Mike Hale visits Rawdon Optical in Leeds to view its new coating facilities

Investing in coating

Running a prescription lab is a tricky business. On the one hand you are required to make constant investment in expensive machinery in order to keep up with the ever advancing state-of-the-art while on the other balancing such outlay with profits won in the famously price-focused optical market.

Occasionally, however, such investment makes such strong business sense that there is no need for agonising, just a consideration of the practical aspects in order to make it happen. An instance of this state of affairs can be found at Rawdon Optical, a BSI registered lab located to the north of Leeds, which has recently invested £1.5m in order to add anti-reflection coating capabilities to its lens repertoire.

'The decision made logical and sound business development sense,' comments Richard Crook, managing director of Rawdon Optical. 'Of course it has entailed a great deal of hard work and there is always a element of risk in any investment but if we want to continue to be a national and well supported laboratory – as we do – we have to be able to control our own destiny. In my opinion the risk to the business would be much greater if we did not make the investment now.'

Dale Parr, director of Rawdon Optical and the man most responsible implementing the practical ramifications of the investment, agrees: 'Previously we were sending out several hundred coated orders each day and came to question whether this was beneficial to our business. The accountants did the mathematics and it was clear we would make the investment back. From there it was a case of working out how to do it.'

After consideration the first step to solving the 'how' part was the purchase of two Satis Loh vacuum deposition machines: the 1200-DLX and the MC-380-X.

The establishment of a coating facility meant a reorganisation of the premises. Rawdon Optical is based in four large separate buildings that sit on the respective corners of a shared court space. The coating machines have been installed in the ground floor of one of the buildings with a new IT suite created in the upper floor.

'A key thing we had to do was upgrade the electricity provision on site because of the power required by the Satis Loh machines,' explains Parr. 'We have created a dedicated power room which provides around 190kW, which is pretty substantial. The last part of the jigsaw was to upgrade our IT organisation. So we have appointed an IT manager for the first time and put the related systems into the newly fitted IT suite with all the computer servers all housed in a bespoke room.'

The coating department has come online with five full-time staff working in a split-shift system designed to accomodate the three hours that the lenses spend in the ovens halfway through the coating process.

'We start at about 5am and finish around 5pm at night,' says Parr. 'The plan is to increase the workforce as the workload increases.'

Benefits to customers

So what benefits will Rawdon's clients get from the anti-reflection coating service?

'The biggest advantage is the increased speed with which we can

Vacuum chamber of the Satis Loh MC-380-X

get jobs done and back to a practice,' explains Crook. 'Previously there was an automatic three-day delay on coated jobs because we were sending a pair of finished lenses to a third party to be coated and sent back to us – so that is an instant improvement. Another side of it is that invariably the more complex jobs, in particular coated jobs, are the ones that are more likely to incur a problem at some stage and if a pair of coated lenses has to be redone you immediately have the same delay again.'

Crook notes that these delays in serving clients have been one of the biggest frustrations at Rawdon. 'We tried to put ourselves in our clients shoes and asked what they would want from a lab – consistent quality and service at a fair price – and that is what we are aiming for through our rolling programme of investment.'

The lab has come a long way to its current position on the cutting edge of the prescription house business. Rawdon Optical was founded in 1975 in a converted barn in the village of Rawdon, which is situated to the north of Leeds and fairly close to the current premises.

'The equipment was quite primitive but the standard of work was high so in 1989 Rayner Opticians [which still owns Rawdon Optical today] bought them up and moved them to the current site about 12 months later,' says Parr. 'The site has developed over the years. From originally holding two of the buildings on the court we have expanded and have filled all four since around 1999.'

The four buildings are now made up of one dedicated to surfacing, another split between surfacing and accounts, a third divided between customer services and glazing, and a fourth housing the new coatings and IT areas. The fourth building was previously used for the storage.

Over the time that the site has expanded so has the lab's scope. Originally solely dedicated to serving Rayner practices, today Rawdon is a national lab that serves practices all over the UK.

The current staff total at the Leeds site is 75 while another 17 people are employed at Derby Optical, which functions as a satellite glazing lab for Rayner practices. In days gone by there were another two satellite labs but the improvement in delivery services rendered those additional sites unnecessary.

'Clients can specify any type of lenses from any source and in addition to that we have our own in-house designed products too,' says Crook. 'I like to think we have the best of both worlds because we have the scale of the larger labs in terms of production efficiencies and buying clout but have the personal approach of a much smaller local lab.'

The anti-reflection coating service is the latest stage in a rolling programme of investment at Rawdon

'It is fair to say that any of the lab's customers can phone up with a question and get the answer straight away from someone that they know and who can make a decision if needs be right away,' confirms Parr.

Staff loyalty

This level of service is partly enabled by the company's excellent level of staff retention. No less than 15 people at the Leeds site have been presented with gold watches to mark 25 years of service to the company.

'We added up the total years of service across the staff a couple of years ago and it came to 888,' says Crook. 'I must admit I get a bit lump in the throat thinking about it – there are people here who have given more than half their adult lives to Rawdon. We are very proud of that and hopefully they are proud to work here. It is a two-way street and we have to look after them to keep them.'

As mentioned before the development of the lab's anti-reflection coating service is the latest stage in a rolling programme of investment at Rawdon.

'We invested heavily in freeform and digital technology about six years ago, purchasing Schneider machines,' says Crook. 'It is a case of evolution and investing in the business as we go: Dale has a never ending shopping list.'

'It has been an ongoing project for as long as I can remember here,' confirms Parr. 'The current strategy is the proper way – no matter what fancy freeform lens designs we have, and we've got plenty, without the coating facility we would be stuck at a half-way house with aspects of the business out of our control.'

Looking ahead Crook feels the business will continue to evolve but is reluctant to aim for growth at the expense of service.

'We've got the potential to grow bigger and the introduction of coatings is part of fulfilling that, but we have absolutely no desire to be the biggest lab or have the biggest market share – I think we would just end up as busy fools if we did. We want to be the best fair-value lab in the country, regardless of size and we can do more than we currently do without compromise. At some point we might outgrow these premises and need to look at what would be a dedicated bespoke operation but for now the next step is to expand our shift patterns and get more of the machines utilised more of the time.'