



## Multiple Practice of the Year



This year's Multiple Practice of the Year award went to a team that identified a problem and together came up with a strategy to solve it

It's 2010 and staff morale is at an all-time low. The economic forecast is bleak, one in four of the town's residents are claiming benefits and unemployment locally is nearly twice the national average. Even the most optimistic person would find it hard to be positive about business prospects.

Hartlepool Specsavers had identified 2011 as the year to take the store to new heights but it seemed the odds were stacked against them. The story of how it motivated its team and turned its prospects around made it a worthy winner of this year's Multiple Practice of the Year Award.

First on the agenda was a 'state of the nation' speech from director Ian Walker in which he shared the accounts with the team in full and explained that the business was 'massively underachieving'.

The aim was to make the situation as transparent as possible, as manager and DO Steven Wheatley explains: 'We'd had a terrible year and it was no use denying it. Our team really wants the store to do well so they did need to know. It meant they were pretty much behind us from the start.'

The next step was to hold an open forum one evening to allow the staff to set out their own vision of what they wanted from the store and define its mission. 'Not only did it give us direction, it showed us what they, and the customers, were passionate about,' says Wheatley.

Both events had a positive impact on morale and showed that communication would be a decisive factor in the store's future. The tea room was identified as the key location for a wall displaying financial information, training plans and mystery shopper results, as well as a section inviting feedback on successes and concerns.

Morning 'huddles' and one-to-ones held every six weeks provided more opportunities for staff to air their ideas and have their efforts recognised.

### Investing in youth

So far so good, but it was the store's strategy for recruiting and training young people that especially caught the



Ross Hutcherson from Specsavers Hartlepool is presented with the Multiple Practice of the Year Award by Anne McCormack, MD of sponsor Macuvision

judges' eye. When a senior dispensing optician retired and another left to go to university, the decision was taken to invest in new recruits rather than replace like with like.

Youth unemployment in Hartlepool is over 17 per cent, more than 7 per cent higher than in the North East as a whole and over 9 per cent higher than the national average. Approached by apprenticeship provider Key Training,

the store learned there were many excellent candidates available locally and agreed to give them a try.

'We'd previously had bad experiences with apprentices but this company said there were lots of bright people out there – A-grade students – who were put off going to university either by rising fees or the lack of graduate jobs,' Wheatley explains.

'We thought we'd interview a few and set out to get one apprentice, but we were so impressed by the candidates we ended up taking four.'

Two clinical assistants have now completed NVQ level 3 and another is considering enrolling on a dispensing course, while one has trained as a technician. Since winning the award the store has also taken on a pre-reg optometrist and invested further in the training of its DOs.

'Some practices may be cautious about taking on apprentices but I want people to know how good they can be. It's definitely the way forward,' Wheatley argues.

Customer service has improved dramatically through attention to the customer journey and encouraging staff to take ownership of people's spectacles, with simple measures such as each team member keeping a diary for calls and collections.

### Winning streak

Taking the Optician Award at the first attempt was just the start of a winning streak for the Hartlepool team. The store ended the year with more than double the annual regional growth for the group and the highest performing large Specsavers in the region in its mystery shopping league.

Local recognition of its achievements has also come through winning the Hartlepool Retailer of the Year Award and, most recently, a local health service award for Optometrist of the Year.

'After the year we had, to have a year like this one has been a polar opposite,' says Wheatley, who credits the whole team and its 'unsung heroes' for turning the practice around and creating an atmosphere where success can thrive. 'I'm always telling them how good they are and now they know I'm not lying!' ●

● Multiple Practice of the Year sponsored by Macuvision Winner – Specsavers, Hartlepool

Shortlisted  
Boots Opticians, Brownhills  
Specsavers, Sutton in Ashfield  
Specsavers, Teignmouth