



Going From Free to Fee Consultations Yes, You Can. Here's How.

By Karen Zupko

To charge or not to charge? That is the question many aesthetic surgeons and their staff ask about paid consultation fees.

Some are concerned that if they charge, patients will schedule with a free “cosmetic surgeon” across town. Others use the excuse, “Everyone else is free—so how can I charge?” Younger surgeons worry they won't build a patient base if they don't offer free consults. And, then there are the confident, self-assured surgeons who see their consultation as a real service for which they've earned compensation.

Regardless of the rationalization used, my response for decades has been that *aesthetic surgeons can and should charge a consultation fee*. The fact is that you, dear reader, are not everyone's plastic surgeon. The reasons why we recommend charging, and how to implement a move from free to fee, follow.

Why Charge a Fee?

Simply put, when patients don't pay, you send the message that your time has no value. And from the patient's perspective, there is no risk or consequence, if they don't show up. So many “no show,” making the appointment schedule look like Swiss cheese. If you don't believe me, generate a *No Show Report* from the software system and take a look at the data. If you aren't tracking appointment no shows for new patients in your system, start doing so immediately. Savvy surgeons review this data monthly. To compensate for the inevitable no shows, practices overbook which of course backfires on days when because of the planetary alignment, everyone shows up. Then the practice is punished on Yelp by impatient patients accusing them of scheduling malpractice. Or, the surgeon and staff rush through consultations in an attempt to accommodate everyone, proving there was a reason the experience was “free”—it wasn't very good.

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Third, there's no risk for patients to see Dr. Free for a second opinion after they've already scheduled surgery elsewhere. And who can blame them? Why not get a verification of a recommendation?

Fourth, when the consult is free, patients don't appreciate the value associated with the overall patient experience you and your team have worked so hard to create. To them it's just another free opportunity to ask a surgeon questions and maybe with imaging thrown in. And since the consult is free, many patients reason, “*Why not ask for a discount on the surgery?...*” Not charging for your time, expertise, and five-star service results in a perceived lower value for each of them. Further discounting and negotiation attempts typically follow.

But If I Charge, Patients Will Go Somewhere Else!

This is the story many aesthetic surgeons tell themselves. I see a different story.

We have dozens of clients who charge \$75, \$100, \$200, or more, who successfully fill their consult and O.R. schedule. And if you are a young surgeon who believes you can't charge until you have been practicing for a while—why? You are impeccably trained and have extra time to devote to each patient—make that clear. When your “free” brand is established, making the move to charging a consultation fee is harder.

What of the patients who do decide to go somewhere else if you charge a fee? We don't think of this as being a bad thing. Think about it rationally: If a patient can't or doesn't want to pay for the consultation, what makes you think they can even afford surgery? In many

cases, they can't. If they see a free competitor, fine. You have more room on your schedule for the paying consultation patient who is more likely to become a surgery patient. Say it again, “I am not everyone's plastic surgeon.” Face it, plastic surgery has something in common with retail. There are Neiman's shoppers and there are shoppers at T.J. Maxx—different experience, different price point. It's not up to you to provide Neiman's and Sak's quality surgery at T.J. Maxx or Forever 21 prices.

Implementation Policy Options

If you are thinking of moving from free to fee—great. The next step is considering how to implement it in your office.

Confirm first that your staff thinks you are worth it. Yes, you read that correctly—read it again. Your staff must believe that you provide quality care, show excellent judgment, and deliver results that are well worth paying for. Of course, discussing fees with prospective patients requires more work for your staff. Having trained literally thousands of receptionists and patient care coordinators, I can tell you that some are unskilled in having conversations about money and recognize the need and welcome an opportunity for training. My favorite clients to remember are the staff who believe in their surgeon-boss and—once trained—confidently implement a consult fee on their own—much to the surprise of their boss, who learns sometimes weeks later that a credit card charge was enacted, which is why the surgery schedule is more full.

We don't think there is a one-size-fits-all solution. There are a variety of options. In some cases, the consult can still ultimately be complimentary if certain thresholds, such as scheduling surgery within a time limit like 45 days are met. Some of the other options are:

1. *Require a credit card guarantee, and charge only if the patient doesn't come in.* This is common practice for upscale salons. Massage therapists aren't afraid to ask—why are plastic surgeons? It reduces the no show rate almost immediately and cures appointment amnesia.

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2. *Require a credit card guarantee, and charge for the consultation at check-in.* Deduct the consult fee from surgery if the patient makes a non-refundable scheduling and booking fee that day. The consult then becomes “free” but only for the patients who commit to surgery. Make sure you have a written protocol for making this transaction.
3. *Require a credit card guarantee for medspa patients receiving treatments from in-demand staff or equipment.* Say it’s an injectable patient, having filler. The practice charges for at least one syringe of whatever will be used. The latter is particularly beneficial if you offer appointments on Saturday and/or if you have high no show rates in the medspa.
4. *Ask for a credit card and charge the whole fee at the time of scheduling. Don’t deduct it from the surgery fee.* The consultation becomes its own revenue stream. This is typically the policy of practices with a large facial rejuvenation practice and older, established, discerning patients. The consult is often 45 minutes or an hour.

Explaining the Credit Card Guarantee to Patients

Charging a fee, as well as asking for a credit card guarantee, takes skill and polish. It’s important to have a plan for how to explain the charge to patients. Here’s a sample script for your team to customize. It begins after staff and patient have agreed to a date and time for the appointment.

Staff: Which credit card would you like to use to guarantee your consultation time?

Patient: Why do I have to do that?

Staff: *Because* (NOTE: It’s very important that you use this word) we have scheduled you for 45 minutes with Dr. Skilled, we ask for a credit card guarantee. We’ve found that by doing this, patients remember to call us if their plans change. So, if you can’t come in and your call us 24 hours before your consultation, there’s no charge to your credit card. I’ll send you an email letter confirming this.

Patient: I don’t think a doctor has ever asked me to guarantee an appointment.

Figure 1. Charging for Consults: Part of an Effective No Show Prevention Plan

The number of patients who fail to keep their schedule appointments has grown steadily over the past five years. The trend is not unique to physicians and it’s why many fine restaurants, top stylists, and upscale spas require a credit card to guarantee a reservation. Don’t let no show patients steal your opportunity to have a full surgery schedule. Use this formula to develop and implement a prevention plan.

1. Track and monitor no show appointments in the software system. How many no show appointments were there in 2016? Make it a goal to reduce that number in 2017. Review the no show report monthly and judge it by the quarter.
2. Try to avoid scheduling too far in advance. Have some consult times for patients who have a near term surgery date in mind.
3. Pre-register patients by phone or on the patient portal.
4. Require a credit card to guarantee the appointment.
5. Send a confirming letter confirming the charge and cancellation policy via email and track open receipts in Outlook. Use this if the patient denies knowing you would charge.
5. Charge half the fee on the card the day the appointment is made for major injection or other spa treatments.
6. Remind patients in confirmation calls/texts/emails and other communications to cancel if they can’t make it so they will avoid a charge.
8. Use a negative option when confirming: “We’ll release the time if we don’t hear from you.”
9. Maintain a list of ready-to-be-worked-in patients.
10. Don’t give patients with a history of no shows a prime appointment time.

Staff: I can’t speak for every office but I do know that asking for a credit card is a practice that is growing nationally among physicians in all specialists. Many physicians and dentists are asking for credit cards to address the growing problem of no show patients. You know, this practice is also customary at high-end hair salons, spas, fine restaurants, luxury hotels, and airlines.

Note the adjectives “high end,” “luxury,” and “fine.” Make sure staff uses these consistently in their conversations with patients.

In addition to helping patients understand why you are charging, this conversation reinforces the value of the appointment and reduces no show rates. Figure 1. provides additional components of what we refer to as a No Show Prevention Plan.

Moving your practice from free to fee takes some planning and won’t transition smoothly without staff training. But if the notion of reducing no shows, increasing the perception of your service value, and adding new revenue are appealing, use these techniques to create an implementation plan that works for your culture and patient base. Remember, there are typically long lines to enter clubs with a red velvet rope—the barrier makes them more desirable.

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