



SPRING 2017
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OPTI-POCALYPSE

CAN YOU MANAGE THE POST-MERGER FALLOUT?

WAR OF THE WORDS

WHAT MAKES YOU USE A PRODUCT

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

HOW'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR LAB

SURVIVING THE OPTI-POCALYPSE

ARE YOU UP TO THE CHALLENGE TO MAKE IT

ALSO INSIDE: FEA 'True' Independent | Patient Loyalty | Your Insurance Has Been Terminated | The E Files & much more!

LETTER from the

EDITOR

If you've followed us up to this point, then you've probably noticed a distinct lack of frames in this magazine. I think that served a purpose once, but now it's time for a change. No, we aren't merging with anyone. There's not going to be an OPTluxillor. We do, however, want to stop discriminating against frame companies, and instead support all of the independents in this industry. We want to help out people that want to make a great product, and aren't out to compete with you and steal your customers. We want OPT to be a great resource for all independents in this industry. The fact that this might upset some of the Big Opticals is an unfortunate, but awesome, side effect.

That's part of the reason we've dedicated this issue to a sort of 'deprogramming guide'. We want to give you that information that you need to go from using big-brand products to being able to differentiate yourself with products that aren't out to compete against you. This isn't about telling you to use one brand or another, but is really to illustrate that there ARE other options out there, and that you, as a business, need to keep that in mind. You aren't going to outprice Big Optical - they have way too much money for you to be able to do that. You need to be better. You need to be different. If your patients just want a quick exam, and the cheapest possible pair of glasses, you aren't going to win. You need to elevate the whole experience and give them something they aren't going to get from a big box store or online - personal service.

There are going to be biases and slants to all of the stories and articles that are in this magazine - we want to make that clear. Everyone has an agenda - even us. That much should be obvious to you. So if there's anything you read in here that makes you think it's a little one-sided, well, it probably is. But you should use that to help you come to your own opinions. Our overarching message is that you need to decide for yourself - and you only do that by trying things out, not by doing what a salesman tells you to do.

All of that being said, we are also hoping that you enjoy the satire and parody that we put into this magazine. We don't want to just focus on dry, boring business aspects - we want to make it fun. Sure, there's plenty of made up stuff in here, but a lot of it has kernels of truth and examples that you can use in the real world. We know that our job is done when people actually look forward to getting the next issue, and want to read it. If we've managed to elevate ourselves above the 'flip through and throw out' status of most magazines, then we're happy. And we hope you are, too.

- Bill Heffner, IV
Editor OPT Magazine

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STAGES OF POST-MERGER GRIEF

DENIAL

There's no way this is really going to happen. The government will never allow it. It's just talk, nothing is really going to change.

ANGER

What do you mean this Big Optical insurance plan only covers Big Optical frames and lenses? I want to be able to sell what I want! You're increasing my minimum frame buy-in by HOW MUCH!?

BARGAINING

Oh, you can buy these online for \$60, even though my cost is \$55? I don't think I can't sell them to you at that... wait... no... don't go. We can make something work.

DEPRESSION

I don't sell anything unique. Everything I have people can get somewhere else cheaper. What am I going to do? I've been doing everything the way I've always done it - and it's not working!

ACCEPTANCE

The only way I'm going to succeed is by being different. Giving my customers products they can't get everywhere, and a new level of customer service. I am the one in charge, and it's time for a change.

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FEA INDUSTRIES, INC.
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LUXILOR

THE 'HOT' NEW FACE OF FRAMES!

THE ONLY COST
IS YOUR SOUL

The Committee for Regulating Ads in Publications (C.R.A.P.) 'requires us' to provide a frame-ad in each issue. They were however, not specific on what type of frame needed to be used.

OPT is proud to be 99% Big Optical-free!

SURVIVING THE OPTI-POCALYPSE

- Bill Heffner, IV

War. War never changes. Seemingly stuck in an unending battle. People that were once friends have changed sides, and are now working for the 'other side'. Brother against brother, with the larger side having an inescapable grasp around the throat of the opposition.

YOU'RE THE OPPOSITION, BY THE WAY. AT LEAST, WE HOPE YOU ARE.

With all of the mergers going on, there's a lot of uncertainty in the industry. There's been a lot of talk about what the future is going to be like, and if there's going to be a place for independent eye care professionals in it. Now, we're not just having competition from online, but from the very companies that profess to 'support your business'.

The problem that a lot of independents face now is that they feel like they are stuck supporting a cause (or company Big Optical, in this case), and they can't break free. Whether it's frames, lenses, or something else, many people feel like they aren't really able to change. Part of this, of course, is due to massive marketing efforts over the years. Of course they want you to think that you're powerless to change - they don't want you to. They want you to think their products are the only ones you can sell, because if you started to question that fact, then you might start being dangerous.

And that's not allowed.

MAN OR MACHINE

When you can't even tell who your opposition is, that makes it really, really hard to win. Whether we're talking about cyborgs or companies, if they have a pleasant face, it's easy to forget about the cold machine that lies at the heart of it. In our industry, you've probably read plenty of stories about smaller companies being acquired by larger ones. I'm sure, however, that you don't always see (or remember) every acquisition. That makes it really hard to remember who belongs to who.

Let's take a look at all of the buzz that happened when the Essilor/Luxottica merger was announced. I saw all kinds of people looking for 'other options', whether it was for frame lines, lenses, or whatever else. Their rationale being, usually, that they would rather support other companies besides those two. The disturbing thing that I noticed, however, was that many of the 'alternative' companies that were being suggested were also owned by one of those two mega-companies. When someone was asking for other options for lenses, for example, one of the constant suggestions was "use Shamir". Even though it's been six or seven years since Essilor bought half of Shamir. Of course, they don't go out of their way to announce that fact. They want you to think of them as separate companies, and there's nothing wrong with that. When you want to know who benefits from your purchasing dollars, however, it's an important fact that you need to have in order to make your decisions.

SUPPLY LINES

Just like a military operation, your business thrives on your supply lines. If you can't get the product you need, then you are stuck. You can make all the sales in the world, but if you can't deliver in the end, then those patients are not only going to walk, they aren't going to come back. This means you need multiple options - since I'm sure you've heard the concept of "not putting all your eggs in one basket". This applies to your vendors, especially. Having multiple sources for all of your products only makes sense. I'm sure the last thing that you want to do after a sale is call the patient back and say that "Sorry, your lenses are on backorder for three weeks", or "The color in that frame you picked out won't be in stock for a month". The point here is that you need to make sure you have more ways of getting a product than just from one vendor, since you have no control over what they do. What if they decide to change the terms of your business arrangement? Then what do you do?

THE WAR OF THE WORDS

Communication is perhaps the most potent weapon that we have in today's world. Being able to spread a message to large amounts of people is what makes it easy for larger companies to control the narrative of the industry. They are large enough to dump massive amounts of cash into their advertising campaigns - whether it's email, sales reps, television, radio, or whatever else. If you keep seeing their messages everywhere, it works its way into your brain. It becomes more familiar to you, even if you've never even used their product. This makes you more susceptible to their messages, since you're more at ease with it. When you compare this to something from a smaller independent, the independent can be at a large disadvantage.

FRATERNIZING WITH THE ENEMY

Maybe you think a lot of this is over-reacting. Maybe you've done well so far. Maybe you've sold a bunch of the Big Optical frames and lenses, and done quite well with it. Don't get me wrong - I'm not saying nobody's ever been successful with it. The message here is that times are changing, and you need to look at the unpredictability of the future, not the successes of the past. If you pause for a moment - if you look at five years ago, how many people came in and either googled or searched Amazon for the frames on your board? Now, how many did that last week? Or how many patients decided to buy online? As we see, the model for eyewear sales is changing - are you sure you're going to be on the winning side in another few years? You need to seriously evaluate what the future trends in the industry are going to be, and what use Big Optical is going to have for you once they don't need you any more to develop their own retail channels, because your customers can get the same brands that you sell cheaper online, or at the big box store down the road.

As we've all seen over the past few months, there's a lot of change going on in the industry, and we aren't traditionally very good at accepting it. The model that we've had hasn't really changed much for hundreds of years - eyewear was eyewear. With the rapid expansion of technology in all aspects of the optical world, however, the recent years have seen an unprecedented shift in the core dynamics of eye care and eyeglasses. We are shifting from more of a commodity goods-based model business to that of a service industry. The experience that you give to your patients is why they are going to come back. No longer do you just refract them and they leave. Or just "fill their prescription" for eyewear. You need to step up and enhance the entire patient experience - as that's not something they are going to get from an online or big box shop. We're at the verge of the end of one way of life, and the beginning of an entirely new way of looking at eyecare. ⚙️

IT'S THE END OF THE OPTICAL WORLD, AND I FEEL FINE.

- R. Neville

Lens coatings have become as much of a concern as the lenses themselves, these days. There's plenty of choices when it comes down to it, and you really want to know what it is that you're buying, and what kind of performance you can expect from it. This is where it does make sense that the 'brand name' coatings are popular. They give you a better idea of what you're going to be able to expect from the way the product behaves when it's out there in the real world. One thing that this mentality leads to, however, is confusing consistency with quality.

QUALITY vs CONSISTENCY

Consistency can be a great thing, but you need to know what your limits are when you're considering how it applies in any given circumstance. For example, if you know that your brand-name coating is definitely going to craze when you leave sunglasses on the dash of your car - well, that's consistent. You don't want them to do that, of course, so maybe in that instance having consistency isn't a good thing. It lets you manage the failure when it happens, of course. I told you not to put them on the dash of the car! But you don't really want to be in that situation in the first place. You want the lenses to work and not have a problem. No matter what kind of abuse they get subjected to, you really would prefer the coating doesn't get scratched, crack, craze, or do anything.

You can usually get a pretty consistent meal from whatever McDonalds or other fast food chain you go to. No matter where you get it from, you're getting the same thing. Which is again, both good and bad. You know what you're going to get (more or less), but you also know where the quality of it is going to be. It's not like you're going to order your usual *McHeartAttack* at a different restaurant and they're going to suddenly use real meat instead of compressed cardboard and newspaper. No - ingredients and process remain the same, so that way consistency and 'brand integrity' is maintained. As with AR coatings - your branded products need that same consistency from lab to lab, and usually a lower standard of quality is easier to maintain across multiple locations. If you look at the 'top tier' of branded products from some manufacturers, for example, you can see this. Most labs are only allowed to produce the 'lower tiers' in-house, and have to outsource the highest-quality stuff to a central location to get produced. That's an indication that the process may be a

little too involved and costly for your every-day lab to manage. If it's quality that you're really looking for, then it makes sense to find labs that can do a top-tier coating themselves, since that can be an indication that they're committed to producing the best quality they can, and not just the middle-of-the-road options.

NOT CREATED EQUAL

One problem is that there is often a very broad brush when it comes to AR coatings. We have maybe three major brands, and then everything else that's not a 'name brand' gets lumped together into one category. Usually with some negativity attached to it. This is very common for 'house brand' AR coatings. For some reason, trying the house brand of a lab once, ten years ago, is enough for someone to classify "all house brand ARs ever are terrible". This just seems to make very little sense to me. Obviously, you can get bad stuff. But that doesn't mean that all places produce the same kind of product. Just because it doesn't have a fancy name attached to it doesn't mean that it's junk.

A SOLID BASE

Hard coating plays a very large part in the AR process, whether or not you knew that. That's the 'bedrock' of the AR coating, and it makes a huge difference on how any coatings that are applied to it behave. There are really two types of hard coat processes - a 'spin coat' or a 'dip coat'. Generally, the spin is quicker, but can be more prone to problems during the life of the lens. The dip coat process takes longer, but can yield much better long-term performance for lenses. Knowing what kind of processes your coating uses can help give you an idea of how it might perform in the future. The dip coating tends to be a more uniform thickness, which helps it be more resistant to crazing. This happens because heat (like being left on the dash) can cause the hard coat to expand. If the coating has larger variances in thickness, it expands unevenly. This makes the AR coating on top of the hard coat more likely to crack. When the hard coat layer is even, the coating will expand at a more uniform rate, which reduces the likelihood that the AR coating on top will have a problem. A dip coating also tends to be more scratch-resistant, as the coatings using in a spin coat are normally cured using a U.V. light source, while the coatings used for a dip coater are usually baked in an oven. This allows them to use different hard coating chemicals with different properties and performance characteristics. This is something that you should be aware of - all 'hard coating' and 'AR coating' are not the same. It's just like saying that one pair of 'glasses' or 'frames' is the same. There's a lot more that goes into it, and you are better served by knowing the differences so you don't get an inferior product.

PROCESS IS KING

The process that's used in applying AR coating can vary wildly depending on where you get it from. This is what matters. The sticker on the bag doesn't mean anything - it comes down to how well the lab applying the coating knows what they are doing, and how well their process is set up. If they cut corners, you're going to have a bad time, no matter what kind of equipment they have.

If we look at dip-coating, for example, the lab is going to need a process for making sure the coating sticks to the front as well as the back of the lens (since it's getting completely dipped in coating). That means a lot of know-how has to go into making sure every lens from every manufacturer works, because all of THEIR hard coats are different. This has to be done, otherwise there's a risk of coating failure, which nobody wants.

Even cleaning can be a problem. AR coating basically deposits very thin layers of materials on the front of the lens. Even a tiny speck of dirt on the lens, and it gets trapped there forever. Like a mosquito trapped in amber, except in this case it can't be used to create new dinosaur populations. It just pisses you off because it looks like a pit in the lens.

If you have a lab that has a 'big brand' coating as well as their own 'house brand', you can usually tell the quality of the house brand really isn't any worse than the big name brand. That's because it's not about the AR coating itself - it's about having the mentality to correctly process the coatings and not have problems. Often, big brand names will help get a lab 'up to speed' or to a minimum level of standard. Once they get the process down, the actual brand of the coating they sell becomes less relevant, as they have all the building blocks of successful coating in place.

The take-away from this is that coatings are going to be different from every single lab. The only way you're going to know what you are going to get is to try some out. You shouldn't just assume that they are going to have a bad product just because you haven't heard the name. Or because maybe you didn't like it five or ten years ago. At the rate processing technology is changing, a lot can change in a short period of time, especially when it comes to improving quality and process control. If you're thinking about trying a new product - then do that. Do your homework on what a lab can offer you. Get an idea of what kind of equipment they have, and how good they are at doing things. If you educate yourself about how coatings work, you can make sure you're giving your patients the best quality products. You don't need to jump in blindly, but go ahead and take a lens coating from an independent lab and put it up against a brand name coating. See how they work for you and make your own decisions. 

SURVIVAL GUIDE FRAMES

- Charlie Heston

If you're currently in a situation where you carry a large number of big-brand frames, what can you do to get yourself out of there? Obviously, you don't want to just swap to any frame line - you need to research what your options are. When doing that research, however, what kind of things do you need to be concerned about? You want to make sure you've asked the right questions and taken everything into consideration before you drop one line in favor of another. The last thing you want to do is switch from one to the other and find out that your new one does a lot of the things you didn't like about the old one.

ONLINE

One of the major problems that a lot of people can experience when they carry big brand frames is how popular they are. I say that's a problem because, being so popular, that means a LOT of places sell them. Specifically online markets like Amazon, which can make it almost impossible for you to compete against them on price. It doesn't exactly seem like it's in your best interest to have someone standing directly in front of you, seeing if they can get a 'better deal' online. Then they proceed to ask you why you're selling this frame for \$200, when they can get it for \$60 off of Amazon. That which is below your wholesale cost, of course. How is a brand actively helping you, at that point? It seems more like it is actively damaging your relationship with your customer. It makes them think you're ripping them off.

That being said, just because a frame is available online doesn't mean that the frame manufacturer is evil and out to steal your business. There's some other things that go into it. Firstly, they may sell them on their own website for the same price you're selling them in store. In that type of a situation, they're not really doing anything that's going to get a customer to buy from them instead of you - if they customer is going to pay the same price either way, there's really no negative for you. Similarly, if you see their product being sold online below your costs, you have to see where it's being sold. Especially for smaller independent frame companies, it can be necessary for them to offer their product for sale online, simply because it's a lot more cost effective for them to do that as compared to the cost of hiring a nationwide coverage of sales reps to place the product in stores.

Similarly, if you see their product being sold online below your costs, you have to see where it's being sold. If you see frames going cheaply on a site like Ebay or other places with a "marketplace" (available on sites like Amazon, Walmart, and others), it may not even be the frame manufacturer selling them. The frames there could easily be someone listing because they got ahold of some frames and wanted to make a quick few bucks. They could easily also be discontinued, overstock, or even stolen frames here and there. With that in mind, you need to take a good look at where the sources of online competition are coming, and make sure the frame manufacturer is the one that's undercutting you.

With all that being said, there are certainly options available to you if you prefer to have an "internet-free" eyewear company. Many of these types of frame companies will offer private label options, or simply choose not to make their product available to chain stores or online sellers. This could be something else you look for, in order to further differentiate your offerings from the competition.

DO YOU HAVE...

Often times if people ask for a brand, they don't actually know what the frames really look like, or that there are multiple styles. There's a lot of homework that you usually need to do in order figure out which frame they actually want - if they even know. In this context, though, how much do they care about "the name" and how much do



they care about “the look”. How often are you likely to lose a sale because you don’t have the specific name, as long as you can tell them, “I’m sorry, we don’t carry Brand X, but we have this line that has similar styles.” They’re already there, so they will most likely at least have a look. You’re probably not going to end up losing much if they walk, since if they’re so dedicated to getting a specific brand name and only that brand name, they’re going to be the type to find out where they can get it cheaper anyway.

Part of this is being able to tell a customer “No”, which can be difficult. If you can explain why, however, it helps to get the point across to them that there’s a good reason you don’t carry a specific brand. Saying that “I’m sorry, we don’t carry that” as compared to, “I’m sorry, we don’t carry brands that are easily available online. Instead, we have this line which allows our customers to be unique, and not with a style easily found on any website.”

MADE IN AMERICA

It’s becoming more and more popular to look for frames that are “Made in America”. While not common, there are certainly several options that are available to the independent eye care professional. This type of offering makes it easier for you to offer a product at a higher price point, and to have a good reason for it. That’s one thing you need to keep in mind with this type of frame - it’s going to cost more. You aren’t going to be getting a sub-\$10-wholesale price of frames that are made in America. The people putting the frames together were paid a much higher wage than those in the countries that typically make frames, so you need to make sure that your customer knows what they are getting. This, of course, is a great addition to your frame selection, as you can use it as a unique selling point. Much of this is going to depend on your demographics, of course.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

In order to get some perspective on the frame market (and the overall market in general), I received some input from Maarten Weidema. Maarten specializes in eyewear and store design, and also runs a facebook group called “The Eyewear Forum”. This is a group of about 11,000 opticians from around the world, and focuses on independent eyewear design and store interiors. I felt his perspective would be useful here, as it gives us insight from someone outside of the US market.

“The time to differentiate is of the essence! The recent mergers should have told you that much by now.”

“The time has come to ask yourself: why it is that people visit your store, and not the chain store around the corner? Sure, you are a locally owned store. You support your community. You employ locals and pay your taxes - but guess what? So does that store around the corner!”

You offer Raybans, with a nice pair of lenses - but so does that store around the corner, only theirs is a lower price. So why should I buy my frames at your store? Okay, maybe you serve a better coffee. That’s nice, but I didn’t come here for coffee! If I wanted some coffee, I would go to Starbucks and help 10K refugees get employed. You’ve got better service? Yeah, when you are open, but that store around the corner has got a 24/7 hotline to call. You are a great guy who coaches the football team, yeah, I am sure the guy at that store around the corner keeps little boys locked up in his basement.

You can differentiate your store with a great cup of coffee, a friendly chat and the best eyecare your customer can find. But do you really think these big box guys can’t do the same? That they will serve crappy coffee forever and mess up people’s RX for ever? No!! They are smart, they’ve got marketing budgets that can buy out your countries debt AND pay for a wall on both borders. They didn’t evolve from creating handmade frames out of their daddy’s garage into international conglomerates because they are stupid.

Be that local hero. Serve them that great coffee, ask about their kids, provide the best eyecare and service. Create the best brand, product and quality awareness. Do that, sure. But the most visible way to differentiate is to offer them something that the other guy doesn’t have. Not coffee. Not great service. The big box guys will beat you at that in the end - trust me they will! You need to be able to offer them something that’s unique. What I’m referring to is the very first thing that The Eyewear Forum was founded on - independent eyewear! Find those pearls in this big ocean that we call “the optical arena”, because an arena it is! Sure, there are indie start ups with crappy quality, companies with a great line but a poor back office, but find those awesome ones that work! The ones that provide you with that missing link to complete your collection. It isn’t just about adding that one brand. You can add to your assortment so it will all be good. You have to create a harmonic selection that can both extend your current lines or make them more unique.

The best way to do this is to look for yourself, and not wait for someone to come find you. Go visit at Vision Expo, Mido and Silmo! See the HOT! zone and the Village! But don’t forget the smaller niche shows that are more local. Sometimes, the pearl is just around the corner!”

SHO THEM WHO’S BOSS

One other option is to do it yourself - create your own brand. Private labeling is not only an opportunity to carry your own collections, but something much, much better. A chance to fight the online epidemic and Big Optical takeover. You get to wait - calmly - as your customer searches in vain to undercut your prices and waste your precious time. When they realize they can’t find your product elsewhere, you can proceed with the sale and get compensated for your expertise and overhead.

Private labeling is becoming available to the little guy by innovators like SHO Eyeworks. Their philosophy is to support the Independent by offering customized products with high margins, low minimums and quick turnaround times. There is a frame for every face in the collections making it easy to offer a range of styles and price points. The product is billable through all major insurance carriers and is published at a higher price than what you pay. SHO enables you to build your brand with high quality product and 2 year warranties, new styles quarterly, custom POP, marketing tools and Branding Consultants. It’s not about stamping your name on a frame and leaving you to it. They want to support your sales and marketing cycle and help make you a more well-rounded practice. This is a great example of how a smaller, independent company has an interest in increasing your business. By offering branding support your sales increase which then increases their sales, but there is no ulterior motive to steal your customers like certain Big Optical companies. If having your own line of frames sounds appealing to you it’s worth a conversation with one of SHO’s Branding Consultants.

Visit www.sho-eyeworks.com to learn more or email sales@sho-eyeworks.com

As you can see, there’s a lot of ‘little things’ that go into frame lines, even when you don’t consider what the frames themselves look like. Keep in mind, that many of the above issues didn’t touch on the quality of the frames, simply the method of sales and competition. When it comes down to it, only you are going to know what kind of frames will sell in your area. The thing that you need to do is keep an eye out for what your options are - and that can often involve seeing new designs and meeting new companies first hand. Only when you’ve been able to connect with other independents and gotten a broader view of what’s available can you feel comfortable in the frames that you offer to your patients.

SURVIVAL GUIDE LENSES

- Mad Max

Let's assume that you agree that you want to ditch the "Big Optical" lens brands and give something else a try. There's a lot of things to consider since, at the end of the day, you don't want to cause yourself more headaches than you solve. Your primary goal is to keep your business running smoothly, which means you need to be careful when it comes to switching products.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

When it comes to lenses, name brand is beginning to mean less and less when it comes to a vast distinction in quality. Years ago, before free-form, it meant a lot more. At that point, if you wanted a progressive lens, you needed to be able to mold one yourself. This required a large investment for the mold-making and casting equipment to create a given progressive lens. You have to keep in mind, making a new lens design was extremely costly. Even if you had five base curves available, you also needed production for the add powers. If you went from +0.50 to +3.50, that's 65 different molds for each material. Then you have to build inventory, deal with the various production of each material - then you have the colors! Whether they are photochromic, polarized, or whatever else. As you can see, before free-form came along, there was a lot of investment that went into making a progressive lens.

With full back-side free-form, however, things are a little different. The raw materials are typically just a spherical lens blank. The same piece of plastic (or whatever material) can be used for a variety of different brand name lenses. They are also processed on the same machinery. So, the only thing that differentiates lenses now is the math involved in creating the design that goes on the back. To that end - how much better is the math of a name brand lens going to be when you compare to all the other options on the market? That idea is at the heart of this discussion, as there's really only so much you can do on the backside of a lens, since every designer is bound by the laws of physics. The entire point here is that, with advanc-

es in technology, the gap between 'high end' and 'low end' is much narrower. It's becoming more important to be able to pick the correct 'design' for the visual task at hand, as opposed to the specific brand name. Since lens designers are able to easily customize and create new progressives, it should be much easier for you to find affordable designs that work well for you and your patients.

'HOUSE' BRANDS

Everyone has heard of 'house' brands for free-form at this point. The major thing to remember is that not all of these brands are created equally, and not all of them are designed to address the same audience. Too often, this is used as code for "cheap" or "inexpensive", which makes it seem like they may not work as well.

WHAT'S YOUR SOURCE

As I mentioned before - not all house brands are created equally. There can be a lot going on 'behind the scenes' that means your experience with the 'house brand' from one lab could be terrible, while the lenses from another lab could be superb. I've too often read that people "tried a house brand lens once a few years ago, and it was terrible, so I only use brand name products now." This kind of viewpoint I really don't get. I certainly understand that a bad experience can occur, but then writing off all other products from all other sources completely? I don't get it. That's a lot like

saying "I tried a dish at that new family-owned restaurant down the street, and it was terrible. I'm only ever eating at McDonald's from now on." Just because one place served you something that was bad, doesn't mean that there aren't plenty of great (independent) places to go.

Another thing to consider is whether your lab has a 'house brand' that's a supplement to a myriad of name brand products that they offer. If your lab has a whole host of high-end brand names that they offer - is it in their best interest for you to be purchasing their house brand, or do they have some incentive to get you to use the name brand lenses they sell? If you have a lab where it seems like their 'house brand' has more problems, or takes longer, then maybe there's an intentional reason for that? This is just something you need to consider when you're selecting a lab - make sure that they have your best interests at heart. They may have quotas or 'goals' of selling high-end lenses, and you want to make sure that you're getting what's best for you and your patient, not for them.

TARGET AUDIENCE

When you're considering the debate between the name brand and house brand, you also have to consider who you're selling to, and whether or not they care what brand you have.

Realistically, do your patients know (or care) what lens brand they are wearing? If they know, is it because they wanted that brand, or because you (or whoever they got them from) told them that was what they were getting? In general, the idea of a 'brand name' lens is more for you (the person selling it) than the end-user (the patient). Generally, as long as the patient can see out if it and not have problems, it's a success. They don't care what it's called. What you have to ascertain is whether or not you care about the brand name, in a professional sense.

By 'professional sense', I mean this: Does the brand name help you make more sales? Are you pushing the brand name to the consumer? Do you use branded handouts or brochures to help explain your lens offerings to patients? If so, you can check the section below on House Brands: Marketing.

Alternatively, do you just use your own materials to sell/brand the lenses that you sell? If so, you're already a step up on a lot of people. This has its own pros and cons, as it requires more work on your part, but can payoff more later. For more information on this, check out House Brands: D.I.Y. on the next page. ▶▶▶

HOUSE BRANDS: MARKETING

Part of the added benefit to using a branded lens is having some marketing materials to go with it. You may not want to do it yourself, so you want to use a lens that has at least some basic support behind it. This is where some house brands can do quite well. Since you know the first thing your patient is going to do is google the product name, you want to make sure they find something to support the fact that you're selling them a quality product. Since it's so easy for them to do their research in an instant, you need to make sure that whatever you're selling has something to back it up.

Not all house brands offer this as an option, so it's important to see what a particular lab offers. Many house brands leave this up to the bigger brands, and instead relegate their 'house brand' to being a budget offering. The reason this happened is that the house brands are usually creations of optical labs. They don't necessarily have the marketing and design departments (and budgets) that Big Optical does to support something. So that's why you'll often find little to no supporting materials for these products.

One other major benefit to having a 'house brand' is that they aren't typically sold against you online. I'm sure if you type in now "Buy (your Big Brand) lenses online", you're going to come back

with a number of hits. And your patients will get the same results.

When you go for the house brand lens, you're not going to have this problem, so makes it much more difficult for you to get 'comparison-shopped' or forced into fights about 'price matching'.

HOUSE BRANDS: D.I.Y.

If you aren't using any of the branded handouts or other materials that go along with 'big brand' lenses, then you're already heading in the right direction for lens independence. This is the area in which you are taking control of all of the information that you are handing to your patient, as opposed to using pre-made handouts or talking points. This can be a lot of initial effort, but can have a few areas of benefit.

Some of the setup here can be finding a lab that will allow you to do customized engravings on your lenses. This refers to the tiny 'micro engravings' found on progressive lenses. If your lab is able to set this up for you, it gives you another level of personalization to the product, as it becomes more difficult for people to comparison shop. They aren't going to be able to find your lens anywhere else, so you don't have to worry about them "finding it cheaper online" or at a competitor down the road.

This can be especially useful if you expand the scope of the D.I.Y. beyond a single store. This is a great option for not only multi-location practices, but also can be a tool for independents in a specific area to band together, so they can offer a product that isn't available at local big box stores. 

SURVIVAL TIPS

Here are some resources to help get you started on your road to claiming your lens independence. There are obviously going to be a number of other choices, but here's a few to help get you started.

For a supported "Brand Lens" at a reasonable price:

Eagle™ Lenses
www.eaglelenses.com

Independent Lab:

FEA Industries
www.feaind.com
800.327.2002 sales@feaind.com

Lens Branding Solutions:

D.I.Y. Lenses & Marketing Materials
FEA Industries & OPT MediaGroup
www.optMagazine.com/services



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EAGLE™ Lenses let you customize
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EAGLE DRIVER™

The EAGLE™ Driver is specially designed to be the best possible lens to use when driving a car. The clear, expanded far viewing area allows the patient to see their side mirrors clearly without the need to move their head. The enhanced intermediate zone ensures a clear view of the dashboard, as well as any other electronic devices, such as a GPS. The modest near zone is intended to accomplish tasks such as reading a map or programming a GPS.

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THE E FILES

THE INDEPENDENTS ARE OUT THERE

- Chris Carter

“Backorder? What do you mean backorder?” Molder shouted into the phone, somewhat exasperated, “Fine, just switch it to that. I need this in my hands tomorrow.” He hung up the phone, missing the days when he could at least get the satisfaction of slamming down the receiver. “Problem?” Skulli asked, as she finished piling up job trays.”

“That was our lab. They said that they don’t have our usual progressive lens in stock, and it’s on backorder for two weeks. So if we want the job tomorrow, we have to use their BigOptiLux lens. Or we wait.” He sighed, looking for the job tray in question to make a note in it. “But Molder, aren’t those twice as expensive?” Molder snorted, “Closer to three times, actually, but what are we going to do about it? That’s what they told me. What, do you think this is some kind of conspiracy to get us to use their BigOptiLux lenses?” He had a small chuckle, then he stopped abruptly. The pair looked at each other, coming to some kind of mutual enlightenment. “Molder, no...” Skulli began, knowing where this was going. “Oh, yes, that’s exactly it Skulli. They just want us to think the lenses are on backorder. But I’m sure the lenses are out there!” Skulli shook her head. “You need proof of something like this, you know. And, why would they do something like that?” Molder seemed excited. Way too excited, actually. It had been a slow day. This was more entertaining than re-arranging frame boards, at least. “Go back and check the orders for the past few months. We mark when we have to switch lenses, so let’s see if there’s any kind of pattern.”

Some time passes. Molder spends it talking with customers, handling incoming orders, and the general day-to-day. He doesn’t really do much to help the investigation, but at least the customers seem to like him. Skulli spends countless hours researching old invoices, dissecting billing statements, and reviewing order changes. After a number of hours, she is finally able to get a few clues about their order history.

“Well, I think you might be onto something, Molder.” Skulli told him while she applied a band-aid to one of her multiple paper cuts. It seems like over the past two years, we’ve had a 45% increase in the number of backorders on lenses. Molder thought this over, “Anything more than that? It could just mean we’re ordering unusual stuff.” Skulli reached into a manila folder and produced a very detailed-looking spreadsheet. Molder should have known there was going to be more. “If you look here,” Skulli began, “it starts with a few odd things here and there. High index polarized. A few photochromics...” she flipped the page, “But then about ten months ago, it got even worse. Core product is being ‘backordered’. Plastic? Clear polycarbonate? On Backorder? Come on.” She pointed to a column at the end of the sheet, “And here, it’s never their BigOptiLux lenses that are backordered. It’s always something else. And then we get switched into that. If that’s not a pattern, I don’t know what is.”

Molder sat back in a chair, interlacing his fingers behind his head, “Skulli, do you know what this could mean? It means that Big Optical has infiltrated our independent lab. They just have this fake cover story about being ‘independent’ so people will fall for it. But now we know the truth - but how long has this been going on? We need to know more. We need to know if they’ve been compromised, and how badly. Our business relies on them too heavily for us not to know what their interests are.” Skulli sighed. She knew this meant she had more work to do. Work that, strictly speaking, wasn’t even part of her job or something that she should even be doing.

Skulli was back to work, trying to figure out if something happened a few years ago that would help explain where the changes came from. It seemed odd for it to come out of nowhere - and surely, if there was something major that happened - they should know about it. Shouldn’t they? While she diligently sifted through information, Molder was dealing with a very difficult customer. Apparently this one wouldn’t be told ‘no’, and didn’t understand that you weren’t allowed to smoke in the office. After some convincing, Molder was able to lead the smoking man outside.

It wasn’t really easy to find too much information, unfortunately. Phone calls yielded very little - mostly vague non-answers and voicemails that don’t get returned. Turning to social media, however, Skulli was able to get some more direct answers from her peers. After asking about the lab in question, she got a slew of responses. Some of them seemed to be in the same boat - seeing strange patterns, but not really sure what was going on, or why it was happening. Then came the big break. Someone posted a link to an old snippet from a trade magazine. Buried at the bottom was a small few sentences that confirmed their worst fears. “Molder. Get over here. Now.” She printed out the article and handed it to him.

“Molder... it’s... it’s worse than we feared,” Skulli said, “I just found this press release. It was buried beneath a whole bunch of other news stories... the lab... they were acquired by Big Optical.” He paused, holding his phone in a trembling hand, “I knew it!” Molder exclaimed, a satisfied smile forming on his lips “They were probably switching these products over to make Big Optical happy so that they’d have a nice, fat buy-out. Well if they were just purchased, then... “ Skulli cut him off. “No, Molder... this press release... it’s dated FIVE years ago.” Molder paused, his smile fading, “But, Skulli, then that means...” he paused, trying to re-arrange the truth of the situation in his brain, “...they’ve been Big Optical this whole time.”



Happily Ever After?

Building a lasting relationship with your lab.

Everything you wanted to know about your lab, but were afraid to ask.

- Robert Minardi

As optical professionals, it's critical to have a great relationship with our patients. A relationship based on understanding and caring. Inter-office relationships are also crucial in providing the best possible care through cooperation and unity.

But let's talk about a relationship that may not get as much attention: the relationship with your lab. Are your dealings with your lab a model of collaboration and teamwork? Or not so much? Let's make an admission right now: sometimes there's more push/pull than there should be. Sometimes we play the blame game a little too often. In the end, it's important to realize you both have the exact same goal: patient satisfaction. Your lab, regardless of location or relation, is an extension of you and vice versa. Neither can exist without the other.

Congratulations?

So why the rub?

Many times, it comes down to the needs and wants of the patient not aligning with your lab's capabilities and constraints. When your lab can't make the glasses, they need to be outsourced. This can cause delays. Delays lead to unhappy patients, which in turn leads to unhappy opticians calling the lab. How do we prevent this 'trouble in paradise'?

To help you understand what you need to know, I've enlisted the help of Chris Ealick. Chris has been in the eyecare business for around 15 years. He got his start as a lab tech at a very well-known one-hour processing chain and has since moved into the position of Production Manager for the EyeCare Partners lab in Missouri. His duties include monitoring production, implementing training and serving as a liaison to the retail offices. His lab services about 250 offices across 10 states and, with an average output of around 1000 jobs per day, Chris has seen just about every situation imaginable. Since he's worked in a retail office and a lab, it makes him the perfect candidate for this discussion. On a side

note, Chris has been somewhat of a mentor to me. I had the pleasure of working for him for years and his intuition for solving optician, patient and lab issues is impressive.

I recently sat down with Chris and asked him, "What are the main factors that delay a pair of glasses and cause uneasy relations between a lab and office?" He explained it like this, "You have to know your lab's capabilities. Any given lab can't make every possible pair of glasses due to various limitations. Once you understand what they can and can't do, you'll start to have a truly collaborative relationship".

Chris has devised a list of questions (next page) you should ask your lab to help get you started. If you know the answers to these questions, you'll be able to be on the same page as your lab and be better equipped to inform your patients of any possible delays. (continued...)



Rx limitations of the equipment, frame and lens designs

What are the highest prescriptions (plus or minus) the lab can produce?

Sometimes a lab's equipment has limits on the curves it can cut into a lens. If lenses are outside of this range, they may need to be outsourced, adding days onto the process.

What Rx limitations are there on the freeform designs you make?

Rx power and add powers are limited to certain ranges on many freeform designs. While the manufacturer's specs are great, the lab may have further limitations based on past experience.

What Lens/Frame combinations cause issues, or are just not possible?

Such as:

What is the highest power lens (plus or minus) you can put into a high wrap frame?

High wrap frames are very popular, but some prescriptions are just not meant to go in them. For instance, a high minus lens with a very flat base (front) curve won't fit into a high wrap frame effectively.

What is the Rx range for drill mounts? Do they use compression fittings, Chemistrie clips or nuts and bolts to assemble the drill mounts?

If your lab only uses compression fittings, this is important to know. Due to thickness issues, only certain Rx's can be used with compression fittings without causing durability issues.



Lens availability and frame condition

What tints, coatings and AR does your lab provide in-house?

For example, if they don't do in-house mirror coating, that could add 4 or 5 days to the patient's order; depending on where it gets outsourced to.

What are the labs tinting capabilities?

Some lenses are notoriously difficult to tint. For instance, you don't want to promise a Grey #3 in polycarbonate to a patient because the lab probably won't be able to do it. You may need to offer them polarized instead.

What are your policies for Patients Own Frames (POF)? Is there a minimum acceptable condition that they need to be in?

Chris phrased it like this "If the only thing holding a frame together is the face cheese (you know what he's talking about) caked onto it, it's probably not going to go well." If their frames are too beat up to send to the lab, you have the perfect opportunity to show them replacement frames that you carry.

Know their process

How much time does an AR coating add to the process time?

If they only have one machine with a relatively low capacity, it may take a while for your patients' glasses to get coated.

What is the timeline for an average job? Do you have a flow chart or diagram that can help me understand how you process the work?

The lab wants you to know these things. They want you to be armed with the best information possible so if a patient asks when their job will be complete, you can give them an accurate estimate. All without picking up the phone.

Communicating patient/eyewear issues effectively

Follow these do's and don'ts to resolve issues as quickly as possible.

Do

- ♥ Write detailed description of the issue. Include the following:
- ♥ What was the patient's complaint exactly?
- ♥ Is there anything you can add that might help someone troubleshoot the issue?
- ♥ Verify all the critical information.
- ♥ Is the Rx correct and within ANSI standards?
- ♥ Are the patient measurements correct?
- ♥ Provide SOAP (Subjective, Objective, Assessment, Plan) notes.

Don't

DON'T Write "Hey, this is the job we talked about the other day."

Chris, for instance, could talk to 40+ opticians in a day, so don't count on someone at the lab remembering the specifics of a job off hand. Also, if someone from the lab calls to clarify a note like this, the optician may not remember the details of the job either. This leads to a lot of detective work before you even address the actual issue.

DON'T Return the job to the lab without critical components. The lab may need the frame to re-trace or lenses to resize by hand.

These are just some of the things you should know about your lab. Give them a call and open a dialogue and, if possible, get a tour. If your lab won't give you a tour, that could also be a sign something is 'strange'. It's in the interest of everyone to be on the same page, and knowing how your lenses are made can be extremely helpful to you, and can help you explain it to your patients. EyeCare Partners actually requires their opticians to tour the lab. Just so they can get a better understanding of the process as a whole. Thereby ensuring top notch customer service to their patients.

Empowering yourself with this knowledge will lead to better lab relations and happier patients. 🌸





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In general, labs can be strange. Traditionally, they're sort of like supermarkets. They stock the shelves with brand name products, and you can go in and pick what you want. If you start asking for a recommendation, however, can you really know there's no 'influence' behind their suggestion? The real question is - how independent is an independent?

I mean, if you go into a store to buy soda, and 90% of the stuff on their shelves are Coke products - what does that tell you about their relationship with that vendor as compared to the other ones? It probably means they sell a lot more Coke, and that the products they recommend are going to be Coke, too. Just because they might carry the other stuff, does that mean they are actually independent? Or just pretending to be? If instead of soda, you insert any Big Optical company instead, that's what you need to look out for in a lab.

When a lab carries a lens brand from Big Optical, they're often required to sign a contract that says that are not allowed to draw "unfavorable comparisons" against the Big Optical brand name lenses. So really, they are agreeing that even if the Big Optical lens is junk, they aren't going to tell you what's better. Call me crazy, but that doesn't seem like it's in your best interest. When you look at a lab that doesn't carry the Big Optical brands, then you have much less of a problem with these potential 'conflicts of interest'. Big Optical may also push your 'independent lab' to meet certain quotas (or 'goals') for sales of their product. How can you tell if your lab is recommending what's best for you, or what helps them

to best meet their sales numbers? If Big Optical decides that an independent lab is no longer allowed to sell their product - how much is that going to hurt your lab? If the answer is 'a lot', then is that lab really independent if it can't afford to upset Big Optical? That's why you need to look for independents that aren't bound by this restriction - ones that don't carry the Big Optical brands - like FEA Industries.

This can also go for things like vision insurance. Some labs do a very large percentage of work for these insurances. So, what happens if the insurance company decides that only certain labs (like ones they own, for instance) are allowed to process their work. Is your lab going to have serious problems? When it comes down to it, you need to know these things if you're going to partner with a lab. The last thing you want is to think you've got a good thing going with them, then they suddenly go out of business because they aren't an approved lab for Big Insurance any more.

If you're going to build your business on an independent - make sure they're actually independent. Try FEA Industries. No Big Optical. No Big Insurance. Just good lenses. 

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DILATION MAN

- S. Stallone



John opened his eyes. The world slowly brightened, but remained blurry. He was very groggy and hazy, and couldn't really remember what he had been doing or where he was. He tried to reach over to his nightstand to grab his glasses, but instead his hand slapped against something cold and metallic. "What the..." he began to say, but was interrupted with a loud hiss of air escaping as the tube he was apparently inside of opened. There was what appeared to be a man (judging by the fuzzy outline of facial hair) standing in front of him.

"Can I have my glasses?" John asked, preferring to be able to see who he was talking to. There was a slight pause, then the response came. "Unfortunately, sir, your eyewear did not conform to the current standards. For safety reasons, they have been incinerated." John thought for a moment. Well, the future certainly sucks so far. "So, how do I..." he began, before being cut off. "I have been authorized to accompany you to an eyewear kiosk in order to procure a pair that falls within current standards. If you'll follow me, sir."

John had no choice but to fumble his way behind the officer, still not really sure what was going on. "What, exactly, is an 'eyewear kiosk'?" John inquired as the moved down a very white and fuzzy hallway. "This," said his guide, stopping abruptly. "Simply look into the sensor here, and your needs will be met." John squinted at the device. It looked a lot like an ATM, except this was very sleek and shiny. There was what looked like an opening for a camera towards the top, with a small, impersonal display pad sporting the message Look Forward and Press Start Button. John pondered for a moment, then moved in closely to try and find out where this 'start button' was. He was able to find a small green circle that seemed to look a lot like a fingerprint scanner. He shrugged and placed himself in front of the device and put his finger on the button. With a bright flash and whir, the little screen simply said Processing. Please Wait. After

a moment, the screen beeped and a little drawer popped out of the machine. The screen read: Please take your completed eyewear from the drawer. Your account has been billed \$2,000. Thank you for choosing Essilux. In the drawer in front of him was a pair of dull, black-rimmed eyewear. John put them on and read the screen that was now in focus. "Wait. \$2,000? What the hell just happened?"

The officer looked puzzled for a moment, then attempted to explain. "That is how eyewear is made. The kiosk scans your eyes, determines your prescription, then uses built-in printing technology to create the frame and lenses. They then dispense them, and you pay for them. I'm sure you're familiar with that concept, at least?". John was trying to resist the urge to smack the officer, and was very barely able to hold back. "Well, yes," John began, "but...what about the other things? An actual eye exam with a doctor, for a start?"

"Ah, of course," the officer began, "I'm forgetting about your old ways of doing things. Yes, back in 2020 it was deemed that computerized diagnosis was sufficient to be able to determine a corrective prescription, and it was made commonplace to accept these prescriptions when manufacturing eyewear."

"2020, huh? You would think they would have had better foresight," he chuckled to himself. With a deadpan expression, the officer said, "Those types of jokes were outlawed in 2021, with a mandatory sentence of two years in cryo-education. I would advise you avoid them in the future." John wasn't sure if that was humor or not, but didn't really want to push it. "Well, what about frame selection, then? Or other options for the lenses? How do they just say 'here you go' and that's it? Isn't there anything else besides this 'Essilux' option?"

"Ever since the great optical wars of 2019, all eyewear brands are Essilux." the officer looked at John quizzically, "Is there some kind of problem with your eyewear?"

John appraised the "medical device", turning it over in his hands. He couldn't really tell what it was made out of. It almost felt like some kind of very dense cardboard, but that couldn't possibly be right. It didn't exactly behave like cardboard. But, then again, it didn't not behave like cardboard, either. Very strange. "Isn't it possible to get a frame that's a little better quality? These Essilux ones seem like they're made of the cheapest material possible - they're junk."

The officer let out a slight gasp as an obnoxiously loud buzzer sounded from the kiosk. A tinny, recorded voice spoke from the metal box. "John Smith, you have been fined ten dollars for

violation of the corporate defamation statute". John stared at the box for a moment, "What the f..." the officer interrupted him. "Ah, yes, that... you should be careful about that. Speaking negatively against massive corporations has been made a fineable offence. It starts at ten dollars, but gets much, much worse. I would recommend putting on the eyewear and going on with your day, sir."

John put the eyewear on in silence, not wanting to risk the wrath of the cold, metal box of justice. Things were still a little blurry, but he figured they were 'close enough'. So long as he lifted his head up if he wanted to read anything. It was easier than getting fined. Again.

As he was adjusting to the eyewear, a nearby door was blown off its hinges by a remarkably well-controlled explosion. John and the officer both instinctively covered their ears, trying not to be deafened by the noise that filled the small hallway. The officer grabbed for a radio and yelled into it, "Alert! We have a breach! I repeat, we have independents in..." he was cut off by a rather large man smacking him in the back of the head with what appeared to be a sack full of lenses. John looked at the sign to the left of the smoking hinges of the doorway. It read Optical Equipment Museum. Behind the man with the sack of lenses there were several others that looked like they were hurriedly packing up all manner of optical equipment - from exam chairs and phoropters to edgers. John was wondering how he managed to get himself into the middle of a heist, when the man spoke. "You. Are you John Smith?", the man looked at John's clothes, "Must be. They just woke you up, didn't they? Come with me if you want to live." John didn't have the slightest clue what was going on, but figured that he may as well go along, as he figured this group of people was less likely to fine him for his opinions.

He jumped into the back of a truck where they were hastily cramming the equipment. It was cramped and uncomfortable - not completely unlike public transport, now that John came to think of it. Squished in next to John was the rather large and imposing man that had first appeared after the explosion, John figured now was as good a time as any to ask, "Who are you, and what was with that 'come with me if you want to live' stuff? Were they actually going to kill me?" The large man snorted, then grinned, "Of course not - I've just always wanted to say that. The name's Arnold, by the way." They discussed a number of things on their ride to wherever they were heading - mostly concerning exactly what had happened while John was "on ice" as Arnold called it. (continued...)

It seems that, over the years, the large optical corporations continued to merge and kill off independent competition. They got so large they were able to get the laws shifted in their favor, until they were legally the only ones left that could sell eyewear. Independent practitioners had slowly gone away or been absorbed. That is, until technology got to a point where they weren't even needed. People were able to just go up to these machines, get an 'eye screening', and that was it. They never needed to see a person, and the eyewear was just 3D-printed right inside of the machine. No need for human interaction at all. Sure, the machine didn't necessarily screen them for all of the possible eye diseases and other things that could be wrong with them, but none of the consumers really seemed to care. They were able to get their glasses quickly and easily - and if they didn't think there was anything wrong with their eyes, then why would they bother going to see a doctor?

The truck let out an almost thankful groan as they reached their destination. The doors opened and a few people began hastily unloading the optical equipment. They were inside somewhere. It smelled damp - probably somewhere underground, John assumed. "So, what's with this equipment, then?" John asked, watching them unload. Arnold jumped out of the truck, "We need it so we can bring back real eye exams. We have everything that we need here to give them the best exam possible - we aren't going to be cutting corners, we want people to be able to see what a real eye exam is like - and the choice and style that they can get from a pair of eyewear that isn't the cheapest thing possible." John looked a little puzzled, "So, what's with the fireworks and...you know...theft?" Arnold pulled up the collar of his leather jacket, "Well, they don't exactly make this stuff anymore, or make it easy for someone to get ahold of it. They're scared of what might happen if people realize what kind of service they should be getting. If people only ever think they're supposed to stare at some stupid kiosk, that's all they'll ever expect. What we're planning to do? That's dangerous." John nodded. It seemed to make a kind of sense. He did determine, however, that the future was certainly not what he had expected it to be, and that their infatuation with eyewear was really strange.

"So, if they don't make it anymore, do you have anyone that actually knows how this stuff works?" John asked Arnold as they walked into what was once a spacious room, before it had a truck full of optical equipment scattered about in it. "Well..." Arnold began, sounding like he was trying to find the right way of saying something, "Thing is...we were hoping you might be able to do that for us. You see, that's why I knew who you were - we were able to get into their computer system and make sure you were the one that woke up today," John pondered this for a moment. Sure, John had some optical training, but he wasn't exactly a doctor, by any stretch of the imagination. He wasn't qualified to do any kind of exam, for sure. John was watching them move the equipment around. It almost seemed like they didn't even know where any of it went. "Listen, the chair needs to go over there, next to the phoropter and slit lamp, and the acuity chart has to go here." He paused a moment. Why do I know that?

Arnold clapped him on the back, "I see it's working already." John gave him a sideways glance. "What, exactly, is working?" Arnold gave him a grin that told him the answer was probably not good for John, "We knew you weren't experienced enough, so we adjusted the program that ran while you were on ice. Gave you all kinds of experience - from eye exams to edging - the whole package. You might not think you know it, but it's all up there," Arnold tapped John on the head, "So, what do you think, doctor, are you on board? Do you want to help us bring back independent optometry and eyewear?" John thought for a few moments, slowly surveying the exam room. He didn't exactly have a lot of choice - he couldn't really say no. It seemed like this wasn't going to be easy, but he did think they had a shot. They didn't have to take down Big Optical, but they could certainly make their job harder. "I think that Big Optical needs to watch out - because this might sting a little."



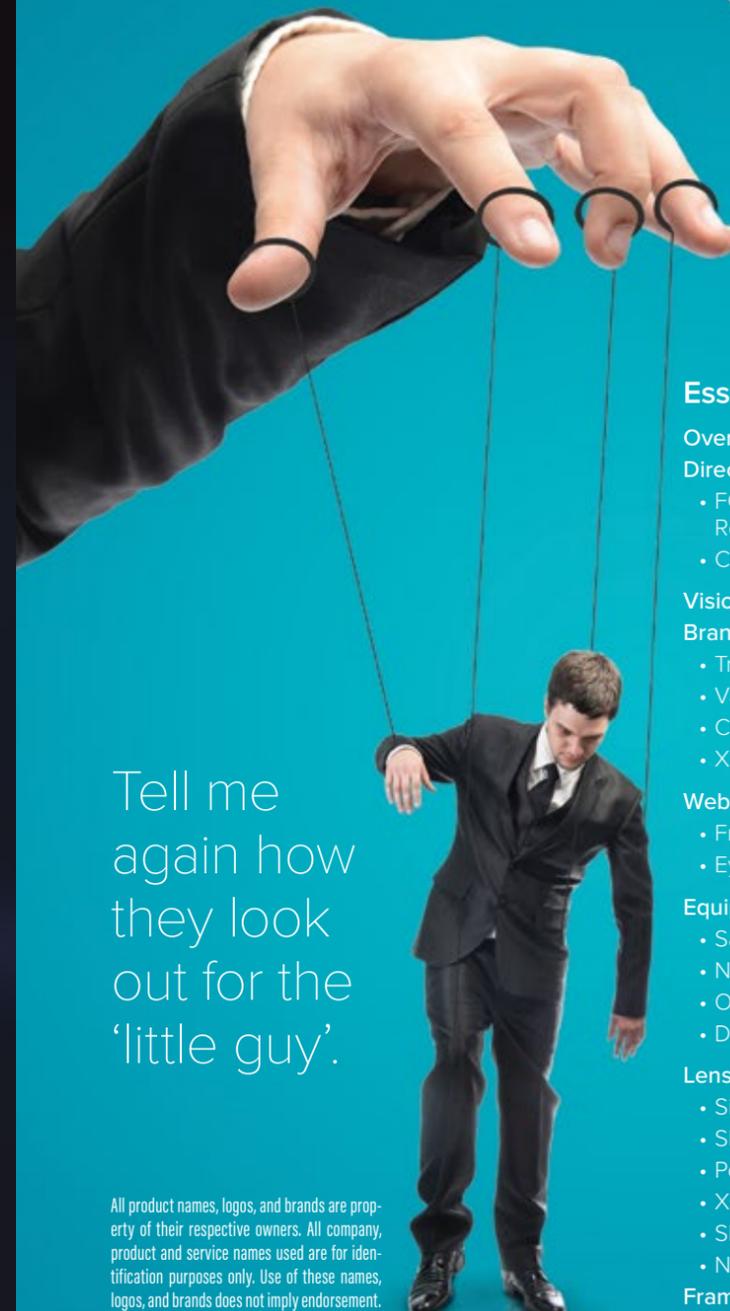
This is only a small list of what brands and companies are going to all be under one umbrella.

Who's Really Pulling the Strings?

(HINT: It's not you)

The list below is for informational purposes only, and illustrates business relationships between companies.

This may be through full/partial ownership, or some other manner of business arrangement.



Tell me again how they look out for the 'little guy'.

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Essilor

- Over 150 Wholesale Labs
- Direct To Consumer
 - FGX International (Foster Grant, Reebok, Gargoyles, & more)
 - Costa Del Mar

Vision Source Brands

- Transitions
- Varilux
- Crizal
- Xperio

Websites

- Framesdirect.com
- EyeBuyDirect.com

Equipment

- SatisLoh
- National Optronics
- Optisource
- DAC Vision

Lens Distributor

- Signet Armorlite
- Shamir
- Polycore
- XCel Optical
- Shore Lens
- Nassau

Framedisplays.com

Luxottica

Retail Outlets

- Lenscrafters
- Sunglass Hut
- Pearle Vision
- Target Optical
- Sears Optical

Frames

- Coach
- DKNY
- Oakley
- Oliver Peoples
- Ray Ban
- Versace

Eyemed (Vision Insurance)

Support your independent labs and frame companies.

(No strings attached)

PHILLY EYEWORKS



- Philly Eyeworks Interview

AS many of you have seen, online sales are becoming more and more popular. I don't need to tell you that. However, some of the online retailers are also doing a little bit more in terms of 'direction competition' against smaller, local optical shops. One such case happened in Philadelphia with Philly EyeWorks and Warby Parker (WP). You may have read about this, as it was in some newspapers, but essentially Warby went on a national tour to promote themselves by driving a school bus filled with their product around the country.

When this came to a spot in Philadelphia, the bus parked itself directly outside of Philly EyeWorks. This wasn't the first time in the tour something like this happened, but I'm sure that's not really a surprise to anyone.

If we fast-forward a little bit, we now have a Warby Parker brick-and-mortar store that opened up in Philadelphia. Only two blocks

away from Philly EyeWorks. So, what do you think Cliff Balter, owner of Philly EyeWorks, decided to do about it? Did he just decide to sit back and wait to see what happened? Of course not. He decided to be proactive about it. Instead of sitting inside his store on the day of WP's grand opening, he ran promotion. On the street. Directly in front of the brand new WP store.



YOU HELD A PROTEST OUTSIDE OF THE WARBY PARKER BRICK-AND-MORTAR STORE - HOW DID THAT GO? DO YOU FEEL IT MADE AN IMPACT ON CONSUMERS? DID YOU HAVE ANY REACTION FROM WP ABOUT IT?

I wouldn't call it a protest; I would call it a promotion—we held a promotional event outside of their shop on their grand opening day. We had the proper permits from the city. We promoted our brand Philly EyeWorks outside of their shop, just like they promoted their brand outside of our shop and many other independent optical shops around the country.

It went really well: we met a lot of great people that gave us an opportunity to tell our side of this story. The day before our promotion outside of their shop there was an article written on philly.com and in the Philadelphia Inquirer about the whole story, so a lot of people we met on the street had already heard the story. We immediately received an outpouring of phone calls, emails, people coming into the shop and social media posts. All of the feedback has been positive. It's only been three weeks now since the promotion began—a pretty small sample size—but, sales of Philly EyeWorks glasses has more than tripled over the same weeks last year. Maybe that will subside, and maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the FUWP campaign, but I feel like it's a direct result and I hope it's going to last for a long time. We have met a lot of people that were unaware of our shop and our brand and there's been a whole lot of energy and excitement about the campaign. In my mind, there's no doubt that the campaign has been a smashing success for us.

We heard from a credible source that Warby was pretty upset with the article and that they were upset that we were discussing them on social media leading up to the day of the FUWP campaign kickoff. On the morning of the promotional event, we walked over to their shop around 8:30am (two and half hours before they opened) just to take a look at the sidewalk and figure out where we would stand and we noticed that they had someone sitting on a stool inside of their shop—with all the lights off—keeping an eye out for us. It was like they thought we were going to storm their shop or something crazy like that. To me that was weird because we are just trying to get attention for our small business but they must have seen us as band of barbarians that were out for blood. I tried to introduce myself to their CEO, Neil Blumenthal in the days leading up to the kickoff/their grand opening but I never got the opportunity. I went in to their shop a couple of times and asked for him but he never

came out to say hello—I don't know if that was because he was too busy or he was angry with me or I am not important enough for him to waste his time, but I never did get the chance to shake his hand. I make it a priority to have some kind of relationship with all the other shops in our neighborhood. Even though we obviously compete for customers, we are not enemies, and if I can do something to help out another shop or if I need a favor, it is good to be able to go to those relationships. It doesn't come up often but to me, it's good business and I think it's the right thing to do.

DO YOUR CUSTOMERS UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR FUWP CAMPAIGN IS ALL ABOUT?

I think that our customers do understand the campaign. The vast majority realizes that it's lighthearted and fun and meant to get our little shop and our little brand noticed. The four letters FUWP is kind of coded, so only the customers that ask about it or have heard about even know what the whole thing is all about and what the letters stand for. I think the campaign is edgy but not over the edge, and I personally think that it's clever and pretty unique.





HOW HAVE YOUR CUSTOMERS RESPONDED TO YOUR EFFORTS AGAINST WP?

We have gotten a lot of new customers from the campaign. Some of them are responding to the fact that Warby may have decided to try to poach customers from us by parking their marketing bus outside of our shop (and other shops like ours all around the country) and some that are responding to the message of shopping small and shopping local. The campaign has a lot of layers to it and the seriousness of shopping small instead of feeding large corporations is a big part of it.

SINCE WP MOVED INTO THE AREA, HAS YOUR BUSINESS BEEN BETTER, WORSE, OR ABOUT THE SAME?

It has only been a few weeks so the sample size is small, but sales of Philly EyeWorks are way up. I suppose that anyone who is totally appalled by the campaign is not coming in to the shop but we haven't had anyone tell us that it's out of bounds in any way. I think that it would be hard for someone to think that our strategy is inappropriate because essentially, we just copied what they did to us and a lot of other shops all over the country.

DO YOUR CUSTOMERS SEEM MORE CONCERNED ABOUT 'SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS' OR ABOUT 'GETTING A CHEAP PAIR OF GLASSES'? DOES THIS CHANGE BASED ON THE AGE OF THE CUSTOMER?

I think the short answer is: both. There are a lot of different narratives here and depending on the person, different parts are resonating with different people. Today's twenty-something's are a different breed, they are pretty sophisticated in commerce and social issues and they seem to be responding the same as our more mature customers. I think the fact that Philly EyeWorks is a really diverse brand also plays in- if you love the color purple when you're 22 years old, you probably love purple when you're 45 and 65 too. That's why Philly EyeWorks has always appealed to younger people as well as more mature people. The combination of supporting local business and getting a really good value is a great combination because it's a win-win scenario.

WITH THE PRODUCTS YOU OFFER TO YOUR CUSTOMERS (FRAMES, LENSES, ETC.), HOW DO YOU CONTINUE THE 'SUPPORT LOCAL' MESSAGE? DO YOU SOURCE THESE FROM LOCAL/INDEPENDENT SOURCES?

At our shop we only sell frame brands from independent companies. But even in cases where a local independent shop sells frames from a large corporation like Luxottica, customers are still supporting the "little guy" if they buy from us because they are still supporting us and keeping a lot of the proceeds in their community.

DO YOU FEEL HAVING YOUR OWN LINE OF FRAMES IS A BENEFIT?

We feel Philly EyeWorks is definitely a major benefit to us. It shows how much we love what we do, it gives us a creative outlet that makes our jobs more enjoyable and it gives us an exclusive product that can only be purchased in our shop or from a shop that we wholesale Philly EyeWorks to.

DO YOU CARRY ANY OF THE 'BIG NAME' FRAME BRANDS? IF NOT, HAS THAT HURT ANY BUSINESS (I.E. CUSTOMERS WANT 'THIS BRAND')? HOW DO YOU HANDLE NOT HAVING THESE BRANDS?

Our shop is located in downtown Philadelphia and there are approximately 30 places to buy glasses within a half-mile from us. Everyone in our area has carved out their own niche and so far, after almost fifteen years, our niche and formula has been successful for us. If we were located in a more suburban area or a rural area then we would probably have a different approach. Regardless of what product mix a shop has or where they are located, I think that the message of shopping small and infusing creativity will have a very positive affect.

DO YOU DEAL WITH VISION INSURANCES? DO THEY AFFECT HOW EASY OR DIFFICULT IT IS TO GET YOUR PATIENTS INTO YOUR OFFICE? DO THEY HAVE ANY AFFECT ON HOW EASY IT IS FOR CUSTOMERS TO 'SHOP LOCAL'?

Vision insurance is just a fact of life right now so we do accept them. I think it's very easy for a customer to use their vision coverage and shop local- there are plenty of local options.

HAVE YOU (OR DO YOU PLAN TO), HAVE SIMILAR CAMPAIGNS AGAINST OTHER ONLINE/BIG BOX RETAILERS? OR IS WP YOUR MAIN FOCUS?

Warby Parker is the company that we have focused on for a several reasons. First of all, they parked outside of our shop to promote their brand and we feel that was both a great idea and pretty insulting- so we took a page out of their playbook and returned the favor. Also, we feel like independent shops have given them a free pass collectively for seven years now. They are media darlings who have taken a chunk out of the income of local shops using narratives that may not be exactly true. It's almost impossible for any optical shop to get press but Warby gets tons of it. Because of the media attention they get we calculated that the only way for us to get attention would be by trying to step into their spotlight. There is another side of the Warby story that hasn't been told by the media and I think it's time to explore the other side. Warby has publicly cast themselves in a battle with Luxottica while behind the scenes they seem to be competing directly with the little guy. We

aren't anti-competition and we aren't even anti Warby (we admire those guys a lot), but why do they seemingly pretend to be going up against Lens Crafters and Pearle? It's perfectly fine to compete with the local shops but I suppose they figure that it doesn't make for good publicity or that it doesn't exactly sound socially conscious. I think that if they had been forthcoming in who their real competition is that their company may not have grown to what it has become- and my guess is that they know this too.

Because we wholesale Philly EyeWorks to local shops all around the country, I have the opportunity to speak directly with other opticians and shop owners. I have mostly heard others tell me that the Warby effect lasts about a year or two; their sales suffer until customers realize that the product that they sell is not exactly the same as they have come to expect from their local optician, at which time they return. I have heard many opticians tell me that they often have customers bring their Warby frames into their shops for them to replace the Warby lenses with their own lenses that are maybe of a different quality. Everyone has told me that they really have no other choice but to be patient until their customers return. We totally respect and appreciate this strategy but I don't feel that it is the best for their businesses. We didn't feel like we should have to just lose sales and wait it out- we felt like we should try our best to fight them head on. Why should our small business have to lose sales, even if it is temporary? I feel like our theory that any Warby story can garner attention has proven true for us, and so we may have effectively used that to help our business.

Luxottica represents a totally different competitor to the independent shop. They operate their own large chains and it's just a normal competitive situation. Their shops sell glasses and we (the independents) sell glasses. I think Warby sells a carefully crafted story to sell glasses. They have made hundreds of millions of dollars from selling their story. There are many aspects of their story that I take exception to- not just the part that maintains that they are only the answer to Luxottica. Also while Luxottica competes directly with our shops, many of us sell their products which are purchased at the wholesale level, so Warby really is a totally different threat to us.

SHOULD EYECARE PROFESSIONALS BE SCARED OF ONLINE RETAILERS LIKE WP? WHAT SHOULD THEY LOOK AT DOING TO COMPETE WITH THESE TYPES OF RETAILERS? OR SHOULD THEY NOT TRY TO COMPETE ON THAT LEVEL?

I know that it runs contrary to the established rules of marketing but I feel like independent shops should be direct with customers that are calling for their prescriptions or coming in to have their eyes checked and are leaving with their prescriptions without giving them a shot at a sale. Of course it's the customer's prerogative to buy glasses wherever they choose and customers should be treated with respect in this regard- and all others- but in our shop we offer Philly EyeWorks as a similarly priced option and we speak directly about the pitfalls of purchasing online. We stress the fact that we take insurance, that we have experienced and qualified opticians, and other important things like timing issues. We address Warby Parker by name and point out why they are, in our opinion, much better off purchasing from us. And that's what I would recommend to all independent shops and small local chains: be sure to have a similarly priced option that is cool and appealing and be di-

rect as to why buying from them is going to be the better option for them. Supporting local business should be the icing on the cake for them, but first and foremost tell customers why it benefits them.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER ECPs THAT ARE LOSING PATIENTS TO ONLINE/BIG BOX STORES?

Getting attention from the local media for an optical business is virtually impossible unless Warby Parker is part of the story. I think that local shops would do themselves a lot of good by getting their story and their opinions of Warby out there- I bet that a lot of press coverage could be had if Warby is mentioned. It's been seven years now that they've grown without much opposition by the local shops that they've been negatively impacting and maybe it's time for us to fight back in the American spirit of entrepreneurship.

What all of this goes to show you is that yes, you can do your own thing and be successful. Yes, you can take on much larger competitors and win. In order to do that, however, you need to be smart about it. You need to think outside of the box and do things that you aren't used to doing. The landscape of the industry is changing, and if you want to be successful, then you're going to need to change with it. Doing the same things you've always done is just going to lead to the same, diminishing results. By shaking things up, you create new opportunities for yourself and your business, and you make it that much harder for large competitions to try and come in and replace what you do - because you can adapt to change and meet the needs of your customers much more quickly than large companies.





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UN-BEAR-ABLE DOCTORS

- Paddington B.

I recently found out that my daughter (who was six at the time) needed glasses. While there's nothing wrong with that, in and of itself, the way that it came about was certainly odd, to say the least. I want to go through what happened, and see if you can spot where things could have gone better. It certainly seemed like some education from a local optometrist would have gone a long way here. Let's see if you can tell where.

After reporting sporadic headaches for a week or two, I took my daughter to see her pediatrician back in early December. After an examination of no real significance, the diagnosis was 'probably allergies'. At the time, I didn't really think anything of it, of course, as sometimes it's hard to tell when a six year old really has a headache, or has just decided to have one. As she had her yearly annual checkup scheduled the following week anyway, I just let it go for the time being. This should have been my first warning sign.

The annual physical exam, however, was a little more concerning. This is also where this little story might get a little more interesting for you, as an eye care professional. As we go along the course of the exam we, of course, come to the eye test. They had their chart set up at the far end of the hallway, and ask her to read it. She couldn't. After some squinting and straining, she managed to get the "E" on top, but that's about it. The general feeling I got was, is that they assumed she "didn't want to" or "couldn't" read the letters, as opposed to couldn't see them. They then get the autorefractor out. After a quick scan, the infallible machine said all was well, and she was "passed" for her vision test. Even though she could barely read the largest letter on the chart.

So, this raises some interesting questions. I'm assuming a large majority of parents would just go with what they recommended, which was that her eyes were 'fine'. Why was there no mention of other testing? How do we, as eye care professionals, prevent situations like this from happening? It does seem like eye care can take a back seat when it comes to diagnosis. It also seems like a lot of kids don't even have a real eye exam until there's a reason for it, which ends up being up the parents to decide if and when to get one done. And most of them might not even think to go see an Optometrist, and just go to their primary doctor in the first place. I know that in order to start school my daughter had to go have an oral exam with a dentist - why is that required, yet an

eye exam is not? Regardless of the reasons for it, that's the way that it is. I think that means we need to take this opportunity to have our own educational programs for other doctors, whether we're talking pediatrician, or just primary care doctors in general. At the very least, get them to refer on to you for a complete exam. This relationship here helps everyone - they still get to do their "vision test", but then can send people to you for actual help, instead of just leaving people to the mercy of the autorefractor.

As an aside for those that are curious, she had a real eye exam two days later. She's at about a -2.00. Since then, she's gotten the pinkest frames she could find, and has been happy since. Inexplicably, however, she is now "blind" and "can't see" whenever she takes them off.



WAR OF THE WORDS

- H. G. Wells



What makes you use a product?

Is it because you woke up one morning, and decided that “You know what, I’m going to go find a lens I’ve never heard of, and just start using it”. Well, no, that’s not how we work. We like being made to feel comfortable. To feel safe with a product. We want it to be familiar. That makes it easier for us to use their products. That’s why you’ll see the same ad, product, commercial, message, etc. repeated over, and over, and over. The point isn’t always for you to see the ad and say “I have to have that right now”. The point of the advertising may simply be for you to accept their branding and products to make them part of your ‘comfort zone’.

Once you’ve seen or heard a message enough, it becomes ‘normal’, which makes you more susceptible to their ideas, whether you realize it or not. It’s a very subtle, long-term way of advertising.

The idea here is that once the message (whether it’s a brand, company, product, etc.) is in your brain, it’s not leaving. That way, at some point in the future, you may be faced with a choice between their product and one you’ve never heard of. Given you have little knowledge about either product, you’ll go with the brand you’ve heard of. Why? Well, because you “saw it on television”, or “remember hearing about it”. Another word for this type of advertising is “propaganda”.

MINISTRY OF TRUTH

The main thing to keep in mind is that Big Optical is in the business of making sure you keep using Big Optical. No matter what they do, it’s always going to be “great for the independent” or “better for the industry”. Do you really expect them to say, “We plan to take your business”, or “This new product is the same as the last one, just in a different box and costs \$30 more”. Of course not. They are masters of spin, and could probably convince you of whatever they want. And that’s not your fault - they’ve been doing this for years, and their message is everywhere.

You have to be alert where you get your information from, as a lot of the outlets can have a certain slant to them - this magazine included. We’re focused on independents, and independent products, but I’m sure you’ve noticed that by now. Big Optical, of course, is focused on Big Optical. They are going to say whatever it takes to keep you pushing the brand and products, because it helps them. It’s not about what’s good for you, it’s about what helps promote their message.

Part of this message isn’t just what you hear, but also what you DON’T hear. Killing negative messages is part of controlling the narrative, and there’s a reason that a lot of those stories don’t end up online or in trade journals. Big Optical doesn’t want them there, so they aren’t there. You just have to follow the money, and you usually find your answer.

DOUBLEPLUS GOOD

Part of the reason that a lot of people don’t compare the Big Optical products against other products is because they can’t. That’s not to say that “there’s no comparison”, but because they are literally contractually obligated to not draw unfavorable comparisons against Big Optical lenses. This also includes independent labs that distribute Big Optical name brands. This is all part of controlling the narrative in the market - your product isn’t going to “look bad” if you make it a breach of contract for someone to speak poorly about your product. They make sure that the thought police are out in force, which helps to give their product a seeming “air of perfection”. It’s easy to say “Everyone likes it” when all the dissenters are hauled off to the Gulag, never to be seen again.

You can also see their attempts to ‘control the narrative’ through much of the coverage of their business activities. They will push things like interviews and podcasts to try and make a more personal connection with you, the listener. That gives them the opportunity to try and calm any kind of opposition by skillfully manipulating the narrative. Especially in the kind of medium where it’s a one-way communication, there’s no opportunity to clarify or get more information. That means that when they dodge or only half-answer a question, it sounds like they gave a good answer, but really they just artfully sidestepped the issue. For example, in a broadcast just after the merger of two Big Opticals, we were told a lot of nice, calming things. Things that were designed to make sure that independents don’t resist, and just wait and see. Things like “give us a chance”, or that they are a “friend of the independent”. Those are certainly pretty words, but saying something doesn’t make it true.

The idea that independents need to give Big Optical “a chance” is, quite honestly, completely ridiculous. Giving someone “a chance” is what you do to the small business that doesn’t have

GIVE US A CHANCE

an established track record. That's where you're 'giving him a chance' to prove that he can do what he says. When you're a billion-dollar company, I'm pretty sure that people "giving you a chance" is what got you there in the first place. Also, when your Big Optical track record includes direct competition with your customers (through online sales and other channels), I'm not really sure what kind of "chance" you want. When Big Optical says "give us a chance", what they really mean is "we need more time before we crush you".

SEPARATION ANXIETY

When we build up these 'relationships' with goods and brand names in our brains, it makes it more difficult to stop using them. It's a lot like an old friend - it's been there forever, and you never really considered what life would be like if it wasn't there. If you want to grow, however, sometimes you need to take a good, hard look at what might be holding you back, and decide where you plan to go in the future. One of the things that can be a real problem is "firing" a rep for a Big Optical. Sometimes, you have to do what's right for you.

This is the part where you need to have your 'personal brain' and your 'business brain'. Having a friendship with a sales rep isn't a problem - until it starts negatively impacting your business. You need to be able to look at the situation thing objectively, and weight the benefits without letting your personal feelings get in the way too much. Obviously, it's going to be part of your decision, and I'm not saying that a good relationship with a sales rep isn't a benefit - what I'm saying is that it's not the only thing that you have to consider.

No matter how great your relationship with your rep may be, at the end of the day it comes down to dollars and cents. Sure, if someone offers you a product that's only a little bit cheaper, it's not worth throwing away a relationship that you've had for years. However, when you can save yourself ten percent, twenty percent, or more....then it's time to start seriously evaluating

your business arrangement. This part is where some reps can get 'nasty'. They'll try to exploit your personal relationship when, in reality, that has nothing to do with your business decision. They may be your best friend, but that doesn't mean you want to pay them 30% more than the other guy. Often times, you'll be told that the decisions of Big Optical "aren't their fault" and that they are only doing their job. Which is, coincidentally, what you are doing when you switch from a Big Optical company to an independent. Your job is to do what's best for the future of your business, and financially supporting Big Optical isn't in your best interest.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

It's always possible that maybe - just maybe - this is a complete overreaction. Maybe Big Optical really is out there to help your business, and just because they have their own retail outlets, maybe they'd rather people buy from you instead of them. Right. If that's what you think, then sure, go right on thinking that. You've obviously made up your own mind, and there's really no problem with that. Your business will probably be just fine. In the short term. Long term? Well, you probably aren't too worried about that. It's probably better to just let Big Optical carry on with their plans, and we'll see where you end up.

While that might sound negative (because it is), it's important to understand that there are plenty of people that run their business in a very reactionary manner, and don't try and change anything until it's too late. To be able to avoid the iceberg, you need to change course when you see it coming on the horizon. If you wait until it's on top of you, then you aren't going to have the time to be able to turn before it hits you head-on. You need to make sure you're looking out with a discerning eye at what's going on for real, and not what a Big Optical puppet master tells you is going on. Free thinking is a critical aspect of keeping your business successful, and you want to be the one pulling your own strings.

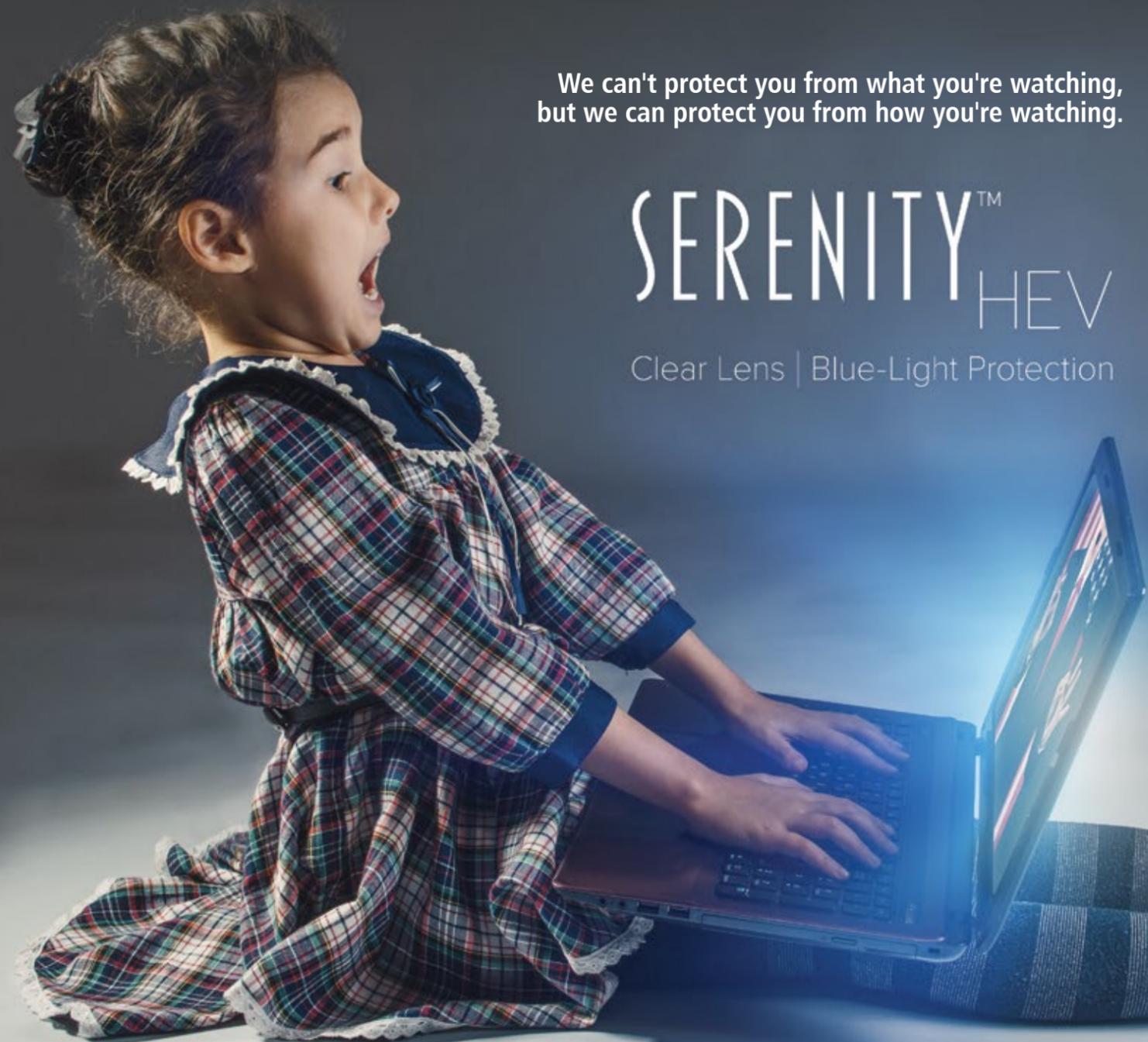
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Papers Please

- Werner Klemperer

I saw one thing pop up in a discussion a little while ago regarding 'certificates of authenticity' for various optical products. Some could be for frames, lenses, coatings, photochromics, or whatever else. These things seem somewhat innocuous, but have you ever stopped to think what their real purpose is? Let's run through a hypothetical scenario, and see who these certificates are really designed to benefit. (hint: It's not you).

So, let's say that we have a photochromic lens made by Company T that comes with a "Certificate of Authenticity" that you're supposed to give the patient, so that way they know it's the "real thing". So, you hand it to the patient, and that's it, right? Well, not really.

So, let's say the patient decides to go register that card. They input their name, address, email, and all that other good stuff so they can register their lenses. They're happy to do this because often they get some kind of reward for doing it (register for a chance to win, or some other thing). So now, Company T knows that your patient uses their product, and has all of his contact information. Also, Company T is owned by Company E. Company E has several online channels that sell direct to consumers - which we also refer to as "your competition". Now your customer starts getting all this information (via emails or regular mail) about discounts and special offers for a 'second pair' or for their 'next pair' at one of these online outlets.

It's probably also worth mentioning that the lab you bought the branded product from may also be reporting back to Company T about who you are, how much of their product you bought, and all of those details. That makes it possible for them to rank you on your sales of their products without ever speaking with you. They can even relate that with the CoA registration to see what customers were likely yours as well, just based on location.

So, is this some kind of far-fetched conspiracy theory? Or does it sound evil enough to actually make a whole lot of sense? Especially from large companies that have their hand in every aspect of the market. This is part of what you end up buying into when you decide to offer certain major brands. They use you to promote the product while they quietly harvest customer information, then eventually they have enough to just go direct themselves.

FORGERIES

Is an 'authentic product' really something that people care about when it comes to lenses? Or do they just want something that works? While they may care about having that little status symbol on their frame, when it comes down to products like lenses, coatings, or photochromics - how much do the patients care about having a 'real, authentic product', and how much do they just want something that works? The point you need to consider here is that do these products having 'authenticity cards' do anything whatsoever to help your business? Do patients even know that's a thing they should be getting? Do they care? If your answer is 'yes' - then why not do it yourself? Make your own brands, and support your own products. Ultimately, if they have a problem with those lenses, who are they coming back to? We both know it's going to be you - so why not control the entirety of the interaction, instead of passing their details along to 'Big Brother'.

T.M.I.

You need to make sure you're not giving away too much information about your patients to people that are competing against you. Let's say for a minute that you have someone come in to your store from a big online eyewear retail, and they say to you the following:

You can sell our frames in your store. Authentic, official product. It even comes with this certificate. All you have to do is give the patients this card, and that's it. The card tells them to come register on our website and give us all their contact information. We aren't

going to do anything to try and steal the customer from you, honest. We just want their name, address, email, and phone number so we can thank them for buying from you. And definitely not to solicit business for our website. Trust me.

How's that any different from what Big Optical does? The only difference being they have a few different products that aren't just frames. How do you think this is any different?

As the saying goes, knowledge is power. When you're a massive company, you have access to lots and lots of information. This helps you make better decisions since you have so many sources giving you so much information, you can easily exploit it. What kind of sense, then, does it make for an independent optical shop to want to simply direct their customers to register their contacts details with someone that competes against them?

Before you give out more of these so-called "authenticity cards", you should probably stop and think whether or not they are providing a benefit to either you or your customer. Does your customer gain anything by knowing that their lens is an 'authentic' whatever? Do they care? If they have a problem, you know they're going to be bringing it back to you anyway. Since you're going to have to solve the problem, what good does the brand name do you? You may as well not just give away your customer information, and take care of your customer yourself. ⚙️

CERTIFIED BY: *Big Optical*



YOUR INSURANCE
HAS BEEN

TERMINATED

- Sarah Connor

"I love dealing with vision insurances. They have helped me make more money, & make my business run more smoothly"

-- said no optical professional ever.

If anything in the optical world is most aptly compared to Skynet, it would be vision insurance plans. They started off as a great idea to try and help people get eyecare. Over time, however, they seem to have morphed into something else completely. They are starting to reimburse less, cover less, and want to take more. They're the perfect machine. They look so unassuming, and can work their way in very easily. Once they're in there - it's almost too late to get rid of them. Or is it?

From listening to all manner of different conversations about vision insurance, I don't think I've seen anyone say that they have a problem by not having it. That is, of course, assuming that you are able to make your product offerings sufficiently different to get your patients to stay in the store. Part of the problem here can be if you offer the same thing that everyone else in town has. In that case, you aren't standing out from the crowd, and you're not giving your patients anything new or different. You make yourself just another cog in the insurance machine - nothing special, just a replaceable part.

Much of that goes back to how optical is becoming more easily accessible to people, through online sales and big box stores. You don't want to be competing at the bottom of the scale, as the big box stores are always going to be able to undercut you if they want. Their business model and yours aren't really the same thing, as they tend to focus on giving people the 'cheapest options' and then upselling to make the margins they want. You, as an independent professional, are focused on giving better quality options, so you're not going to be in the bargain basement. If people really want to get the cheapest thing possible, they will find a way.

The online sale of eyewear, in this case, can actually be a good point for you to consider. People aren't going online to places like Warby Parker or Zenni because they want to use their insurance (usually). They do it because they like the selection, the price, or both. But usually they're paying themselves for the glasses - no insurance is involved. That should be enough to tell you that people aren't adverse to paying out-of-pocket for eyewear, assuming they see some benefit to them. Whether it's the look or quality of the product, or other factors, it shows us that we don't necessarily need insurance to be successful.

Insurances are also trying to (or have already) get into the realm of online sales themselves. They want to take that part of the market as well, and ultimately cut out the optical stores. There have been some that will email their patients and tell them all about how they can 'get more with their benefits' by shopping at the insurance company's website instead of buying them from someone like you. Of course, they still need the patient to be able to go somewhere to get an exam and Rx (for now), so the insurances still 'need' you. But what happens when technology gets to a point where it can all be done online? There's plenty of tools floating around promising 'online refraction' and similar services. What do you think insurance companies are going to do when they can make more money by cutting out independent stores completely? Since technology is making this more likely every year, it's starting to become prudent to drop these insurances all together and build your business around your own products and services.

One thing that you need to keep in mind if you're considering 'dropping insurance' is that just because you don't accept it doesn't mean that your clients can't use it. They can still file out of network for applicable claims. That can be important for them to keep in mind, since they are still 'using' the insurance, but since you're making it a separate step from the transaction at hand, they are going to feel less bound by the terms of it. That is to say, less likely to go with "whatever insurance covers and nothing more".

You do need to be prepared to explain why you don't take insurances, however, as your patient may wonder. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having an explanation ready, since you need to make sure you communicate correctly to your patient. You don't really want to tell them it's because insurance was "too much of a pain to deal with" (even if true), since that's not really explaining it. You don't accept it because you didn't like the way it limited what you could offer to your patients. You wanted to make sure you could offer better quality products, and not just the cheapest thing possible.

A major question that does come up when considering dropping insurances is how the patients will react. How do you make it clear to them that you don't accept the insurance any more? The best recommendation for this is to make it clear when calling to schedule the recall appointment - that way you don't have to make them come in to find out that you don't accept it anymore. This is where whoever is making the call is going to have to be familiar with being able to answer the "why?", as that's bound to

be the first question that the patient asks. If you can communicate that effectively, you shouldn't have much push back from them, especially if they are longer-term patients. You could always offer them a discount to get them over the 'shock' of not accepting the insurance, as the transition period is likely to be the toughest time with patients not really sure what affect their insurance being 'dropped' has.

It does seem that those practices that have dropped insurances haven't really regretted it. I have not yet to see someone say "Man, I wish we didn't stop taking Big Insurance". The feedback seems to be an overwhelming positive, assuming you don't mind putting in some work to keep your patients engaged with you. Some of the people dropping insurance have noticed that yes, they may see slightly fewer patients, but the amount they're making hasn't gone down. They're able to see more profitable private-pay patients more quickly, since they aren't booked out with insurance patients for three months. Ultimately, it's going to come down to where you're located, your patient base, and how you want to run your business. You just need to consider what the market is going to look like in the next five or ten years, and consider how vision insurance fits into your plan. And you should also consider how you fit into the plan of vision insurances. 🌀



PATIENT LOYALTY

- Alfred J. Pennyworth

As I've mentioned before, my daughter has recently 'joined the 'glasses club', as she calls it. As we're out and about, this can sometimes start conversations with other people. Usually, they'll say that she looks cute in her glasses, and the conversation about eyewear moves on from there. As a side note - people never tell me that I look cute in my glasses - what's with that? Anyway...

ONE such occurrence happened when we went to get haircuts from a cheerful myope who, for the purpose of this article, we'll call Carol. This is solely to protect her identity, and definitely not because I can't actually remember her name. So, since we end up being a fairly captive audience during the haircut at that point, and as I have no life other than eyewear, talking about her eyewear experiences helped fill the awkward silence in between snips. What was specifically interesting, in this case, was why Carol had decided that

she like using an independent optician, as opposed to going online and buying eyewear. For reference, she was about a minus six, so a decent enough power to care about where her eyewear gets made.

Carol mentioned, of course, that her friends had told her that she should just buy her glasses online. I was told that she had thought about it, but felt that "you get what you pay for". It seemed that in this particular case, she was more concerned about the frame fit and how it would look on her more so than lens and visual quality. Not everyone is that discerning, so it's always refreshing to talk with a consumer that understands that sometimes things are cheap for a reason.

The biggest reason she liked this store, however, seemed to be their personal service. The optical shop that she went to seemed to be doing it right. She mentioned some specific things that she liked about them, that she wasn't going to get by just buying something online. The first of which was choice. She told me how she'd pick out different frame styles and colors, then go in and try them on when they arrived. I wasn't certain if this was from an in-person interaction, or she was looking at some kind of online catalog, but either way, it made her feel like she had more choice and control over the whole process.



The other thing that she appreciated was the feedback that she was able to receive when trying on eyewear. As I'm sure most of you know, your friends can be terrible judges of what looks good in eyewear. Or, worse yet, they'll tell you it looks great when, really, it doesn't. Carol's optician, however, seemed to nail it with advice about what frames don't look good, or were too big, the wrong shape for her face, and all manner of other advice. That's the sound of an interaction where the person on the sales end cares about what the patient is getting, and isn't just trying to sell them on whatever the highest margin item is.

The other important thing is what she DIDN'T mention. During the whole conversation she never once mentioned that she went there because they carried a brand name frame or lenses. That wasn't even a factor that she considered. Also, she never once mentioned that she got her glasses there because they accepted her insurance. Insurance never came up in our conversation at all.

What this really boils down to is personal service. Opticians aren't in the business of just selling eyewear. If they wanted something cheap that does the job, they'd just go online and roll the dice on a pair from one of the innumerable online eyeglass retailers that are available. But not everyone wants that.

I look at this a lot like the clothing industry. You have a huge spectrum of needs - ranging from casual to formal, and everything in between. People buy clothing online, in huge department stores, and even at small local stores. Generally, if you just want something easy and cheap, you order online and hope it fits and looks okay. If you're a little more motivated, you go to the store, grab a medium and try it on, and you probably buy it there, since you know that's the one that looks/feels good. That works fine for a lot of people, especially when you're looking at the lower end type of clothing (jeans, t-shirts, etc.). As you get into higher end clothing, like dress shirts, suits, and other formal wear, the fit becomes more important. You want the quality to be there, and you want it to look good. You're certainly not getting that online, and isn't really the type of

service most big box departments stores offer. That's where the small independents really shine. This is that area of personal service that a lot of people want, and where independent optical fit in.

This type of story is what shows me that independents are always going to have a place in the market, but we just need to make sure we adjust to fit it. You need to change the perception that some customers may have about eyewear. It's not just about 'the thing' it's about everything around it. Your role on educating your patient is getting more and more important, because they are having more and more ways to get their eyewear from other people. You also need to figure out a way to offer all of this to your customer without sounding like a used car salesman trying to upsell them, even though you're just trying to make sure they have all the facts. I think that if independents can work together, we can really make this industry shine. And to whatever optical shop made such an impression on Carol - keep being awesome!



You Can Make It

- Wall-E

With all of the uncertainty that we have going forward in this industry, your best hope for survival is really down to one person - you. I'm sure you knew that lesson was coming. When it comes down to it, these are business decisions that you need to make, and you need to make sure that you're well-informed about the way things are, and where they could go.

To quote a popular motto: Always be prepared.

Shades of Gray

What you need to keep in mind is that just because something is "Big Optical" doesn't mean that you won't be able to make money selling it. Certainly, we aren't trying to say that people won't buy their products. However, that kind of thinking is better in the short term than it is for the long term. If you can be successful selling their products, then by all means sell them. What we are trying to do is make sure that you think about what you're selling, and why you are selling it. You need to have a 'big picture' type plan.

We also don't want to paint all independent companies with the same brush. Just because a company is independent doesn't mean that it's necessarily better, but it also doesn't mean that it's worse, either. Each company needs to be evaluated on its own merit. Just like any business decision, you want to do what works. The whole 'go independent' movement is about making

it okay to try things that are outside of your comfort zone. Sure, you might not like doing it, but it could be rewarding. You aren't going to know until you try it. Of course, now it sounds like I'm trying to convince my daughter that broccoli won't kill her. She's adamant that she's fine eating only spaghetti for the rest of her life. Certainly, she won't die of starvation if she keeps doing what she's doing, which she's happy to point out to me. But being able to try new things is going to be good for her, and it could be good for your business. We've certainly gone through a number of times where she's tried something new and promptly spit it out (or worse, but we don't need to go into that level of detail). But that's okay, eventually we'll find things that work for her, and everyone will be better off.

Long Term Survival

From everything I've seen, everyone seems to agree that the business of eye care is getting more competitive. Whether we're talking about eye exams or eyewear, there's more options for people to get these goods and services. With the increasing encroachment of technology on the market, there's going to be plenty of changes in the marketplace in the future, and you need to decide how your business is going to handle that.

The problem with a lot of these changes is that they've often cost-driven, and not service-driven. Limiting exam times to cram in more patients, or trying to get cheaper and cheaper eyewear. The ever-popular 'free exam with purchase' comes quickly to mind here. If everything keeps getting devalued, you can pretty much guarantee that you aren't going to be the one that wins the 'race to the bottom'. You're not going to out-big-box a big-box store. They've got economies of scale large enough that you're going to just waste your time trying to price-compete. This is, of course, assuming that the products you sell and they sell are the same. If they carry the same brands as you do, you have nothing different to offer your customers. This is where you need to take a good look at your market and product offerings to see how sales have been over time. If the brand isn't working for you the way it used to - can something do better in its place?

The Light at the End

It's not all doom and gloom here, you can still help yourself if you think about your business objectively. While there's plenty of argument on the merits of 'Big Optical' or 'Independents', there's really one pivotal question. The major question of the whole Big Optical vs Independent argument is this: Which of these wants to help your business, and which one wants to ultimately take it from you?

Most independents don't really go after consumers. They tend to focus on one business segment, and that's enough for them. Usually selling to you is enough, and trying to do an end-run around you just isn't worth it. Of course, some of these may

sell online directly (most commonly with frames), but if they sell at the same retail as you do, it's not like they're stealing anything.

When it comes to 'Big Optical', it's another story entirely. They're big because they have interests in most (or all) segments of the supply chain. That means they have an interest in selling things to you, and also selling directly to your customers. As they've become 'Big Optical' over time, it's only natural that they still want to be 'your partner like they have always been'. Of course they do - when you started selling their stuff ten or twenty years ago, they didn't own multiple online sales sites, or retail chains, or vision insurance. Times have changed, and it's time we realize that. The longer they can keep you selling their products, the more information on your customers they can garner. They can then use that to lure them away to buying from BigOptical.com instead of ever setting foot in your store. No matter where someone buys, Big Optical gets a piece of the action (if you let them). They just get a bigger piece when they can lure your customer away. The only way Big Optical is going to keep shareholders happy is to increase those earnings, so at some point they're going to have to take your piece of the pie, because they've already eaten everything else.

As we move forward in this industry, you need to have your back up plans in place. As cliché as it sounds, you want to keep your options open, and don't have all your frames in one basket. If you can make money in the short term with Big Optical, that's great. When it comes to your long term survival, however, you're going to be better off with an independent that wants you to be successful. For an independent to be successful, they need to add value to increase your business so they can sell you more - it's teamwork. For Big Optical to make money, they just need the brand product to move, whether it's through you or from their own outlets. That kind of relationship is a little one-sided. In the journey along the rough path ahead, you want to make sure you have a friend that's going to stick by you and help you along the path, instead of having the kind of friend that's going to eat you as soon as things look a little desperate.

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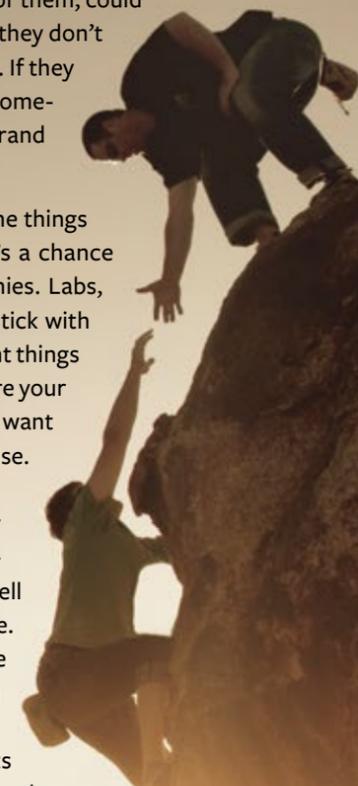
Supporting an Independent: Customer vs Supplier

- B. Grylls

So after going through an exam and spending the past twenty minutes hearing the customer's life story, it's come time to take them out to see what eyewear they want to pick out. Then come the words you really don't want to hear: **"I don't need glasses. Can I just have my prescription?"**

You've gotten this a lot recently. People just want the prescription - when you KNOW they need new glasses - and they want to go buy online. Or somewhere 'cheaper'. The thing is, they didn't even look to see what you had. They just assume you aren't competitive, or don't have anything that might work better for them. Of course, you still try. "Certainly, we can get that for you, but if you're looking to go buy online, we do have some comparatively priced...." they cut you off. "No thanks. Just the prescription." You would think they could at least hear what you have to say, or take a look at what you have to offer. You've got something that's going to be better for them, could even be cheaper, and will definitely give them better performance. But they don't even want to look at it. It's like they assume you're there to rip them off. If they just gave you a chance, then maybe they would actually find you had something better than they can get at the popular online places, or the big brand stores down the street.

With that in mind - let's look at what you sell. Are you guilty of the same things that your customers do to you? This isn't an accusation - rather, it's a chance for self-reflection. What we're talking about are independent companies. Labs, frames, and whatever else. Have you tried them out? Or, do you just stick with the 'big brands' because that's what you've always done? With the recent things that have been going on in the industry, now is the time for you to explore your options, even if they aren't something you would normally do. You don't want to get stuck in the mentality that things couldn't be better somewhere else. Your patient assumes you're there to rip them off (thanks Big Optical) - you know that's not true. So don't assume that an independent lab or frame company isn't as good as a huge company. Sure, there are probably some of them out there that sell junk - but there are plenty that sell great products that are going to help your practice be more competitive. I'm sure you've dealt with plenty of companies that were great, and some that were terrible. They are all different, so we can't just paint them all with the same brush. This isn't about blind trust, or 'taking a leap'. Reach out and find new companies to work with. Try out their products for yourself. See if it lives up to what you expect. Worst case? You're back where you started. Best case? You're making your business more successful. You aren't going to gain an advantage by selling the same thing everyone else sells - you need to be unique if you want to survive.



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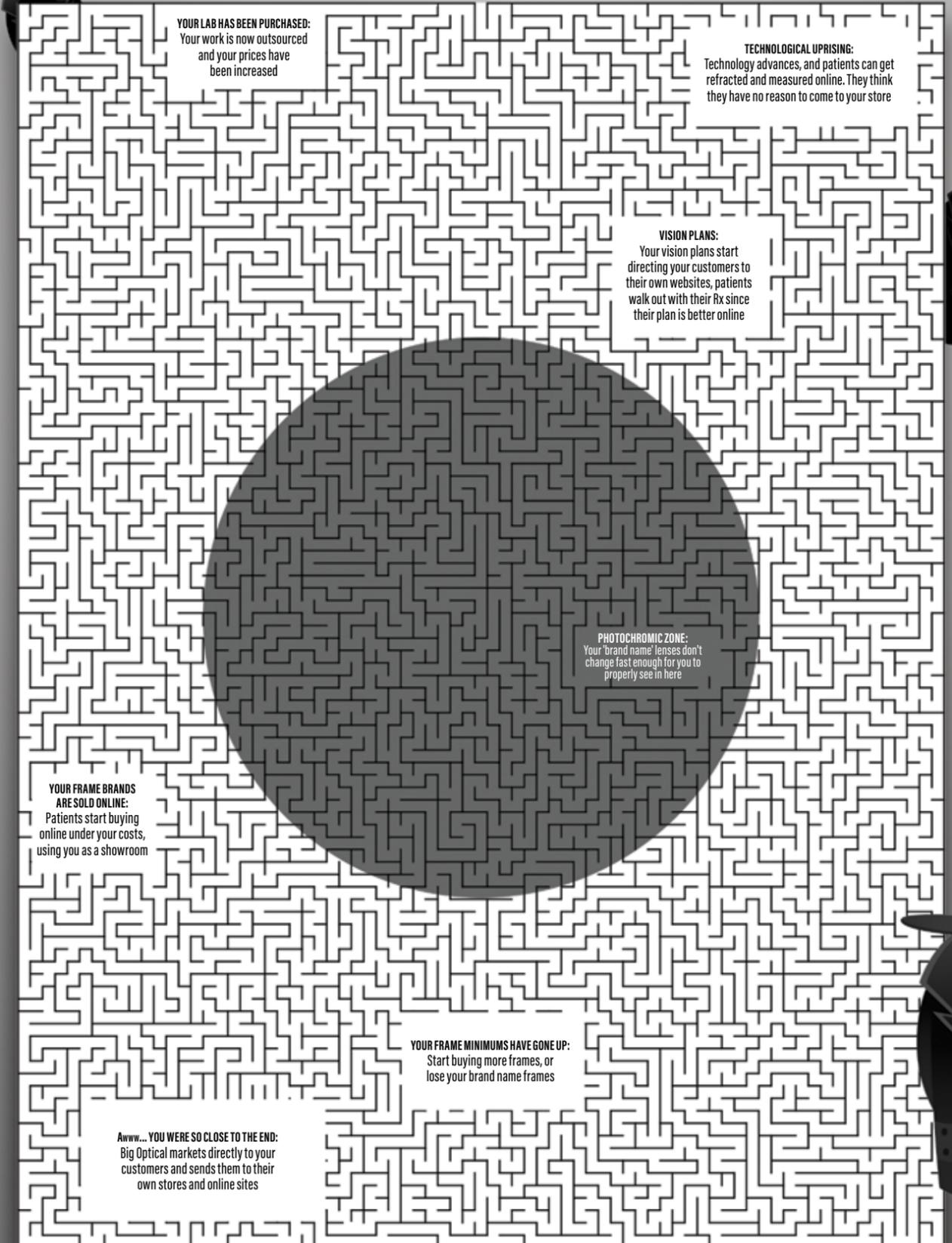
Not-So Fun Page

Under the new regime, fun has been banned. Instead, try to navigate the New Optical World below



Watch-out for Big Optical Agents

START ↓ HERE



YOUR LAB HAS BEEN PURCHASED:
Your work is now outsourced
and your prices have
been increased

TECHNOLOGICAL UPRISING:
Technology advances, and patients can get
refracted and measured online. They think
they have no reason to come to your store

VISION PLANS:
Your vision plans start
directing your customers to
their own websites, patients
walk out with their Rx since
their plan is better online

PHOTOCHROMIC ZONE:
Your 'brand name' lenses don't
change fast enough for you to
properly see in here

**YOUR FRAME BRANDS
ARE SOLD ONLINE:**
Patients start buying
online under your costs,
using you as a showroom

YOUR FRAME MINIMUMS HAVE GONE UP:
Start buying more frames, or
lose your brand name frames

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customers and sends them to their
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