinic

How innovation, entrepreneurship, and effective marketing were keys to success.

BY ANDRE ZOLLARS

As a general surgeon whose only answer for venous disease was compression stockings or performing vein stripping, Bo Johnson, MD, knew there had to be a better solution. "I did not like to see vein patients because I did not have a good answer for them. The treatment was painful and invasive, with long recovery times."

Dr. Johnson began researching alternative treatments to vein stripping. Endovenous laser therapies, he soon discovered, were the solution. The procedure is minimally invasive, quick to perform, relatively pain free, and recovery is amazingly quick.

In his surgical practice, Surgical Associates of Northern Wyoming, in Cody, Wyoming, Dr. Johnson began using laser technology to treat venous disease as a secondary focus (Figure 1). Initially, to attract new patients, he used word of mouth and some direct marketing (ie, mailing postcards to existing patients). It was not long, however, before he realized that he would need to enlist some professional help to market his business successfully. He researched the area and decided to collaborate with Michael Blanck of Brand Ranch (Manhattan, MT), a professional marketing consultant. Soon, he was off and running.

RESHAPING THE BUSINESS

Creating Demand and Branding

First, Dr. Johnson had to change his mindset from viewing his business as only about medicine to enhancing customer care, as well. This meant that to build his practice, he would first have to build the category around this new technology. This involved educating his patients about the significant health, cosmetic, and lifestyle benefits that are now available when laser tech-



Figure 1. Dr. Johnson administers a venous ultrasound examination.

nology is used to treat vein diseases. This knowledge would then create demand.

Once that demand was created, Dr. Johnson was ready to begin the process of branding his business. Mr. Blanck asked Dr. Johnson a series of questions about his services, his vision for his business, and what made him unique. Dr. Johnson reflects, "I hadn't asked myself those questions. This helped me focus and channel my strengths and vision beyond just business and into a branding plan."

The second point Dr. Johnson had to consider was the notion that successful branding delivers a consistent message and experience at every touch point with patients. This meant that Dr. Johnson had to review his interaction with his patients at every level: how his office would look (Figure 2), how his office staff would dress, how they would answer the phone and address patients, the presentation of the Web site, the design of his logo, and the message delivered in his ads. Mr. Blanck



Figure 2. The office's waiting and reception area.

“... to be successful, it was critical that the brand message be clear, consistent, and delivered in every interaction with the patients.”

emphasized that to be successful, it was critical that the brand message be clear, consistent, and delivered in every interaction with the patients.

As a result, Dr. Johnson not only renamed his office Rocky Mountain Vein Clinic (RMVC) (Figure 3), he also emerged with a clear branding vision for his business.

“I’m trying to provide a professional, low-key atmosphere in my clinic where the patient feels welcome and comfortable,” said Dr. Johnson. “My office looks more like an upscale house than it does a cold, clinical medical office. When people call or come in, we are friendly and welcoming, not stuffy or arrogant. We want them to feel at home, at ease, and know that we really want to help them. We believe in our patients being partners in their care, and encourage them to participate as much as possible in the process, from their initial consultation, through surgery, and recovery. Involving the patient in every step, has resulted in a very successful delivery of our brand message to our patients.”

Marketing

Marketing RMVC’s brand message was the next step. Mr. Blanck gave Dr. Johnson some invaluable advice: “Pick your media and stick with it.” Although the local television station in Cody did a feature spot on RMVC, it did not attract many customers. However, several feature articles in the local newspaper did wonders in attracting new patients. As a result, Dr. Johnson now allocates most of his advertising dollars to the local newspaper. He has also written a series of feature articles for the newspaper, with the intent of educating the public about venous disease and the different types of treatments available.

Online Presence

The Web has been another important platform for marketing RMVC’s message. Their Web site, www.rocky-mountainveinclinic.com, has received rave reviews from patients and other physicians. A reflection of his belief that the patient should be a partner in his or her care, the Web site is educational, informative, and explains to the patient every step of the available procedures. It even features video clips demonstrating various interventions. As a result, Dr. Johnson has seen a dramatic increase in the number of hits and referrals from his Web site. The Web has also allowed him to reach patients regionally, which has delivered positive results in Montana and Wyoming—large states that require patients to travel greater distances for treatment.

Trade Shows

As another avenue to reach patients, Dr. Johnson decided to take advantage of local trade shows, including those not geared specifically for medicine. For example, MATE (Montana Agricultural Trade Exhibition) in Billings, held on the local fairgrounds, has an entire section devoted to health care issues. “It is a great way to get in front of potential patients that I might not normally have access to, provide useful information, build rapport, and increase vein disease awareness. I intend to do it again next year,” Dr. Johnson said.



Figure 3. Exterior of the Rocky Mountain Vein Clinic in Billings, Montana.

EXPANDING THE BUSINESS

Dr. Johnson's success branding his business has had a landslide effect on RMVC, prompting him to open a second clinic in Billings, Montana, in July 2006. "With the number of patients I had, I simply couldn't cover both areas from Cody. And, frankly, the demand I see leads me to believe there are even greater opportunities available throughout the region." To meet this demand, Dr. Johnson has brought on board Travis Stratford, MD, an interventional radiologist and native Montanan. His background is perfectly suited for RMVC's needs.

"The demand is certainly out there to open another Rocky Mountain Vein Clinic somewhere in the region."

In turn, RMVC provides a unique opportunity for Dr. Stratford: "It will be a great learning experience to work alongside Dr. Johnson, who has now performed hundreds of vein procedures. I'll also be able to learn about the infrastructure of the practice." RMVC has a very standardized set of forms, questionnaires, and procedures, as well as an electronic medical record that makes the practice very efficient. The demand is certainly out there to open another RMVC somewhere in the region."

With the expansion of his business, Dr. Johnson now offers radiofrequency closure (VNUS Medical

Technologies, San Jose, CA), the latest treatment available, in addition to endovenous laser therapy. This technology uses radiofrequency instead of lasers to close the leaking vein. Dr. Johnson is also considering starting a training program for other doctors interested in getting into vein treatment.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Johnson is excited about the patient care and business model that he and his staff have developed, as well as the branding model he has created working with Mr. Blanck. It has proven to be such a successful formula that he is experiencing an excess of demand and now faces the enviable problem of meeting that demand. Dr. Johnson is optimistic about the future of RMVC.

"I feel great about where we're at and our brand message of delivering high-quality, patient-focused service in a warm, comfortable environment," said Dr. Johnson. "I'm now looking at the big picture regionally, and I'm trying to develop the solutions necessary to meet the demand that I see out there. We have developed a very successful template and will be able to duplicate it anywhere. The need is definitely out there. I think this will continue to be an exciting and rewarding area to practice medicine." ■

Andre Zollars is a freelance writer living in Lewistown, Montana. She may be reached at mtgoldeneagle@yahoo.com.

James L. "Bo" Johnson II, MD, FACS, is the founder of the Rocky Mountain Vein Clinic. Dr. Johnson may be reached at (406) 252-8346; info@rockymountainveinclinic.com.