

WINNING TRIPLE PLAY

By Jackie Summers

At Suzanne Bruce and Associates in Houston, three is the magic number. Three divisions—a clinical dermatology practice, a cosmetic dermatology practice and a center for skin research—create economic synergy for the thriving enterprise. And three leaders—an enthusiastic MD, her business-savvy partner and their experienced director of operations—combine to provide innovative systems for training, management and marketing that keep the businesses booming.



Kelly Goodman (left) created The Spa at SBA and oversees department supervisors; Malcom Waddell handles financial and marketing chores, leaving Dr. Bruce free to practice medicine.

“I like to jump in!” explains Suzanne Bruce, MD, when she’s asked about the array of services offered at Houston’s Suzanne Bruce and Associates medical aesthetics practice. As a result of her “early adopter” mentality, patients at her practice are benefiting from a wide range of cutting-edge procedures, including Fraxel, Thermage, GentleWaves, Omnilux, VelaSmooth and a complete range of injectables including Botox Cosmetic, ArteFill, Juvéderm, Perlane, Restylane, Sculptra and collagen. “Women are always reading about new procedures in magazines,” Dr. Bruce continues, “and they’re constantly calling us, looking for the next big thing. That’s what’s fun about cosmetic dermatology—there’s always something new. I love the chal-

lenge of seeing if we can make it work within our practice.”

Of course, checks and balances are critical within every organization, so while Dr. Bruce is constantly sourcing the new and the next, her partner and husband Malcolm Waddell stays busy crunching the numbers. “Suzanne loves new technology and can assess it well. It’s my job to evaluate the volume potential and viability...how it will integrate into the practice. It’s one thing to have the latest procedure and quite another to create services that the patient perceives as valuable,” says the Harvard MBA who sold a successful industrial service business to become a happy, stay-at-home dad before joining his wife in her then-fledgling practice in 1997.

Clearly the couple’s system is effective. Suzanne Bruce and Associates is comprised of three divisions: The Center for Medical Dermatology, The Center for Cosmetic Dermatology (which includes The Spa at SBA) and The Center for Skin Research. According to Waddell, the enterprise has grown steadily each year (at a rate of about 15%) and by the end of 2007, growth was expected to jump to 20%. “We’re seeing the greatest potential,” comments Waddell, “from the cosmetic dermatology and clinical research sides.”

Natural Evolution

Ten years ago, when Dr. Bruce launched her private dermatology practice after serving as associate professor in the Department of Dermatology at Baylor

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SBA offers a wide range of laser and light-based services.

College of Medicine (her alma mater) and as deputy chief of Dermatology Services at Ben Taub General Hospital, she would have been hard-pressed to envision the organization's current success. Soon after opening her clinical practice in a small office in the Texas Medical Center, she attended a course on treating leg veins with intense pulsed light. During the course she also learned of the IPL applications for hair removal and skin rejuvenation, which ignited her interest in cosmetic procedures. In October of 2000 she expanded her practice and launched The Center for Cosmetic Dermatology. In 2002, she brought the two practices together by moving to an office adjacent to Houston's couture-rich Galleria, near the upscale neighborhoods of Tanglewood, Memorial and River Oaks.

At Baylor, Dr. Bruce had conducted trials for pharmaceutical companies and she continued to do so in private practice. That work led to the inception of The Center for Skin Research in October of 2005. To date, the research division has conducted studies for the likes of Galderma, Novartis and Pfizer and was closely involved in the development of Isolagen's cellular processing system.

Also in 2005, Dr. Bruce and her associates, led by the third component in the SBA success equation, director of operations Kelly Goodman, created The Spa at SBA, designed to provide clinical facials, peels, acne and cellulite

Patient Care Coordinators

In keeping with SBA's laser-like focus on customer service, the team has developed a special staff position: patient care coordinator. There are two at SBA and both are estheticians. "They're the primary points of contact for patients," explains director of operations Kelly Goodman. "They sit in on all consultations and can answer patients' questions on everything from procedures to costs in great detail."

Patient care coordinators are trained on all new services and procedures in weekly sessions with Dr. Bruce. They connect the medical and cosmetology sides of the business, offering patients a higher degree of comfort and peace of mind while building revenue by facilitating discussions about additional services. The position also provides a means of professional growth for staffers who are interested in moving into a position that offers greater responsibility and personal interaction.

treatments, waxing and makeup. The spa is still a division of the cosmetics practice, but next on the to-do list is the addition of a 900-square-foot adjoining office to accommodate the growing demand for these services. The grand opening of the spa will bring the three-pronged facility to nearly 14,000 square feet with a staff of 40.

Human Resources

Goodman oversees department supervisors who manage the business, medical, research, aesthetics and customer service personnel. Staffers include Dr. Bruce and two other dermatologists, nurses, physician's assistants and two patient care coordinators.

In light of the fact that the entire staff is female except for Waddell ("I think we scare men away," laughs Goodman) and many are raising children and pursuing advanced training, "we're very flexible when it comes to the number of days people work and their hours," notes Dr. Bruce. "We try to support them with time off to take classes, care for sick kids and attend school functions. We really want to accommodate our working mothers." As a result, the practice has earned an excellent reputation among prospective employees in the area, and recruitment is relatively easy.

In addition to providing flexible work hours, Goodman and Dr. Bruce are committed to offering careers rather than jobs. That means lots of training and plenty of opportunities for professional growth. "For example," says Dr. Bruce, "one of our RNs started out as a medical assistant. While working here, she got her nursing degree, became a provider and is now a supervisor. It's rewarding to know that we've assembled a team of good people who have prospered and risen to higher levels. And of course, when your people are happy, your customers are happy!"

Service and Safety First

Evidence of that customer satisfaction

can be found in this testimonial, posted recently on a user review website by a satisfied SBA patient:

I tried the laser hair removal and I was so satisfied with the staff performance and their professionalism that I didn't even try to shop around for lower fees—and I always do that for everything else! They're very careful...and conservative. As a doctor I appreciate that, and I know that they are very ethical. Results are just what

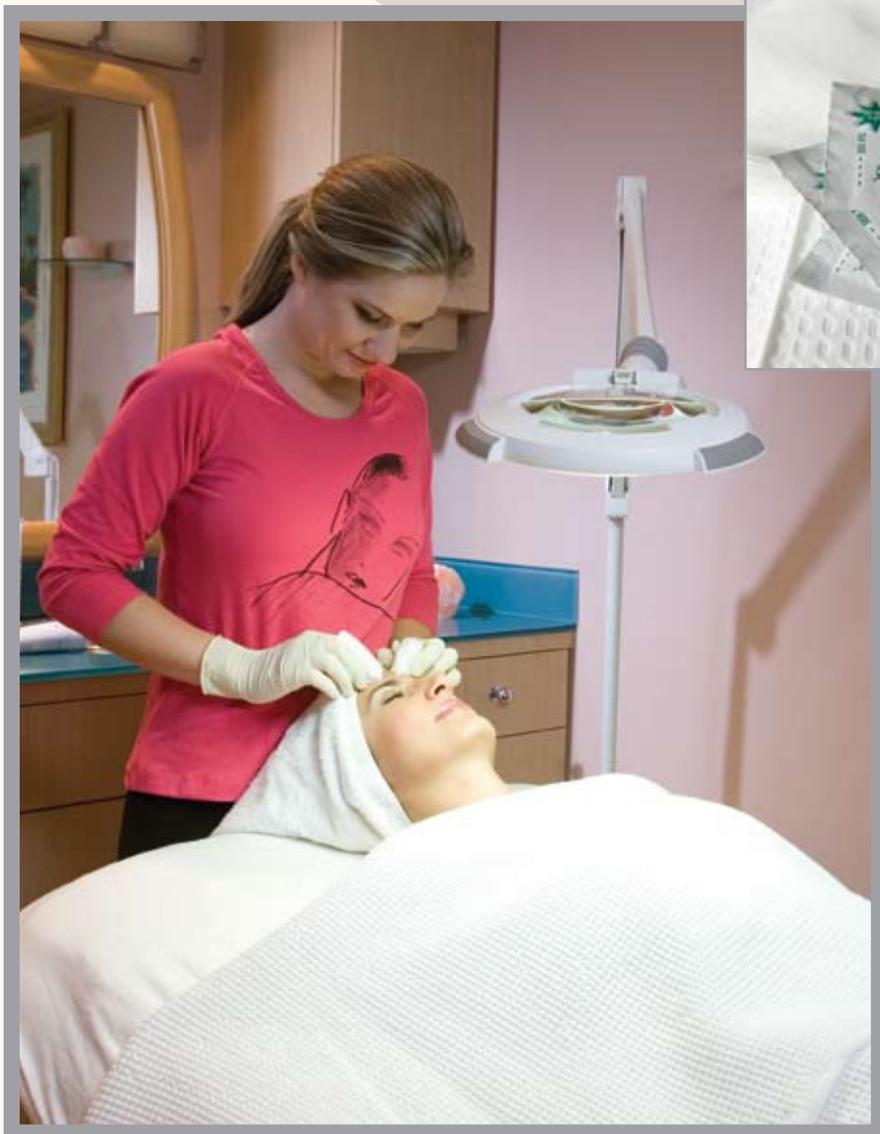
they told me to expect—about 70% hair loss—and I'm very happy. I recommend them to anyone interested. They are doctors first and then beauticians, and that makes a big difference for their patients' safety.

For Dr. Bruce, this glowing review taps all of her philosophical trigger points: "I try to stay on the cutting edge," she says, "but it's a conservative cutting edge. We don't go off and do crazy things. We try new procedures on



Dr. Bruce provides many cosmetic procedures herself, but she does use physician extenders for some services.

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▲ Estheticians at SBA not only do facials but also act as patient care coordinators.

each other first. If we're working with something new, we're very honest with patients. We let them know exactly what we're doing."

Disturbed by the lack of supervision and training she has observed in other practices, Dr. Bruce is adamant that staff training at SBA be thorough and ongoing, and she requires all providers to be certified by each vendor. "Cosmetic dermatology has exploded," she notes, "but many facilities are not run by plastic surgeons or dermatologists. In one practice I know of here the medical director does

not even live in the city! So many things can go wrong—we just saw a patient with a bad chemical burn from a peel she had received in a luxury spa in Las Vegas. We do have non-physician providers here, but I am always right outside the treatment room door."

Outreach

In his office down the hall, Waddell takes great care to communicate concern for clients' well-being in all of their marketing efforts. Under his direction, an advertising agency creates annual

campaigns for ads that are placed in local magazines. He developed a comprehensive website for the practice (sba-skincare.com); a lively and informational newsletter called "The Skinny," which is mailed to more than 46,000 patients and prospects; and two online newsletters (the "Skin-e-Letter" and the "Spa-e-Letter"), which are distributed to about 2,000 recipients each.

"The approach of all marketing materials is to provide as much information as possible to help consumers make informed decisions. Staff-written articles, such as 'Feel Good About Your Neck' and 'Dermal Fillers: Filling You In' are designed," says Waddell, "to identify us as knowledge leaders. We strive to position ourselves as the 'skin expert' brand. By doing so, we hope that customers will make the choice to come to us."

Information sharing is also done one-on-one in the form of the SBA Saturday Morning Sessions—two-hour seminars conducted bimonthly for 40 to 50 guests. The agenda includes a presentation by Dr. Bruce on skin rejuvenation options, both in the clinic and at home; refreshments; and a lively question and answer session. Attendance is free and those who come may stay for any portion of the presentation that interests them and then leave with samples provided by SBA vendors. "People come again and again," comments Dr. Bruce, "and they return with their friends."

On a larger scale, the practice hosts an annual open house each October.



The decor at SBA was chosen to make patients feel at home.

Last year, more than 160 attended and more than 25 vendors participated. The entire staff takes part in the three-hour, Saturday morning event, doing demos, giving talks, serving refreshments and handing out samples and gifts. Goodman, who is responsible for organizing the event, noted that this year's RSVPs started coming in before the date had even been confirmed, and as with the bimonthly sessions, many attendees return with friends in tow. "There are a lot of ways people could choose to spend a Saturday morning," marvels Waddell, "and they choose to spend it letting us market to them!"

Momentum

In the last 10 years, Dr. Bruce, Waddell and Goodman have accomplished much together, but each acknowledges that in light of the local market and the explo-

sive growth of the field, vast untapped potential remains. "Our studies indicate that market saturation in our area is just 11% to 12%," comments Waddell. "And interestingly, when we're asked to speak to groups, even though we're 10 years into the cosmetic field, the most frequent request is for the introductory presentation. What's more," he adds, "when I attend conferences, I'm amazed at the number of new technologies and all of the entrepreneurs and big companies on hand. When I add to that the massive numbers of baby boomers who want to age gracefully and can afford to do so, I realize that this is a very young industry." ζ

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▲Retail is considered an integral part of The Center for Cosmetic Dermatology.