

# HOW TO MARKET YOUR NICHE

Only those who can push past all the rejection and early mornings/very late nights will be successful

JOSEPH LAPLACA, O.D., NOBLESVILLE, IND.

**A**t brunch one Sunday morning with my wife, daughter and son, I see a young couple wearing the local youth soccer academy t-shirts. It's a high-level soccer training academy in Indianapolis. The club had been on my "to visit" list for months, as I'm the owner of a sports vision practice in the area. Today felt like the day to go do it. We finish our brunch and head over.

We walk into the complex, which contains three indoor fields full of athletes practicing. I ask a few people who the manager is and who I might contact

to set up a time to chat. Much to my luck, the third person I talk to is actually the club manager. He's got three minutes before he has to set up another field, so I give him my 30-second elevator pitch, and we set up a time the following week to discuss sports vision training.

Next week arrives. I've prepped. I've got my list of research facts. I've got my presentation prepared, and it's meeting time. I run through it all once more in my head before I enter the facility.

A bead of sweat drips down my face, as I prepare to enter the facility. I can't help but wonder: Why am I so nervous and insecure about this meeting? I have a doctorate in eyes and vision. I'm so confident

→ **DR. LAPLACA** is owner of Ares Elite Sports Vision in Indianapolis, which he started in 2018. Combining his love of the visual system, cutting edge technology and extensive history with sports (soccer, basketball, hockey, volleyball and being a first degree black belt) has always been his main goal. Aside from comprehensive, contact lens and pediatric exams, Dr. Joe routinely manages glaucoma, contact lens related infections, dry eye syndrome, diabetic and hypertensive retinopathy as well as postoperative care for cataracts and laser vision correction.

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in refractions, ocular health, glaucoma, cataracts, etc., but my knowledge base for sports vision is not as vast as these items. I do not feel like an authority on the subject. I don't feel like an "expert." I feel like sports vision changes and shifts so quickly, it's hard to know everything that is out there, let alone how to use it in this changing landscape.

However, I played soccer from ages 3 to 19. I am very confident in my knowledge base for what these athletes need visually, the language they use and how to convey my point to prospective clients. I am the best sports vision optometrist option for a youth soccer academy in my area. Perhaps, that explains what happens next.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, open the double doors and walk in.

## TAKE THE LEAP

Let me rewind to July of 2018 when I first started this journey. I've had a passion for sports vision for a long time, but never took the leap — and, yes, "leap" is the correct word — to pursue it until then. I started Ares Elite Sports Vision and thought, "This will be fun!" The idea of sports vision made sense to me. There's an obvious marriage here. Better vision, better visual system, better processing speeds all lead to a better athlete, right? That'll be *easy* to sell to perspective clients, right?

Anyone who has launched a niche before knows, it's a *lot* more work than that. In fact, it's a lot more work than you could ever anticipate. It's a lot more struggle than most people are comfortable with. It's a lot more self-learning than anticipated. It's a lot more rejection than I care to discuss. However, it's all a necessary part of having a successful niche practice.

I'll continue by identifying a couple sources of that rejection, via the steps I took that only worked a small percentage of the time, and then explain what ultimately worked for my practice, which I think can be applied to most specialties.

## MAKE THE ASK TO CURRENT PATIENTS

"Just incorporate sports-related questions into the exam questions," they say, "discuss what sports they play, inform the patient that this is something all athletes should be doing." From my experience, the success rate of converting these patients into sports vision athletes is about 0.05%. People like the



Reaction light training

idea, but optometrists should understand that most patients have never heard of sports vision. And this can become a chair-time drain if you allow patients to pile up while trying to discuss sports vision with one perspective client. Getting into the weeds was not successful.

The best way around this was simply to state that this is something elite-level athletes are doing, and if you (or your child) are serious about succeeding in sports, you should consider setting up a time

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to discuss it further. I give them my business card and then direct them to my website for additional information.

## EXPAND THE NETWORK

The next thing I tried, in terms of marketing my business, was (before or after work) visiting the local gyms and high schools and talking with the owners or the athletic directors (AD). The owner of the gym wants to know what's in it for him. The AD says, "Well, the budget is really tight, and I just don't think this is something I could fit. I really like the idea, but there's just not money for it right now."

Photo courtesy of Dr. Joe LaPlaca.

After many failed attempts at this route, I began to put myself in their positions. The AD needs to buy uniforms, equipment and cover additional unseen costs throughout the season. What is my value proposition to her? What am I offering to them, really? What does vision training equate too? When I began approaching it that way, my mind shifted

him, a few business cards, shake hands again and discuss a time in the future to possibly meet again.

Happy about the potential, I go home and relax for the night. Four hours later, I get an email from him about another person he knows who might be interested in what I do. The person he has in mind is head coach Martin Rennie of the Indy XI. He has

sent an introductory email, and Coach Rennie is excited to set up a time for us to meet and talk.

Why tell this story and not the Coach Rennie story? Because there is no Coach Rennie story without the soccer academy story. You never know where any interactions will lead. Everybody wants to work with the professional teams. There are 40 steps before the big teams. If you aren't willing to take those steps, do that work and face the insecurity, you're not likely to get there.

This is one of many examples of how athletics are ready for this; they just don't know it. They are hungry for the next edge,

but not sure who can provide it. They are eager to try anything to see what has staying power. I believe we are the staying power. I think we are perfectly positioned to be the experts within this realm, but only if we do the work. We have to make the ask, take the rejection and keep offering our services to ultimately realize success.

Let's do the work to be the experts if we truly want to be the leaders in the evolving niche of sports vision. **DM**



and the questions and answers became more about them than about me. When approaching these individuals, ensure you have the answer to the question of *how* your services provide benefit to *them*, not just the team.

## TRY, TRY AGAIN

Back at the soccer academy, we meet in a conference room. This is pre-COVID-19, so we shake hands and exchange pleasantries. Whew (sigh of relief); he's heard a lot of the big clubs (Arsenal, Manchester United, etc.) have become involved with sports vision programs and are trying to figure out ways to integrate it fully. He is very interested. He knows others — parents and players — who might be interested as well. We discuss a podcast he likes, I give him a handout of information I've created for



**(Above)** Circuit setup for the keepers to work on different visual skills. **F4 racecar driver** working on reaction time, visual processing and eye-hand coordination.