

PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

AESTHETIC CONSULTANT **WENDY LEWIS** SHARES HER THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF THE UK INDUSTRY AND HER TIPS FOR SURVIVING ECONOMIC DOWNTURN WITH **EVE OXBERRY**

A well-respected aesthetic doctor recently told me that what we could really do with in this country is a British Wendy Lewis. We were talking about the portrayal of the aesthetics industry in the consumer media so the doctor in question meant, of course, that the industry could benefit from an independent expert who had witnessed the development of the market over several years, experienced many procedures first hand and could explain the ins and outs of everything from skin resurfacing to sclerotherapy in accessible language.

While the beauty industry abounds with such figures and the cosmetic surgery world may have one or two, Lewis really is unusual in the sphere of aesthetic medicine and even more so in the fact that her prolific and long career and an enviable talent for self marketing have secured her position as an expert in all three disciplines.

DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?

Lewis worked counselling patients for New York-based plastic surgeons for 12 years before setting up her own consultancy in 1997, so she has extensive experience of consumers' desires, fears and expectations. But some are of the opinion that Lewis should not be advising potential patients on invasive treatments without a medical qualification – and her role as consultant and counsellor on cosmetic treatments is certainly unusual in that respect. Yet it is her experience as a consumer of treatments, coupled with decades of working within the cosmetic surgery, non-surgical aesthetics and beauty markets that make her position unique.

A British Wendy Lewis may seem somewhat unnecessary when you consider how much we already hear from Lewis herself in this country. Often called upon for her independent opinion, Lewis still puts her English degree to good use, contributing features to a number of maga-



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zines, including *Tatler* and the *Mail on Sunday's* *You*, not to mention some 10 of her own books.

Operating her consultancy business from New York, London and Paris, Lewis keeps a close eye on the international marketplace and has strong opinions on how they differ but also believes that the lines are beginning to blur. “UK consumers are becoming more demanding and more like US patients,” she says. “Just look at how many law suits are taking place over here now. The pressure is really mounting for clinics to meet those demands and provide a higher level of service.”

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

And these measures are also vital for any clinic wanting to survive the financial crisis, which, she says, is set to cause a lot of closures and consolidations this year. “It's worse in the US than the UK right now so clinics over here should be looking to the strong American brands to see how they're surviving,” she says. Even if you haven't yet been affected by the credit crunch, Lewis emphasises that the worst thing you can do is think you are recession proof. Don't live in a vacuum, use this time to focus on sharpening up your service because it's inevitable that competition is going to really stiffen up soon, she advises.

“This is a market that has been growing at 20% year-on-year and that's hard to sustain at any time, especially now,” she says. “But a recession doesn't necessarily mean that it will decline, instead I imagine it will still grow but at a slower rate of more like 5% and the pressure will intensify.” She suggests that it is certainly not a time to expand but neither should clinics cut down on marketing at this time of increased competition. “We're going to see the less successful clinics and product brands bought out by the stronger ones so it's really important to let people know what sets your clinic apart,” she says. “I know some clinics are trying to

TREATMENT TRENDS

Wendy Lewis predicts...

- Non-surgical procedures to be more popular than surgical this year
- Some treatments to be shunned in favour of less invasive alternatives
- A backlash against extreme procedures as patients demand safety and reliability
- Companies with proven track records and FDA-approved products will prosper
- The many fillers that have poor clinical data and low market share will close

get bigger market share by diversifying and adding as many new treatments as they can but I think that's the wrong way to go about it. The way to survive is not to invest in expensive new equipment but to stick to what you know and do a few things well. We're going to see the med-spas starting to shut as they try to do too much within one site."

She also suggests it is now more important to work with brands that are well known in the public domain because consumers are increasingly seeking out particular brands and will select a clinic in the basis of that offer. "Doctors should demand more from the brands they're using," she says. "Brands with a clinic finder on their website, for example, are at least doing something to drive traffic to your site."

This is ever more important in a society where the trend for consumers asking for products by name also continues to grow. "This is something I'm seeing more and more of in the US and it's both a good and a bad thing," says Lewis. "It means the industry is growing and becoming better understood and that consumers have choices and can research different procedures. But there is definitely also an element of patients beginning to think they're experts and requesting products or procedures that may be wholly unsuitable for them."

PRICE WARS

Other than upping your offer, the most obvious way to compete in a tough economic climate is to lower your prices. Some clinics don't like to discount or even to devise special offers to reward loyalty because they feel it undervalues their skills and services. Others believe it is unprofessional to discount because the decision to buy aesthetic procedures should be based on a strong desire for change, not for a bargain. And of course any clinic that does run promotional offers must be careful to do so within the law – for example, not discounting botulinum toxin and approaching time-sensitive offers with care.



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But Lewis stresses that you'll begin to hear more complaints from clients that their finances are getting tight and you have to acknowledge that in some way. "In the US clinics are not necessarily price cutting but they are adding value, for example bundling procedures, so if a client wants Botox and a filler then offer a discount off the filler if they book the two together," she says. "I've also seen more clinics accommodating same-day appointments so as not to lose clients – and walk-ins should not be discouraged either."

It's not only the cost of procedures that consumers will be keeping an eye on as they tighten their belts, Lewis also predicts that we'll see an increased demand for fast results as people seek the maximum value for money and become less tolerant of any treatments that don't demonstrate their worth quickly.

"People are entering a time of cautious spending," she says. "They have less patience for treatments that need an investment of a lot of time and money over a course of months before you achieve results." She also predicts that we'll see something of a regression to heads ruling hearts in that the quest for ever more powerful and exciting procedures will be outweighed by a demand for tried and tested ones with proven results and safety records.

If competition and consumer demand are set to dominate change in 2009, so too is the increasing need for legislation. "Beauty therapists administering injectables in the UK is terrible. Self-regulation is a nice idea but it just doesn't work. The government has to get involved before consumers will take notice," concludes Lewis, who, as ever, may be outspoken but makes a fair point. ■