



# Green shoots in Limerick

**E**conomic recovery in the eurozone cannot come soon enough for practitioners in Ireland having to work that little bit harder to survive.

Vision 2 Opticians has matured into a business offering e-commerce, taking a lead on children's vision and spearheading collaborative marketing campaigns. Upon opening 11 years ago, the independent practice on Henry Street, Limerick, was transformed from a derelict building to a contemporary practice fitting of an area boasting high-end hotels and shops.

Despite the modern look, director and optometrist Orlaith Ryan (pictured) has retained a traditional approach and grown its patient list through both face-to-face and online engagement.

Upon arriving at the practice it is

Irish independent Vision 2 Opticians opens its doors to *Optician* and explains how a number of initiatives have spurred growth in a tough trading environment. **Joe Ayling** reports from Limerick

clear the team has also invested time on the window displays. One space is aimed at children going back to school while another exhibits framed art and vintage suitcases to attract a trendy clientele, with both catching the eye of passers by.

Director and optometrist Orlaith Ryan, preparing to feature a number of designer sunglass ranges and present prizes at a nearby catwalk fashion event, says the area has changed no end since the turn of the century.

'This whole area was redeveloped around a decade ago. This was a derelict building and they built it from

the ground up,' she says. 'It was a really exciting time because we'd moved into an empty shell and it took 8-10 days to transform it.'

Indeed, her practice has evolved from initially employing one locum and two staff members to now having five support staff, including a clinical practice placement student and an optometrist. It hasn't all been plain sailing, however, and the recent economic crisis – a bleak subject humorously banned from mention in some Irish establishments – has altered the retail landscape.

'Up to 2008 it was a very prosperous market in Ireland,' says Ryan, recalling



The independent practice is located in an area boasting high-end hotels and shops

patients splashing out on several pairs of eyewear in single visits. 'Now people continue to look for good value for money and as a business owner you must be prepared to meet your client's requirements.'

However, there are few signs of recession across the street from Vision 2 Opticians, where shoppers exit the doors of a Dunnes Stores outlet with trolleys stocked up with provisions ahead of the weekend's All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship.

'This year things are certainly starting to improve, there are some green shoots of recovery and long may it last,' adds Ryan.

Sport seems to be as much part of the Irish culture as the famous staples of soda bread, stout and folk music. Ryan's 11-year-old son, a hurling player she fits with contact lenses, is the inspiration for a latest campaign, called My Contact Sport, which encourages children who play sport to have an eye test.

'Wearing contact lenses makes them much more confident on the field and confident in themselves,' she says.

### Pooling resources

Ryan is on the board of directors for EyeZone, a group of 100 Irish independents pooling their resources on campaigns and marketing initiatives. Working in isolation is no



A welcoming professional environment is key to business success for director and optometrist Orlaith Ryan

longer deemed an affordable option for high street practices given the marketing might of the multiples. The group's next campaign, called Mind The Gap, targets a gap in eye care for 12-16 year olds in Ireland caught between school screening and having a medical card.

She says: 'As an independent practice owner, hiring a marketing consultant to design your campaign posters, adverts and online media for various events can prove expensive. But through Eyezone we can work together to create and deliver successful national marketing campaigns.'

### Contact lenses

Together with children's eye care, contact lenses represent a large chunk of business for Vision 2 Opticians. 'Contact lenses are always really popular,' says Ryan, identifying daily disposables, multifocal and toric lenses as the top growth areas at the moment.

She continues: 'People who have worn contact lenses since they were in their 20s find themselves in their 50s and 60s and then they need multifocal contact lenses. Others are looking to start wearing them for the first time for sports and social reasons.'

'When you're examining a patient's eyes, you ask what hobbies and activities they enjoy doing. You can also tell them how contact lenses have improved significantly and they are now very comfortable to wear.'

'We've re-done our website with an e-commerce operation in the past year. We price them [CLs] at the best value we can, but we also speak to patients about the health of their eyes. Buying online is a matter of convenience as well.'

Although internet-only contact lens sellers do not have the rents and running costs of a high street practice, established patient loyalty works in Ryan's favour.

Another help to Vision 2 Opticians' contact lens business is the close relationship it has with Johnson & Johnson's Vistakon plant, also in Limerick. Ryan believes her patients would be well aware if their lenses were Made in Ireland – something a certain Arthur Guinness found to work in his favour.

Aside from product though, creating a welcome environment in the Irish spirit is the most important fuel for growth. 'It's all about delivering a good professional personal service,' she adds. ●