Individuals are faced with more choices for eye care than ever before. Our competition has become an anonymous opponent; located universally, available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; and seen whether chosen to view them or not. The inundation of continuous “pop-ups” on various social media sights claim “two for one,” “free eye examination” or offer prices that are outlandishly low, and almost always impossible for the private practice to compete with. These ads are a constant, with the notoriety of overwhelming our patients! Additionally, online optical sites provide instructions to our patients in self-measurement of segment heights, and pupillary distance! Seemingly to publicly broadcast a de-valuation of our optical proficiency.

Is it possible to remain a skilled and valued professional to our patients, when social media advertisements clearly do not advocate our expertise? Are we able to create and maintain patient loyalty amidst all the healthcare changes and additional competition?

The answer is yes, providing we maintain our focus on what we unmistakably do best, provide our patients with the finest hands-on, quality eye care. Our ability to provide face-to-face eye care becomes our most valued tool, and a clear advantage over a faceless and impersonal opponent.

The secret to building patient loyalty is obvious when we compare building patient loyalty to assembling a puzzle; it becomes clear multiple pieces are required.

Building a puzzle with a strong foundation insures the puzzle strength. Likewise, starting with a strong foundation is essential when we begin to build patient loyalty.

The first piece of foundation to our loyalty puzzle is trust. We begin to build trust with a reliance on the integrity we demonstrate when providing our patients’ with improved eye health and vision. Allowing our patients to understand as their eye care providers, our goal is to enrich and enhance their lives with better-quality vision and improved eye health.

Value is the next piece to our loyalty puzzle foundation. When a recommendation is made for a specific eye care product, it becomes our responsibility to interpret their benefits. Allowing our patients to understand that product’s importance and usefulness. They will then comprehend the value each product is for their continued eye care.
Our professional skills are an important piece to patient loyalty foundation. By understanding the significance of our optical skills, we understand the need to continue to hone them, and discover new products available. We must strive to become educated on their use and benefits for each patient’s individual needs.

Confidence and skill go hand-in-hand. Skill is the last piece of the loyalty puzzle foundation. When we are confident in our own skills, our patients then become confident in us. It is important our patient’s have recognized that we are capable of providing them with the most advanced eye care, and eye care products available. With our continued supervision, we will promote every patient’s individual medical eye health. It is important to develop an understanding, when we become established as our patients’ eye care providers; we become an important instrument for monitoring and maintaining their overall medical health.

Referrals are a valuable piece to the loyalty puzzle. Only the very unhappy and the very happy patients will have something to talk about to family and friends. We are in a position to ensure our patients become our greatest advocates, and not our largest critics. Predominating happy patients are a goal we strive daily to ensure. Guaranteeing additional referrals and continued practice growth.

Working together each team member plays an important role when assembling the patient loyalty puzzle. Proper telephone etiquette is important; as it is almost always the first communication patients have with our practice. Speaking with a smile will change the tone of voice, making it sound happy and sunny. Receiving patient comments on our happy voice is a great way to begin a conversation.

The greeting made by the front desk team can dictate the atmosphere of our patient’s visit. It is vital for a positive patient experience that the first impression is upbeat. When the entire office team is held accountable for beginning every visit with a positive greeting, we eliminate the chance of creating a negative atmosphere for our patient.

Familiarity is an important piece to the loyalty puzzle and begins before our patients become our patients. Allowing them to view us as recognizable members of the community. Volunteering or speaking in a public, or community event will help us to become familiar to our potential patients. With familiarity comes comfort. A patient will always appreciate comfort, and will return to our practice. This begins the progression of becoming our loyal patient.

Utilization of social media is a valuable tool for our practice, and now becomes a piece of the patient loyalty puzzle. Permitting patients to observe our practice day
to day. Email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow us the ability to announce a new frame line, a frame event, or new instrumentation. Advise can be offered for maintaining healthy eyes; a subject that will serve both as communication, and public service. We are able to announce all commendations and awards earned by our doctors and team members. It will continually encourage interaction with patients, and prospective loyal patients. It permits continued communication between routine office visits. Partnering with communication companies that use social media as a marketing tool with healthcare providers; creating surveys, progress checks, birthday, and appointment confirmation calls, texts, or emails save countless staff hours, but should never eliminate the necessity for personal calls to be made.

Incorporating a patient survey can be a helpful. It encourages patient communication regarding any concerns, or complaints. Providing necessary information for our continued improvement.

Some loyalty puzzles pieces do not fit; and are pieces that block patient loyalty: One of the most important pieces of the puzzle to avoid is extended wait time for appointments to begin. Delays are sometimes inevitable, but communication concerning possible delays will offer security that they have not been forgotten, and we value their time. Providing comfort with the knowledge the appointment will begin as soon as possible. All communication with our patients are always appreciated. And will provide additional interaction with our patient.

Accounting errors are a puzzle piece to avoid. It leads to angry emotions, combined with a feeling that we have taken advantage of our patients' financially. Should an accounting error arise, it is always best to remember the old adage “The Customer is Always Right.” Make certain all the facts are known, and then handle it with compassion. If a patient is unable to pay the account in full at that time, suggesting an alternate financial institution can accommodate their current financial situation.

If our patients' request a specific day and time for their appointment, that is not available, it is important to use tact when scheduling, allow some flexibility. When a patient is forced to wait for an appointment time, it is advantageous to offer a wait or re-schedule list (it is essential to avoid negative terms such as “cancelation list”). A wait list is a great tool that will help our patient understand they're appointment is not scheduled at a date distant enough for them to be ignored. We then provide them with confidence by allowing us to place them on a wait list they may have the opportunity to have an earlier appointment time. Along with the knowledge the wait list will be constantly monitored and maintained, alleviating any chance of our patient being forgotten.

When assembling the patient loyalty puzzle we must remember our patients are acutely aware of their surroundings. Make sure the reception area is clean and clutter free. It should feel comfortable with an easy understandable movement.
Each examination room should be made comfortable. Counter tops clean and clutter free, instruments always in their place. Frame rooms hold a little drama and color; it will encourage some excitement from our patients as they view it for the first or after many times.

This is where the pieces come together, and complete the loyalty puzzle. We gain loyal patients when patients’ understand their lives have been enriched and enhanced by improved or perfect vision. Together with trust, and confidence they have received the best quality eyewear and eye care. Encouraging them to refer family and friends, inspiring them, as they become our loyal patient, while helping our practice to grow.