

HOW TO SEE CLEARLY THROUGH THE LASIK MARKETING STORM

By

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Around two years ago, I became aware of the term *LASIK* (Laser In-Situ Keratomileusis). I didn't know exactly what it meant at the time, but I knew it had something to do with improving one's vision by using a laser. Once the term LASIK entered my consciousness, it seemed like everyone was talking about this amazing procedure that could restore one's vision in just minutes. The news media began running positive stories about this miraculous procedure for better vision that took only a few minutes and was virtually painless. People began to talk about LASIK at the office and at parties; *they talked about having better than 20/20 vision and freedom from the hassles of contact lenses and eyeglasses*. It seemed like the perfect procedure: a win, win for everyone.

Still in the past year, I noticed more and more LASIK ads both in print and on radio. Suddenly prices were being quoted lower and lower and according to the ads every doctor and center claimed to be the best, with the most experience, using the newest high-tech equipment. An acquaintance of mine had the procedure done at one of the low cost centers but I wasn't hearing another success story. I was hearing a nightmare about a procedure gone wrong, done wrong. About bait and switch tactics, of quoting low prices in ads to bring them in but with so many restrictions and necessary upgrades to bring the procedure up to speed with better lasers and post-op care. She was talking about *halo vision, starbursts, and constant discomfort and headaches*. Another surgeon she went to after the procedure told her that she shouldn't have had the procedure to begin with. She had been inadequately screened at the corporate center. And that's when I realized there was going to be serious problems with LASIK.

Having more than twenty years experience in marketing and advertising, I knew that the cumulative effect of all these LASIK ads would certainly be to create greater demand for the procedure, but it would also blur the differences between individual doctors and centers. The sheer bombardment and quantity of ads from various centers with similar sounding names (*Laser this and LASIK that*), all essentially saying the same thing would only add to the confusion. It was certainly true for me. Often I couldn't discern one LASIK center from another when listening to their radio ads in my car.

Typically when there is general confusion in regard to differences between competing products or services, the majority of interested consumers will gravitate to the lowest price since the claims of better vision using LASIK were essentially the same from all the players. The only real distinction highlighted in the ads seemed to be the price. Unfortunately for unsuspecting consumers: nothing could be further from the truth.

ALL SURGEONS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

Laser eye surgery, any surgery, is not the same as purchasing a television or a car. Surgery is a precise skill, not a commodity. It is dependent on the individual experience,

training and skill level of the surgeon and as in every profession, some are better than others.

But you must also contemplate the unthinkable. If you're one of the unlucky ones, you may end up trusting your eyes to an incompetent, poorly trained, inexperienced LASIK surgeon. Add to the equation corporate greed, unethical behavior (by some), and a price war environment, where corners are cut at the patient's expense and you have a formula ripe for disaster.

And the disasters have been coming fast and furious. The same media that only a short time ago was praising LASIK as a miracle procedure was now reporting horror story after honor story. For example, the *LA Times* ran a story about a LASIK chain that was being sued by former patients for allegedly trying to cut costs at their expense. The patients claimed that to save money the center only intermittently changed disposable blades between procedures risking potential infection and contamination including HIV.

CBS news ran a report that included among other mistakes: a LASIK surgeon who kept the laser on too long and burned hole through one patient's cornea. Secondly, the laser used was not FDA approved and was calibrated incorrectly.

Another inexperienced surgeon in the same CBS report used the wrong laser for the patient's particular eye disorder. A LASIK surgeon hired by the patient after the botched surgery described the first doctor's inaptitude as using the wrong tool for the job, *the equivalent of trying to use a hammer when a screwdriver is necessary*. The result: permanent blurred vision and the need for a corneal transplant.

A Doctor Has to Get Experience Somewhere (Just Not with Me!)

If you go to a corporate chain to get LASIK, don't be surprised if you don't meet with your doctor until the day of the surgery. Who will be your surgeon? That's the one essential question you must have answered long before the day of surgery. It is the single most important element in whether the procedure will be successful *or not*.

So let's use some logic and common sense about how the real world works. Most highly skilled, experienced LASIK surgeons are either currently in a successful private practice and/or are affiliated (academically and/or on staff) with major university medical centers. Almost certainly they *are not* going to work for any of these LASIK chains. There is no good professional reason why they would choose to be associated with them. Would a top chef at an exclusive restaurant choose to suddenly become a cook at a fast food chain? Would a star major league baseball player choose to play in the minor leagues instead?

You get the point. If I'm having laser surgery on my eyes I want the very best surgeon available. This is not the time you want to gamble to try and save a few bucks. Hey, I like a bargain as much as anyone does. I'll shop prices to exhaustion on cars, televisions, computers, furniture, even groceries (my wife's heavy into double coupons), but not laser eye surgery. I'm just not into playing *LASIK Russian Roulette*. Find the very best doctor and finance the procedure through the center if money is an issue. Or don't have the procedure at all. End of story. Well, not exactly.

Buyer Beware: Other LASIK Marketing Tricks

With all the slick LASIK ads you see in the newspaper and hear on radio, you would think every one of these doctors or centers came up with the LASIK procedure all by themselves. Furthermore, I've never heard a commercial from a doctor who didn't imply or come right out and say that they were one of the best in their field and I never heard one say, "I'm really not that good."

Before I start to rant and rave, first let me state as a disclaimer, that there are good, even excellent doctors who do advertise and some are even members of the LASIK Referral Service. The problem is you can't tell one from the other by simply looking at their ads.

Bait and Switch #1 - Price (What's included, what isn't?)

The old adage: if it sounds too good to be true, it usually is, is certainly true in LASIK. So how can they quote prices that are below cost? How can they lose money? For the most part, it's bait and switch. You come in for the low price and you realize that it doesn't include the best and newest laser technology or post-op visits (\$90 additional each time) and if you have certain eye conditions such as astigmatism (which almost everyone has to some degree or another) that's almost always additional. By the time you've finished *super sizing* your LASIK procedure it's two to three times the amount you thought it would be.

Here's a real example from one large corporate LASIK chain advertising the procedure for \$499 on radio and in print. Of course, *certain restrictions apply*. Do they ever! First of all, the pre-op and post-op is rarely conducted by the doctor and only three post-op exams are included in the price. Additional post-op exams will only cost an extra \$90 each. Hyperopic and myopic patients have to pay an additional \$200 per eye. And to top it off, the \$499 procedure doesn't include the *really good laser*. If you want the better laser, the one that gives you the advantage of "greatly reduced night glare and halos" (as stated in their literature) now you're up to \$1,000 per eye and counting. Of course, if you also want to add one year of unlimited post-op exams and free enhancements to your shopping cart that's an additional \$149 per eye.

Now let's stop and look at this for a moment. Who in their right mind when presented with this information is going to choose the \$499 package? Are you going to say, *sign me right up for that inferior laser. So what if I have a little night glare and halo vision, big deal?* I don't think so.

This is classic bait and switch. The only difference is that instead of doing it with a stereo system or a car it's being done with a surgical procedure. Are these really the people you want to hire to perform laser surgery on your eyes? If you answer yes, please call me right away, I have some wonderful land in Florida that you might be interested in at a great price. A little wet and muddy with a few friendly alligators, but trust me, you're going to love it. Of course some restrictions do apply and individual results may vary.

Bait and Switch #2 - Doctor (Are you my doctor?)

But this one gets my personal *you've got to be kidding* award. One high profile doctor in the Los Angeles area placed an ad in the newspaper with his smiling picture next to a couple well-known celebrity clients, along with a price stating that *you don't have to sacrifice quality for price*. Obviously, you can have both. Except that in small print next

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to the quoted price is the disclaimer, "when performed by the doctor's associate." I'm a marketing guy, but this just blew me away. My mouth was agape at the sheer nerve of this ad. Remember the whole ad is designed to make you think you're getting this *doctor to the stars* at this unbelievable price, *except if I want the lower price*, I'm going to get his associate (no photo of him in the ad). I suppose I can look at the *star doctor's* picture in the newspaper after the *stand-in* performs LASIK surgery on me. Or I'm going to pay more to get the main guy. Hey, nothing wrong with paying for quality, but don't make me think I'm getting a bargain when I'm not.

In conclusion, laser surgery on your eyes is serious business. Don't let price and marketing ploys seduce you into making a choice you may later regret for the rest of your life. Protect your eyesight. Do your homework and find the best LASIK surgeons in your area. Once you narrow it down to the best doctors, you can then compare other factors such as price, equipment, proximity, and comfort level. At least, you'll have all the facts to make an informed decision about your eyesight and hopefully some of those dark LASIK marketing clouds will finally begin to clear.

