

Sono Bello - Reinventing the Liposuction Wheel

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In 2008, the U.S. faced a rapidly decreasing market for liposuction due to the onset of the recession. Yet despite the grim outlook Sono Bello, a liposuction clinic performing surgery under awake local anesthesia, opened its doors for the first time. Since then, and 17,000 cases later, Sono Bello has grown to 12 locations nationwide across nine states. Sono Bello skillfully filled a niche, unidentified by competitors, by re-

casting a well-known product in a newer and more attractive light.

The public is hungry not only for outpatient surgery, but also for procedures done under awake local anesthesia. It's no surprise that people are generally concerned about procedures performed under general anesthesia. In fact, a recent study by John Starling III, MD published in the February 2012 issue of *Dermatology Times* revealed much higher mortality and morbidity figures for patients in Florida and Alabama who received liposuction and other cosmetic procedures performed under general anesthesia in an office setting. So, Sono Bello hit the mark when investing in the concept of awake liposuction.

There is also a perception, which is not scientifically grounded, that hospital procedures have a higher risk of infection, a greater chance of medication errors, and offer less privacy than those performed in an outpatient-clinic setting. Regardless of the facts, it is a quicker leap of faith for a patient to trust a smaller, warmer clinic than a larger, cold hospital. Recently hospitals have

tried to overcome that stigma by placing their outpatient clinics on the periphery of the large mother hospital. For those of us who have been in private practice, we know it is often a hard sell to take patients to the hospital rather than an outpatient facility. There is a lot we can learn from that.

The meteoric rise and success of Sono Bello rests on many factors, the summation of which drives the company to future expansions, doubling its size in the next two to three years. First and foremost, the surgeons are among the best. To be hired, the surgeon must be a board-certified and board-eligible plastic surgeon or a fellowship-trained cosmetic surgeon. Second, every clinic is certified by the American Association of Ambulatory Health Care (AAAHC) thereby reaching the highest standards possible for safe outpatient local anesthesia surgery. Third, Sono Bello has rigid standards of quality control that put stringent systems in place to constantly monitor each clinic and every procedure. We collect patient satisfaction surveys and analyze the results to evaluate how each

surgeon performs at each step of the patient encounter. Every clinic regiments face-to-face follow up with patients in addition to regular phone and email correspondence. Last, although we are proud of our patient referrals, Sono Bello financially budgets to achieve maximum marketing penetration in ways that respect the patient experience.

Now, back to the physician. It is not simple to perform liposuction on patients who are awake. Most plastic and cosmetic surgeons are trained to perform liposuction under general anesthesia. Our surgeons are specialists at awake liposuction. That is what patients want. Patients tell us they would prefer to have the procedure done while they are awake, while maintaining minimal discomfort. Our physicians are trained to do just that and after hundreds of cases each, they deserve to be called experts in the specialty of awake liposuction.

Behind the scenes, Sono Bello has developed a strong administrative base which covers all aspects of any healthcare organization including risk managers, physician trainers,

clinic practice managers, recruiters, financial officers, and many more. The chief medical officer functions as a safety officer and also collects data for research, interviews prospective physicians, troubleshoots, and represents the company in the media.

Not every cosmetic patient is always satisfied. Our internal surveys show that 95 percent are pleased with their results, which is very competitive with the national average. It is the 5 percent that require further review. Within the company we have a prescribed mechanism to take care of all patients and resolve instances when the patient (customer) expresses dissatisfaction. Issues are addressed immediately and decisively with thoughtful participation from all levels of administration and medical personnel who provide advice and counsel to manage any problem that arises. Small and large problems are treated with an equal sense of urgency. Internally, every person in the company is empowered to feel comfortable communicating with the CMO or Sono Bello's governing body about any concern.

When a company grows exponentially in bad economic times there should be lessons to learn. A previously unfulfilled niche was identified. Highly specialized and certified medical professionals must deliver safe and consistent surgical service. Follow-up care and consultation after the service should not be haphazard, but by prescription. The company should not hesitate to financially support the product with professional marketing. Quickly resolve patient dissatisfaction using decisive action that may involve counsel from an entire chain of command whose members are always reachable, accommodating, and personable.

Dr. Michael Gellis is a board-certified plastic surgeon. He was the previous chairman of plastic surgery, William Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak, Michigan. He is an associate professor of surgery at Wayne State University School of Medicine. Presently he is the chief medical officer of Sono Bello, a national liposuction company.

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