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TAKING IT TO THE EXTREME

MEDIA AND MARKETING Alice Hart-Davis asks whether the latest extreme marketing methods being used to promote cosmetic procedures are trivialising our view of surgery



Many extreme marketing techniques violate established codes of ethical medical practice

sensitising effect. People forget that these are medical procedures and not just beauty treatments."

Brits could be forgiven for thinking that things are worse in the USA, but thanks to the dismal lack of regulation in the UK, that is not the case. The US has similar issues with voucher offers and competitions, but the general consensus is that it is worse over here.

"It's a sticky subject," says US-based international cosmetic surgery consultant, Wendy Lewis, who is known as 'the Knife Coach'. "Surgeons' associations hold their members to higher standards than other groups of doctors. It is frowned upon to offer free procedures or raffle off surgery at benefits, however, it has become commonplace to offer deals, discounts, and special offers, mainly based on the economy. Facebook has impacted this to a large extent because many doctors do have competitions and contests running on that platform. Groupon and its spin offs have raised a lot of questions about ethics among surgeons' organisations here, too." If it seems mad that people fall for gimmicky marketing, it seems doubly so given that we are all increasingly aware that, done badly, cosmetic procedures can give awful results; the media offers plenty of horror stories of surgery 'gone wrong' or 'botched Botox®'. But does this really reflect what is going on in the market?

"Certainly, bad cosmetic work skews people's perception of surgery in a negative way," says leading cosmetic practitioner Dr Tracy Mountford. "If anything goes wrong with someone in the public eye, prospective patients are very fearful of complications. On a positive note, well known celebrities who are known to have had extensive cosmetic surgery, like Demi Moore and Sharon Osborne, present a very positive image that people will aspire to."

So, you're still thinking of having a bit of work done? Here's a tip. Choose a good surgeon, and check their credentials (are they on the Specialist Register with the GMC?) Have a consultation and be prepared to pay for it – you are taking up the surgeon's valuable time. Get more than one opinion and don't rush into anything.

And above all, keep your antennae tuned. If any offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is – in which case, it is best avoided. ●

5%

ADULTS ARE INFLUENCED TO HAVE SURGERY BY MAGAZINES AND TELEVISION MAKEOVER SHOWS

£1,999

THE COST OF A £5,000 BREAST AUGMENTATION WITH Groupon DISCOUNT

14

NUMBER OF ADVERTISING STANDARDS AUTHORITY ADJUDICATIONS INVOLVING "COSMETIC SURGERY" SINCE 2007

■ So, you are thinking of having a bit of 'work' done. Would you pick your hospital and your surgeon because a) A time-sensitive voucher-offer landed in your email inbox? (b) A magazine's readers looked at your picture and voted you the most deserving of the op? (c) You would get travel vouchers as well as surgery if you signed up? Or (d) It is free if you agree to be filmed throughout the process?

Please, tell me you would say: "None of the above". No one would dream of undergoing a mastectomy or a heart-bypass on such a basis, but in our cash-strapped, bargain-orientated and looks-fixated society, this is increasingly how cosmetic surgery and non-surgical cosmetic procedures like Botox® and laser hair removal are being sold.

Is it right? Is it ethical? Is it not breaching some guidelines? To any respectable doctor or surgeon, the latest extreme marketing methods being used to sell cosmetic surgery are unacceptable.

"I find it staggering that any reputable UK surgeon could contemplate or partake in such crass marketing gimmicks aimed at young women,"

says Fazel Fatah, consultant plastic surgeon and president of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS). "Not only does the offer of a surgical procedure as a prize violate both ethics and good taste but time-linked initiatives are prohibited by well established codes of medical practice. Surgery cannot be treated as entertainment, such a process severely compromises the normal doctor-patient relationship regardless of what safeguards are ostensibly in place."

Again, medical professionals find it beggars belief that people are prepared to submit to potentially life-changing surgery and cosmetic procedures so lightly.

"One has to realise these are medical treatments with potentially serious medical complications and to trivialise them by these sort of sales tactics is extraordinarily dangerous," says Dr Mike Comins, medical director of The Private Clinic and former president of the British Association of Cosmetic Doctors.

Another worry is that extreme marketing tactics are preying on insecure women. "What we are doing in cos-

metic enhancement, however you dress it up, is treating an underlying self-esteem disorder where the patient feels conscious about a part of their body they would like to rectify," says Dr Comins. "You are dealing with vulnerable people who may be more in need of counseling than hard-sell."

These latest marketing wheezes give the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) a headache, too. It is legal to advertise cosmetic surgery, as long as providers of procedures don't overstep rules in the Advertising Codes. Any claims made in ads about the experience or qualification of the providers need to be substantiated and advertising should be "socially responsi-

It's a sad fact that in the UK, most people spend longer choosing their bathroom tiles than they do choosing their surgeon

ble and not otherwise misleading". "We have taken action in the past, for example, where an ad implied that cosmetic surgery was 'low risk' when, of course, risk is inherent in any medical procedure," says an ASA spokesman. "If an advertiser were to use Photoshopped models, this may well be deemed misleading if the advertiser was unable to show that the effect shown was not that produced by the surgery or if the effects of surgery were exaggerated."

The net result is that we do not take cosmetic procedures seriously enough. It doesn't help that the eagerness with which the media pounces on stories about cosmetic work, both good and bad, tends to blur the lines by grouping minor, non-surgical treatments such as Botox® and fillers together with cosmetic surgery, leading some consumers to regard surgery as quick-fix beautification.

"It's a sad fact that in the UK, most people spend longer choosing their bathroom tiles than they do choosing their surgeon," says consultant plastic surgeon Rajiv Grover. "Certainly, so much media coverage of cosmetic treatments and surgery has a de-