



# Caffeine-fuelled in Milan

**F**ew trade shows can reflect the feel of a city and optical industry as much as Mido. Sprawling exhibition halls, niche showrooms and pop-up eyewear events contribute to an espresso coffee-fuelled buzz throughout Milan.

Waiting half an hour at Malpenza Airport for a shuttle bus to the hotel offers immediate acclimatisation to transport and weather in the city, which is a noticeable few degrees warmer than the bitter homeland.

Following the delay, though, the coach speedily sets off into central Milan. Feeling belted-up is going to be a rarity at Mido, which had 1,000 exhibitors and 43,000 visitors from March 2-4.

## First morning

Rarely can arriving for the first morning of a trade fair be described as a breath of fresh air. But the open air walkways at Fieramilano heighten the senses on a cool Saturday morning. On arrival *Optician* checks in at the press office for an espresso and shovels up piles of press releases and show guides.

First up is a press conference to celebrate 100 years of German company Eschenbach. On hand to address the media is company chief executive Dr Wolfgang Rebstock.

Today, low vision aids such as magnifiers represent 25 per cent of the Eschenbach business but are still considered of utmost importance by Dr Rebstock given the rising population of elderly people worldwide.

This includes China, where the company will commence doing business this year. 'The Chinese



Mido's mixture of fashion, chaos and excitement makes it more authentic than your average exhibition. **Joe Ayling** reports on his two days in Milan and the highlights of the show

opticians don't want to use Made in China products, they want Eschenbach Made in Germany,' he says.

In eyewear, which represents three quarters of revenue, Eschenbach is likely to develop its own brands rather than seek new licences. 'One of the positive things for us is that most of our business is on the solid ground of own brands so no third party can draw away a licensed brand,' adds Dr Rebstock.

The company is also planning for the April launch of Storm through UK subsidiary International Eyewear,

which it acquired in 2008, and a new own brand collection for Europe to mark its 100 year anniversary.

*Optician* takes the opportunity to ask more about the recent acquisition. 'International Eyewear didn't have brands in the price and premium level that we had, so there was not a cannibalisation factor,' Dr Rebstock says. 'They are also a family company like us. We kept it feeling like it is and kept the name but added the Eschenbach division to sell our brands. The good thing about an acquisition

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is you find people already in the company that can do the job better than you could do it.'

Around a mile down the walkway visitors hit the main exhibition halls at Mido. The venue is split into a technology hall, lens area, Asian pavilion, two fashion district pavilions and the Mido Design Lab, and weaving between pavilions to make appointments requires endurance.

Crowds gather at the stand of Glorify Unbreakable on the first morning, where trial bike world champion Vittorio Brumotti is trying his hardest to smash a pair of the Austrian eyewear company's sunglasses with his bike. Glorify inventor Christoph Egger tells *Optician* he has an EU patent for the frame, which either pops out or uses an unbreakable hinge.

Already released in Austria and Switzerland, Glorify is setting up in Germany but has no distribution for the UK or Italian markets it is presenting to. 'We know the brand is good for Italy but to do distribution is a different story,' says Egger as Brumotti bunny hops on his bike between black crates. 'Now we feel ready to go to Germany and do it in a good way.'

## Category killers

One company at Mido with direct plans for the UK is Ogi Eyewear, whose vice president of global sales Joseph Tallier tells *Optician*: 'Right now we are taking on a worldwide expansion.'

The US company's growth will take shape through direct distribution, says Tallier, adding: 'Distributors are good partners but the world is so small today and we don't want our message to be diluted.'

Nine sales reps have been hired in Europe but Ogi is still looking for the



**Trial bike world champion Vittorio Brumotti tries but fails to smash a pair of Glorify Unbreakable sunglasses**

right person to drive its UK plans. 'We are looking for a seasoned professional who knows how to sell luxury eyewear, has a good history with accounts and is energetic.'

The Seraphin collection of neoclassic frames made up of titanium, hand-casted aluminium and Italian acetate is the best known of Ogi's brands currently sold through some independents in the UK.

'I think Seraphin is the best fit,' says Tallier. 'The UK is a very sophisticated market so matches that taste well.' Tallier describes Seraphin's pricing below the €100 mark as a 'category killer to the couture', believing it can punch above its weight in terms of quality.

'The downturn in the economy has really helped our strategy,' he adds. 'We are offering both style and value, whereas I think flashy brands have become a little declassé.'

Indeed, experimenting away from the mainstream brands is also a recommendation of WestGroupe's Glen Eisenberg. The Canadian group's Fysh, Klink Denmark and Evatik collections, sold in the UK through 1,000 independents and distributed by Ridgway Optical, follow fashion catwalk trends closer than heavily branded spectacle frames do, according to Eisenberg.

'They [heavily branded ranges] are very traditional in their make up, the only thing that is enhancing them is their brand name,' he says. 'We're interpreting what is happening on the fashion catwalks and using true design elements that are being pulled in from the runway. There is a holistic approach that we take to bring this product into the market.'

Alas, at the blink of an eye the first morning is over. But not all at Mido has run so smoothly. A brief check with government service Counterfeiting Free confirms there were 12 arrests for selling fake optical product during

the first four hours of the show. The action forms part of a campaign, communicated throughout signage at the venue, to protect trademarks, patents and designs on display.

## Party atmosphere

There is a great variety of stands at this year's Mido, which together create something of a party atmosphere. A giant steel burger van and blaring music stands iBerlin apart, while bikini-clad models lounge in hot tubs at the Polar sunglass stand.

As the afternoon draws in, there is an opportunity to discuss matters closer to home when *Optician* is invited to the Inspects stand to discuss UK design and manufacturing.

Fresh product from Superdry, CAT and Animal is on display, alongside Inspects' 2012 *Optician* Awards trophy. The company is going big at Mido with more than a dozen representatives, while its Algha Group stand is hosted by three members of the Viner family.

Inspects CEO Robin Totterman tells *Optician* of his plans for the Algha factory in East London – a rare survival story in British spectacle frame manufacturing – amid soaring overseas demand.

'Our Far Eastern business is exploding,' Totterman says. 'They love the quintessentially English look.'

He adds that last year's acquisition of Algha opened up the opportunity to produce more of Inspects' brands in the UK, so as shipping and labour costs creep up in Asia, new tooling and machinery is being fitted in East London.

'Now it has gone full circle and the value of British-made product hasn't been greater for a number of years. The gap is narrowing,' adds Totterman.

There are no shortage of networking events at Mido and when the first day's appointments are over Theo lays on a Belgian beer reception. The quirky



**Ogi's Joseph Tallier and CEO Robert Rich**



eyewear maker uses the event to introduce four new models of its Olive collection, boasting a new 'covered over' hinge as smooth as the Vedett being handed out.

Later there is a reception to mark the merging of The Vision Council and European Sunglass Association, before parties to celebrate the launch of Carrera and Replay collections back in Central Milan.

Indeed, the packed diary of events at Mido can only serve as an example to show organisers of how to keep visitors engaged and create a buzz. *Optician* ends the night in a cabaret-style cocktail party with live music and a 1930s-style photo booth to pose in the new Replay frames.

## Warm welcome

Day two in Milan commences with a visit to Marcolin's showroom in the city centre and a short walk across Centro wipes away the cobwebs of last night's partying.

There is a warm welcome at the door from no less than five happy receptionists. Marcolin has chosen to receive guests in a more serene environment than the packed Fieramilano, and the showroom has a supremely stylish feel to it, with carrot and apple juice handed out, gold heeled receptionists and resident models.

At the show itself Marcolin has re-launched its Web Eyewear brand, CEO Giovanni Zoppas tells *Optician*, but invited journalists, photographers, designers and buyers view its more established brands at the showroom.

Zoppas says: 'Mido is a stable platform to launch something like Web, there are a lot of brand new things and new products.'

'When we've got worldwide awareness for a brand what we have to do is give our clients the opportunity to stay relaxed in a place with a lot of light, to understand our collections, what is new and our proposition.'

'Yesterday at Mido people were coming to get information and everybody was trying to understand the basis for the re-launch. Web remains a Made in Italy brand but we have added newness and some touches that made Web a success in the past.'

He also vows to help optical practices sell-through Marcolin product without having to do unnecessary groundwork.

'We will give more and more support to people in practice, including sales tools. When you're selling a Swarovski, for example, you're not just selling a piece of plastic you're selling a 360-degree lifestyle,' says Zoppas.



**Inspects team (l-r): Robin Totterman, Fiona Bermingham, Craig Justice, Victoria Stoker, Paul Lovett, Adam Abel (holding the award), Nick Youle, Hayley Croker, Sophie Woodrow, Rebecca Harwood Lincoln**

'We are working a lot on all the trade merchandising side of the business. The idea is to support the trade as much as we can.'

It is clear from the local perspective that the Sunday of Mido is the main event for Italian opticians, when they can close the practice and visit the show. This year organisers have laid on free train and bus transfers for opticians and students travelling into Milan from other Italian cities.

Zoppas adds: 'There are more visitors than last year. They are looking for pavilions like the design lab where there are products outside the box.'

On arrival back at Fieramilano, Cirillo Marcolin agreed over another espresso that visitor numbers are up and the final count later confirms as much (News 08.03.13), but the reported traffic is not universally witnessed.

For example, Continental Eyewear sales and marketing director Neal Grimason tells *Optician*: 'The exhibitions have changed over the years. You get used to fewer people visiting the show generally but the quality is very good. People are here for a purpose and there are fewer tyre-kickers.'

Without further ado it is time to reunite with other fellow countrymen at Mido. William Morris quite literally flies the flag, by providing thousands of branded union jack carrier bags for weary visitors weighed down with brochures and samples. It proves effective as the bags can be spotted everywhere. The company has also set up a separate exhibition stand for its Charles Stone New York collection, which seems to be forming its own identity less than a year after launching.

Dunelm Optical director Peter

Beaumont, meanwhile, says the company has launched 15 new styles for Mido, including for the Paul Costelloe brand and a Whiz Kids collection modelled by Beaumont's granddaughter for posters at the show. Brand UK is once again reported to be a major selling point for international buyers.

'I think it is a good thing to promote Britishness,' he says.

Therefore, despite the showcasing of Milanese lifestyle, fashion and design, exports from the UK leave a strong impression at Mido.

On completing a final appointment with Safilo Group it becomes clear just what big business the fashion frames market has become. A tour of the brand portfolio prompts superlatives including 'sexy', 'fresh', 'super-clean', 'super-sensual' and 'a taste of the past'. It is difficult not to think back to conversations with Tallier and Eisenberg, but what big business lacks in parochial charm it gains in marketing prowess and brand stature.

A striking Dior sunglass sticks in the mind while the translucent Carrera range celebrated at last night's party also demonstrates the allure of Safilo's product.

It is evident on a busy final afternoon that while UK manufacturing is unlikely to reach the dizzying heights of Made in Italy eyewear, British brands have created an exciting trusted niche in world retail.

As *Optician* awaits the two-hour shuttle back to Malpenza Airport, Mido has showcased a truly global range of the latest eyewear fashions. Only on returning home can you decide, over a strong cup of English breakfast tea, which ideas have made the journey back with you in one piece. ●