



Start Up Practice of the Year

When optometrist Mike Procter and dispensing optician Phil Howlett set out to launch Planit Opticians in Colne last July they had it all worked out – not least the name. Situated in the heart of a Lancashire town very much on the up, their strategy was to lure in the locals with some top brands and structured payment plans seems to have paid off.

‘Our performance so far is bang on target,’ Procter says. ‘We had a fairly clear idea about how quickly we could expect to build the business and how much we needed to spend on marketing to achieve this.’

However, what did turn out to be a surprise was winning Start Up Practice of the Year at the Optician Awards less than a year later. He adds: ‘We were delighted to win. You’re never quite sure what the criteria is that the judges are applying, so when we entered the competition we just explained the best we could our logic behind setting up the business. We were really excited on the night, not just because it was recognition, but because of the opportunity it presented in terms of marketing the business.’

Indeed, Planit has advertised its status as an award winning practice at every given opportunity; most notably by installing a large white badge on the window of the practice’s modern facade. ‘It’s on the website, on emails and all our printed media, on the windows and until recently it was on a banner across the way adjacent to the practice – it’s everywhere,’ he adds.

Procter, who also runs a number of other practices in the region, created the business model for Planit together with general manager Howlett, with their combined experience of around 30 years in practice invaluable.

He says: ‘We had lots and lots of conversations about where we both thought optics wasn’t working or where businesses weren’t delivering what the public wanted. All businesses have an issue in terms of attracting new clients and communicating a new proposition to them, but the issue that’s specific to optics in terms of creating a profitable business is that not enough people come back when you ask them to, while those that do don’t necessarily buy a pair of glasses.’

‘So in terms of the ethics of being an optician, if you’re inviting people back

Appealing patient payment plans and a strong focus on marketing helped Planit Opticians in Colne to become the Optician Awards Start Up Practice of the Year. **Joe Ayling** reports



Mike Procter (left) and Phil Howlett celebrate their success



to have their eyes examined and for the provision of eye care then of course that all stacks up. But if they haven’t bought any glasses at the end of that process we’d all go bust.

‘Our business model aims to increase the retention and conversion rates through tailored payment plans. That’s the whole thing about Planit, you’re planning your future eye care and your future eyewear as well as purchasing your current eyewear and eye care.’

Meanwhile, the practice name seems to have had the desired effect of catching the imagination of patients.

‘We wanted it to be easy to remember – a real one word, two syllable non-expansive title, with some sort of strapline that invited a need for further investigation. When people

then purchase the glasses it allows us to explain why we’re called Planit,’ Procter says. However, he stresses there is much more to Planit than the name suggests. Its spacious design, clean lines and sleek green and black colour scheme result in a contemporary look and frame brands including Oakley and Ray-Ban have been carefully selected.

‘We’re trying to create a desirability, but make it affordable for people to give them the justification they would require before they make a purchase. So the first part of the process is all about desirability in terms of what brands we sell and how we go about selling them. The dispensing optician’s role is to create that desirability.’

Howlett adds: ‘The reason we chose Colne in the first place is that you’ve got a working class population that judging by the other types of retail businesses coming into the area is becoming more affluent.

‘When it comes to choosing glasses, in the first instance it’s not about payment plans or any of that, it’s a normal dispensing process you’d see in any optical practice. The next part is specific to us and that’s about tailoring both this purchase and possible ongoing purchases of eye care and eyewear to their specific needs in terms of affordability and intervals between. That’s the bit specific to what we’re trying to do as a practice.’ ●

● **Start Up Practice of the Year, Sponsored by Birmingham Optical**

Winner: Planit Opticians, Colne
 Shortlisted: Mellis Eyecare, Thornaby
 Tempany’s Boutique Opticians, Broadstone