

Extended office hours can be worth the effort, improve satisfaction

Worth the trouble and expense

Greg Wiener, MD, a plastic surgeon in Chicago, also endorses the concept of extended business hours. His practice is open 9 a.m.–8 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday, and 9 a.m.–6 p.m. on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wiener is in the office on Saturday but doesn't have formal hours.

Despite the rigors of this schedule, the effort is "absolutely worth it," Wiener says. "We find that people, especially new consultations, want later hours so they don't miss a day of work. When they come to our office it is not a necessary medical problem, but rather a personal choice to see what their options are, so they would prefer to do this on their personal time rather than during their workday."

To accommodate staffing needs, Wiener's practice has one staff member start at 11 a.m. on Monday and Wednesday, and her workday ends at 8 p.m. That way, she works a full day but does not qualify for overtime. Therefore, the longer hours do not increase in staffing costs.

Wiener says the schedule is not just beneficial to his patients, but it fits into his own work style as well. For example, the office is open at 9 a.m. every day, but he arrives at 7:30 a.m. to prepare for surgeries and other necessary parts of the day.

"Each day I work from 7:30 a.m. until 9 p.m., although I may get out earlier on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. On Mondays and Wednesdays, my day will absolutely not end before 9 p.m. I schedule my day to do surgeries in the morning and consultations from 2:30 p.m. on."

Although Wiener says the plan works well from a business standpoint, he admits that it can place high demands on the surgeon.

"It is exhausting because I work 13- or 14-hour days, Monday through Friday. Because of this, I lose a lot of personal time," he says. "But having extended hours is essential to grow the practice, and without extended hours I would lose patients to my competitors."

No-shows have more impact

Another potential downside is the added effect of a no-show. If your 3 p.m. patient doesn't show up, the effect is limited because you'd still be in the office to see the 4 p.m. appointment. But if the patient is scheduled for 8:30 p.m. and doesn't show, you might have waited around for no reason when you could have been having dinner with your family.

The no-show rate is even higher for complimentary consultations, Wiener says. "Because it is a complimentary service, we have patients that do not show. If I removed this option, it would be a great disadvantage to me because offering complimentary services has become commonplace," he says. "People want to learn more, but you need to make it convenient for them to do so."

Wiener has considered formal office hours on Saturdays, but so far he has resisted the temptation. With such a long work week already, he fears that formal office hours on Saturday would be too much to handle. If there are patients who simply cannot be treated at any other time, he will see them on a Saturday. Usually he is in the office to catch up on paperwork and other projects on Saturday.

Overall, the extended office hours—although they can put a burden on the surgeon—can provide a boost for the business, Wiener says.

"This does provide an advantage against the competition. Doctors that are unwilling to see patients outside of office hours lose opportunities, and the patient response to extended hours in my experience is very positive," Wiener says. "All of my late hours are always filled. I don't know exactly what all of the other doctors in the area are doing, but I do know that patients always want to schedule appointments later rather than earlier." ■

