



Winning for a lifetime

It's not every day that an award is created that echoes your own practice's tagline but this is exactly what happened to IJ Brown of Dorchester. It entered and won.

'We have used the tagline "vision for a lifetime" in our communications for over 20 years,' says Paul Wallis, optometrist and partner, so entering the Vision for Life Award (sponsored by Johnson & Johnson) seemed like the natural thing to do.

IJ Brown in Dorchester is one of a four-strong group in the area and prides itself on putting patients first. Although more than half of the town's population is aged over 50 and the practice has a specialism in low vision aids it also runs screening for children with special needs giving it a broad spread of ages to cater for.

'We have always put our patients first,' says Wallis when asked about the ethos of the practice. 'It is as old as the hills but it is still true, we try to treat our patients as we would wish to be treated ourselves. We place a great emphasis on making sure they understand what is happening to their vision and how it may affect them and how best to address any changes.'

These soft patient skills are the important thing, he says. 'We are not seduced by the lure of high-tech kit.' Equipment has its place but nothing beats communicating with patients.

Long-term view

The importance of vision is the key message I J Brown tries to get across. 'Particularly with the very young and the very old. Their vision is critical and they need to understand how this can affect their life.' The way they see the world changes as they age and they can be very worried about these changes, says Wallis, so I J Brown takes a long-term view. If that means losing patients to the multiples in the short term so be it. Wallis says when patients return they are welcomed by the practice.

'Rather than concentrating on whether they can be sold another pair of glasses today, we are with them for the long term. We emphasise the eye care element of our services and hope that our expertise is recognised.'

In its newsletters I J Brown tries to inform and educate in many of the

Paul Wallis of IJ Brown of Dorchester says he would encourage other practices to enter the Optician Awards. It's an enjoyable process that makes you really assess what you do and why you do it



Alun Beaven (left) and Paul Wallis hold the Vision for Life trophy at the Awards presentation

areas of eye care not touched by the eye examination to trigger a reaction from the patient.

Although the practice entered because of that 'vision for a lifetime' tagline it took nothing for granted and Wallis says it didn't expect to win. 'We were aiming to go for it in 2014 and thought at the last minute we would enter for 2013 as a way of testing the waters, consequently we entered with no expectations at all. So getting shortlisted was a major surprise and winning was amazing.'

A group of 10 staff from the practice travelled to Birmingham for the black tie presentation. 'We had a fantastic time. However, by Tuesday morning I was not so sure as most of the staff were still struggling with the after-effects of the night out.'

He says the delight was shared by the whole team who all knew the practice was up against some strong opposition. 'We felt we had won just getting to the final. The celebrations were ecstatic and the victorious staff took to the dance floor with no inhibitions,' he adds.

The trophy now takes pride of place in the practice and IJ Brown has publicised the win in the local media. Wallis says he would encourage others to enter the Optician Awards.



OPTICIAN
AWARDS

- Vision for Life Award, sponsored by Johnson & Johnson

Winner: IJ Brown, Dorchester
Shortlisted:
Keith Holland & Associates, Cheltenham
Buchanan Optometrists, Snodland

'It is almost like doing a practice audit because it makes you really assess what you do and how you do it,' he says. The upside is that entering is a much more enjoyable process because it is something you want to do. That process forces you to see the practice as a judge would view it, he says, which does concentrate the mind.

'I suspect most practices think: "We just do what all practices do, we are not any different to all the rest." If you really think about it you will begin to realise that maybe you do have something that is essentially "you" and does lift you away from the crowd.'

In Wallis' case it was recognising that over the years his interest in low vision aids, picked up as a pre-reg at Moorfields, had built into something appreciable. 'This is very much one of the Cinderella subjects, over time we have managed to carve out a niche for ourselves. Having created a niche in one area of expertise it is easier to then extend into other areas as you are trusted in the original.'

'You can't overnight suddenly become an expert in a field but gradually you inch forward and oddly you may not even be aware of the progress you are making. The awards are a good way of making you assess your own performance.' ●