



# Nip and plug

BY MICHELE INGRASSIA

**E**ven in the best of times it would have been a questionable PR pitch. But the E-mail touting a Park Ave. plastic surgeon that landed in editors' mailboxes soon after Sept. 11 stretched the limits of taste.

"Business at strip clubs is booming," a Behrman Communications flack wrote under the post-attack headline, "Boosting One's Spirits."

"From her New York office, Dr. Helen Colen has seen a steady flow of strippers seeking breast augmentation since this disaster," the pitch read. And then the clincher: "I would be more than happy to supply you with statistics I have been gathering from various strip clubs throughout New York, or to arrange for you to talk more with Dr. Colen about this topic."

No one took the bait.

But that hasn't deterred doctors and their PR reps from the hard sell.

And with the FDA's pending approval of Botox for cosmetic use, media-watchers say the scramble for publicity — and a piece of the lucrative \$7.4 billion-a-year plastic surgery market — is likely to get even more frantic.

"I see a desperation in these pitches," says Linda Wells, editor of the beauty magazine *Allure*.

It's not just fallout from Sept. 11. With the economy still sagging — along with baby boomers' brows, breasts and butts — plastic surgeons are hawking themselves more feverishly than ever. "If you're going to die tomorrow, die with great boobs" has become the mantra of the moment.

Pitches come, dozens a day, from doctors eager to comment on Greta Van Susteren's eyelift, doctors pushing facial "tune-ups," even a professional group touting cosmetic surgery for the 65-plus set.

"PLASTIC SURGEON THROWING BOTOX BRUNCHES," screeched a recent pitch for Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Dr. Brent Moelleken, whose Web site calls him "Dr. Brent."

Forget his Yale Medical School credentials; the E-mail from his Newport Beach PR firm didn't even mention them. Instead, it pumped the melon and prosciutto Moelleken serves "so the gals can get their faces touched up while catching up on their gossip."

## NO SUCH THING AS BAD PUBLICITY?

This sort of approach has some wondering whether the spin game has gone too far. Though no one keeps statistics on how many of the nation's 23,000 plastic and cosmetic surgeons have publicity agents, most experts say the number has soared in the last five years. For doctors, it may be a marriage made in celebrity heaven; for patients reading about the doctors in magazines and newspapers, it can render the whole decision-making process more confusing than ever.

First, there's the matter of appearances: Is any pitch a good pitch as long as it gets your doctor's name in print?

"It's become more competitive — there

are more plastic surgeons and more are hiring outside PR people — so they're going to get more brazen," says veteran New York PR executive Dan Klores, who does not publicize any plastic surgeons (but represents this paper). "But there is a fine line between getting the job done for your client and doing it in good taste."

Then there's the question of safety. Though doctors and their press reps caution that choosing a surgeon to suction the fat out of your thighs is as serious as choosing one to perform coronary bypass surgery, many concede that not all patients are scrupulous in their research. The doctors themselves admit that *Cosmo* and *Vogue* are as important to their résumés as their Johns Hopkins and Harvard M.D.s.

"It amazes me that so many people come to my office based on [a magazine reference]," said Dr. Paul Jarrod Frank, a model-handsome Manhattan surgeon who was recently the subject of a splashy Harper's Bazaar spread on plastic-surgery parties. "They don't want to see the diplomas on my walls."

*Allure*'s Wells, who is as apt to run a story about the dangers of a face-lift as one about the potential benefits, says one problem is that not everyone vets the doctors they're quoting, yet many patients see a mention in the press as some sort of endorsement.

"Their names start to become known because their PR agents push them hard or because they go to a lot of cocktail

parties or because they look cute in a Prada dress," said Wells.

Of course, the scramble for publicity isn't new. The U.S. Supreme Court paved the way in 1982, when it overturned the American Medical Association's ban on advertising by doctors. The ruling came just as baby boomers were beginning to push 40, determined to stave off middle age at any cost. And as medical technology reduced the dangers of plastic surgery and cut recuperation time, there was a new sense that having a face-lift, a tummy tuck or any other cosmetic work was no big deal.

## TUCK AND TELL

"Twenty-five years ago, no one who had these procedures, even if their livelihood depended on it, announced it to the press," said University of Illinois professor Sander Gilman, author of "Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery." "That was part of the process of how invisible plastic surgery was. But one of the things that happened in the '80s and '90s was a diminished stigma around alterations of the self, whether you're taking Prozac for anxiety or having an esthetic process."

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, more than 7.4 million Americans had cosmetic work in 2000, everything from chemical peels (the most popular procedure) to upper-arm lifts (just 338 were performed). The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery,

meanwhile, reported last month that 34% of women it surveyed said they would consider cosmetic surgery.

It's a tempting financial pie, and doctors — plastic surgeons and others — have become savvier and more aggressive about using publicity to get a piece of it. In an era of shrinking insurance reimbursements, cosmetic surgery — which can start at \$200 for microdermabrasion and top \$20,000 for a face-lift, nose job and all the trimmings — may be one of the last cash cows in medicine.

That is, until Sept. 11, when anything that smacked of vanity ground to a halt. In the months after, patients who weren't scared off by the attacks were scared off by the recession.

"A lot of my clients — from Park Ave. princesses to Wall St. secretaries — looked at their investment portfolios and their husbands said, 'We're down 35% so you're not doing a face-lift this year,'" said New York plastic-surgery consultant Wendy Lewis.

Though many doctors insist their practices are now doing better than ever — and pitched stories saying as much — not everyone agrees. While volume might be returning, many concede that big-ticket face-lifts and tummy tucks have given way to less-expensive tinkering.

"Business is about 75% or 80% of where it was pre-Sept. 11," said a source at the metropolitan area's largest distributor of medical supplies, whose customers include most of New York's most

prominent cosmetic surgeons. "And it may never get back to where it was two years ago until the market changes."

Which is why the frenzy to get quoted at any cost is still accelerating.

"I think everybody across the board was panicked," said one public relations executive, who asked not to be named. "The pitches became a little bit more creative."

Like linking breast augmentations for strippers to Sept. 11? Even Nancy Behrman, whose company crafted the idea, admitted that it's "a little tasteless" — though she hastened to add that "this was something the doctor was seeing in her office."

**COMMENTARY AS COME-ON**

Other publicity agents take a subtler approach. After Van Susteren's eyelift the PR woman for New York physician Dr. Philip Miller pitched him as an expert on the procedure (though she noted that he hadn't performed the Fox analyst's eyelift). A week later, she was back, this time offering him up as a Botox expert ("What it means to the industry, to patients and to physicians").

Miller, who also teaches at NYU Medical School, signed on with a Connecticut public-relations firm several years ago and sees being quoted as a "win-win" situation: Reporters, he said, get sources to explain complicated medical procedures; doctors get publicity.

But he doesn't deny it can lead to new patients.

"There is always a portion of the population referred to you based on exposure," he said. "I think it also validates you to a certain degree as someone who is trusted as an expert or worth listening to for comments and advice."

With FDA approval of Botox — it involves no surgery and almost any doctor can administer the shots — the din will only get louder. Already, pitches are ringing in from coast to coast.

Dr. Frank, the New York cosmetic surgeon who recently signed on with the hip fashion-and-beauty PR firm Factory Communications, says it's not necessarily a bad thing. Although his appearance in Harper's Bazaar was undeniably glamorous, he says it exaggerated his practice. Botox parties are the exception, not the rule.

Besides, while money can't buy the sort of cachet associated with a glossy magazine spread, Frank says it's the doctor's responsibility to bring patients back to reality.

"If they like seeing [your] picture in a magazine, it's fine as long as you know your priority is the medicine," he says. "The articles make it look easy, but people are coming in and I'm injecting them with things that have a risk, and I have to take it seriously. As long as I portray that to patients, the publicity doesn't make a difference."



**PUMP IT UP:** One flack claimed strippers were going for Pamela Anderson look after the Sept. 11 attacks.