



Simon Jones talks to Kirk Originals MD Jason Kirk about what it takes to win the Fashion Frames Practice of the Year at the 2012 Optician Awards

The Fashion Frames Practice of the Year award was won by Kirk Originals for its flagship store on Conduit Street in the west end of London.

The category is always hotly contested and this year was no different, with 14 practices in the running.

The *Optician* judging panel all singled out the store for praise, encouraged by the fact that the brand has dared to take on the process of opening a new optical store, with a new set of rules, in the middle of a financial downturn.

The store opened in 2011 and since then has received plaudits and awards from around the world for its design – it was ranked alongside Apple and Nike as one of the world's coolest flagship stores by retail journal *Business Insider*. It's fairly obvious that the practice, or store as Kirk Originals prefers to call it, is a totally different proposition to regular practices. From the outside there is little to identify it as an optical fashion store, only the abstract eye displays suspended from the ceiling. It fits in perfectly with the shops around it, which include high end fashion labels such as Vivienne Westwood, Issey Miyake and Belstaff.

'Fashionable frames require a similar environment or the consumer will not be convinced. We tried to take everything one would normally associate with an opticians practice, and then threw it all in the bin. We didn't want the traditional ideas like white boxes and everything presented on shelves, so we came up with something else,' says managing director Jason Kirk.

Frames in action

Kirk says the store was designed to be more like a fashionable clothes shop than an opticians and as such, has been painted in black, with accented lighting showing off the custom-made display rails – which feature the novel 'winkies'. 'We wanted the glasses to come to life, so we created the winkies characters to show off the glasses. The drawn eyes allow the customers to see the glasses in action and they genuinely



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Fashion Frames Practice of the Year

build up a relationship with the glasses and the winkie, so that when they put on a pair of Kirk Originals, they make the person feel good.'

So what is the average Kirk Originals patient like? 'We don't have patients, we have clients and we prefer to think of dispenses as fashion transactions,' says Kirk. The masked nature of the medical side of the business continues in the store and is very much a deliberate ploy. 'We've moved away for the word patient and moved the testing room away because we don't want people to feel like they are coming here for medical attention,' says Kirk. Customers are taken downstairs for eye tests, and the only evidence that the store offers them is an old-fashioned A-board on the street – something which Kirk says has increased trade since its introduction shortly after the store opened.

Social media has also been a major factor in the store's success. The @kirkoriginals Twitter account has over 1,300 followers and is used to promote

offers in the store and to interact with clients. Its Facebook account has a similar number of 'friends' and allows the store to interact with the client base in more detail. It also used to promote news events such as celebrity spotting and product placements.

As for any successful project in the spotlight there are detractors, many quick to point out that the store only stocks its own Kirk Originals products, but this isn't the case. It regularly plays host to guest brands from all around the globe, each with an eyewear ethos similar to that of its own. Guests have included French minimalists Underoos, and California based Leisure Society, that produces eyewear for the most ardent of aficionados.

On what the award win means to the store and the brand, Kirk says: 'It's a fantastic achievement and a great honour to have been selected by your industry peers. It's something we are communicating heavily to press and now have a sign about it in the window – which builds confidence on the part of the consumer that the medical aspect of Kirk Originals is of the same quality as our frames.'

The flagship store's success has paved the way for expansion and Kirk is aiming high in the company's 20th year of trading. 'We're thinking locally, but also globally too,' he says cryptically. 'We know the costs of everything now, so expansion of the Kirk Originals brand makes perfect sense.' ●

● **Fashion Frames Practice of the Year sponsored by Vogue**

Winner - Kirk Originals, London

Shortlisted

Eyesite Opticians, Beverley
M Procter Opticians, Harrogate
Martin Reynolds Opticians, Bishops Stortford
20-20 Optical Store, London