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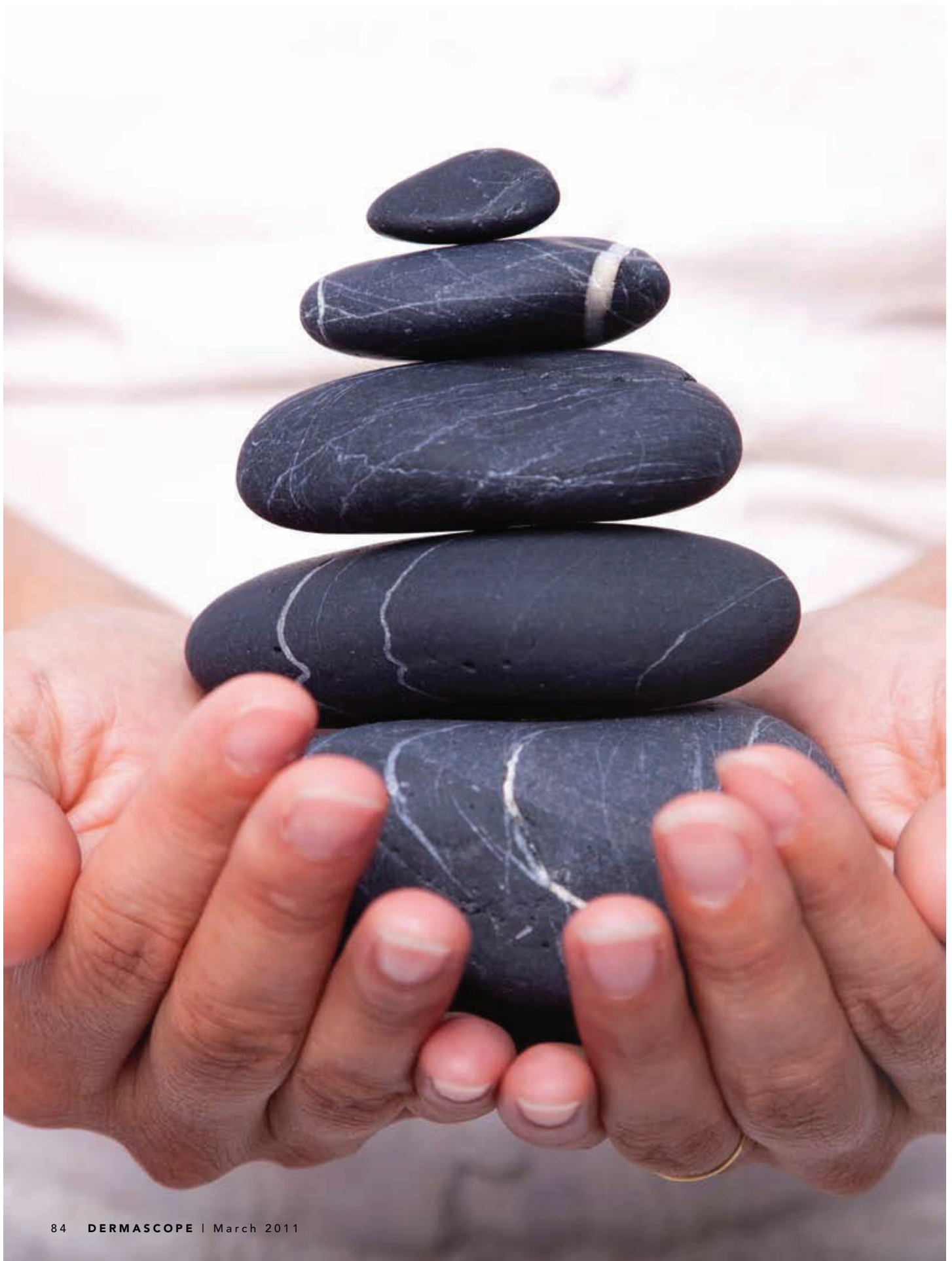
The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics

March 2011



Your Skin Care
Business

The Official Publication of
Aesthetics International Association





Building Relationships Builds Business

by Richard Linder, MBA

Carefully crafted client relationships build businesses. Studies show that younger consumers increasingly cite excellent customer service and personal identification with a business as primary reasons for selecting one business over another. Clients want to know that a business cares about them, not just as consumers of products and services, but as people.

Forgetting that yours is a personal business focused on individual needs is one way we get off track. Instead, you must understand your patients, let them know that you hear them, and show that you value them on a personal level.

Building a lasting relationship with a patient is like dating. You want to put on your best face and come across as caring, capable, and worthy of another date. With that dating analogy in mind, I offer five key steps to ensure the relationship goes forward.

Make a Great First Impression

Just as the expectation exists that a date will show up at the door looking fantastic, a patient's initial impression of you and your business matters. You want to take care that a first meeting reflects your best.

Why? In his bestseller *Blink*, author Malcom Gladwell shows that snap judgments become permanent perceptions. A good impression sets the stage for a bright future and makes the next steps in client relationship-building easier. On the other hand, countering a bad first impression may mean offering the dating equivalent of being forced to go to the most expensive restaurant in town for a second date.

To make that great first impression, know what your values are and make certain you reflect them. Your business environment says much about who you are and what you prize. Patients notice.

Are you welcoming and receptive to others? Practiced business hospitality allows clients to relax; and when that tension fades, good things follow.



Create a Connection

The best dates happen when one feels that spark of connection with another. Encouraging that spark takes effort, though.

In an age when thousands of messages bombard us daily, listening has never been a more rare skill. People want to be heard, especially when their need is important to them. When you practice active listening skills, you breathe life into a relationship.

Active listening is not automatic; you will need to focus your attention fully on the customer through all interactions. Laying aside your own emotional state, biases, and preconceived ideas about client needs is the first step. When patients speak, you should maintain eye contact and then calmly summarize what they said. This lets them know you listened and allows patients the chance to correct any mistakes in your comprehension. Listening with your eyes matters, too, as body language adds important nonverbal information to what clients say.

Receiving negative comments requires avoiding a quick rush to defend your position or explain away patient concerns. While hard to do, if you show that you can handle criticism well, you let patients know that you are safe and can be trusted to hear them without judging their words. They can then rest assured that any future differences will be handled with as much grace and tact.

Also, note when a patient shares personal information such as a spouse or child's name, an anniversary, or a challenging personal event. Touchpoints like these, when remembered, create another opportunity to connect the next time you see the client. That kind of empathy goes a long way toward creating patient loyalty and friendship.

Ask Questions

Remember the long phone calls or e-mails that followed a date? Not every patient connection will be face to face, either. In those times of being apart, it pays to ask questions that will build the relationship.

Online surveys are a vital tool for listening to virtual clients. Harvard Business School studies found the most effective survey to be a simple question: Would you refer a friend/family member to our business? You want to know if the patient will come back.

A common survey mistake, though, is to ask too many questions. This is a relationship, remember, not an interrogation! And people are busy. If they feel as if you are wasting their time, you may undo the goodwill you built by other means.

Limit the number of questions that follow the first to the most pressing. Ten questions total should tell you most of what you need to know from an initial patient contact.

Many online survey tools exist to build relationships with virtual customers. I recommend surveymonkey.com, which provides complete control of surveys in an inexpensive, easy-to-use format.

Lastly, make taking the survey worth the time and effort. Show gratitude by offering a gift in appreciation – especially one that gives patients a reason to come back to see you.

Maintain Communications

No dating relationship lasts without communication. Likewise, if your patients never know they are in your thoughts, you will not be in theirs.

Social networking on the Internet – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogging, and other means of connecting through the Web – is no longer optional but a cornerstone to client communication. It is not

enough to have a website or send out an e-mail now and then. Staying connected to patients through online social networking sites is now part of the cost of doing business.

The gotcha is that social networking may add to the noise if not properly directed. Patients need to see the incentive for joining your Facebook page or Twitter feed. One size does not fit all, though, and companies are still discovering the perfect means to reach clients through social networking. The best advice for now? Stay abreast of social networking sites and track successful uses by other companies.

Remember the Golden Rule

One of the wisest rules of dating (and life, in general) is to treat others the same way you wish to be treated. Are you applying that wisdom to your patient relationships?

Life is stressful for many people. The more you consider how to serve them in a way that eases some of that stress, the

more likely they will consider yours a connection worth keeping. Asking how you wish to be treated by others, then extending that same care to patients, forms a firm foundation for any relationship. It helps you put the focus where it belongs: On your patients.

Despite your best intentions and effort, breakups happen. Just as a dating relationship does not always work out, so some patient relationships fail. How you break up with a client says a great deal about your business values and how you value others.

The key to breakups: All of the patient relationship advice above still applies. Maintaining your professionalism and care for others does not end when a relationship does. Who knows? That patient may go elsewhere only to return later. A clean break makes that return all the more sweet.

Dating leads to marriage, the ultimate commitment. When you practice the five core components to successful patient relationships, you build what every business desires: Client loyalty. While others spend millions to achieve that elusive goal, you can find success by being a listening, caring, human presence who is there with outstanding products and services when your patients need you most.



Richard Linder is the CEO of PCA SKIN®. Prior to joining the company, he held executive positions at Greenwich Street Partners, the St. Louis Economic Development Council and

KPMG in Zurich, Switzerland. Linder's long-standing interest in the health care field dates back to his studies at Harvard Business School, where he earned his MBA. While there, he was awarded a grant from Harvard University to study the purchasing behaviors and preferences of the aging baby boomers. This study focused specifically on brand recognition of companies that solve health-related issues. Linder also serves on the Board of Directors of the National Holistic Institute.