



Optical Supplier of the Year is one of the most closely contested categories at the *Optician Awards*, primarily because of the eclectic nature of the nominees. The 2011 awards were no different, with entries invited from frame designers, prescription labs, lens manufacturers and even training providers.

Despite the variety in the nominees, the *Optician* judges were looking for common traits – excellent service, quality of product and dedication to customer relationships.

The entries received demonstrated excellence in all of the aforementioned areas and much deliberation was required over who would walk away with the award. The judges felt that there was one particular nominee that performed impeccably across the entry criteria – Hoya UK. 'It was nice to win the 2011 award, but really for us, this is recognition for the hard work Hoya has been doing over the last three or four years,' says Dale Hughes, Hoya's UK marketing manager.

Over the course of 31 years, Hoya UK has developed a reputation for being more than just a lens supplier, but as a full solution provider to independent opticians. As well as a selection of award-winning lens lines, the manufacturer has developed sales training initiatives for independent practices and created a customer service team to look after their needs.

Time is of the essence

Recognising the detrimental effect that slow turnaround times can have on independent practices and their customers, Hoya has set about making sure that its times are class-leading. Like many lens suppliers, it has a number of stats and metrics that can be called upon, but the standout figures for delivery are 98.5 per cent delivered on time and more impressively, 91 per cent are delivered early. These stats were taken from the 12 months prior to the award win in April, a period which included volcanic ash clouds and times when much of the country came to a standstill due to snow. When *Optician* visited Hoya in August 2011, it claimed that the on-time figure was now running at over 99 per cent.

While delivery is swift, Hoya also makes sure that delays are minimal and rectified quickly. 'What really kills practices is when orders go late,' says managing director, Martin Batho. 'Virtually nothing goes more than one or two days late with Hoya. Many

A timely award

Hoya UK was named Optical Supplier of the Year at the 2011 *Optician Awards*. **Simon Jones** visited its Wrexham manufacturing facility to find out why



Martin Batho of Hoya celebrates with the Optical Supplier of the Year Award

competitors have orders that drag on for well over a week and that makes the optician look bad,' he adds. Practices are notified of any delays in production by customer services, who are told instantly of any breakages or issues in production.

The effort put into providing products on time would be negated completely if they lack continuity. Hoya claims that a 'right first time' rate of 99.5 per cent is testament to the regimented high standards of its output. 'It's easy to dismiss, but it has to be a given,' adds Batho. 'What tends to happen in this industry is that the peak seasons can see a dip in quality due to the suppliers working on lots of tinted lenses.' Hoya regularly monitors the return rate to make sure that this 'right first time' mantra isn't just top-line marketing speak. Improvements in the production process have seen the rate drop from 0.83 per cent in 2010 to just 0.53 per cent in 2011.

Just because return rates have dropped, Hoya hasn't rested on its laurels when it comes to customer service. It says that the aim of its customer services team is to effectively

become an extra member of staff in the practice, and goes about doing this in a number of ways. Efficient training of customer service staff is high on Hoya's list of priorities, something reflected in the fact that all customer service advisers carry out training which is effectively the first year of a dispensing optician course. This allows the advisers to speak with practices on their level and recognise complexities and problems straight away. Calls are routed depending on their location, so more often than not, practices will speak to the same representative, allowing them to build up a better rapport.

Innovation

Excellent customer service counts for nothing if the products do not meet the high expectations of independent opticians. Hoya believes they have some of the best lenses and technology in optics, along with stringent quality control checks at every stage of the production process, such as lenses being visually checked in a regulated 2,000 lux of light after each stage of production. Steve Davies, production manager for Hoya, said: 'If you can't see imperfections in that amount of light, then you won't see any in a practice.'

Hoya has also invested heavily in manufacturing equipment. The most recent Schneider purchase has been brought in to give its TrueForm lenses greater traction in the UK market. Until recently, the lenses had to be shipped from Thailand, which extended delivery times. The new machinery highlights its commitment to offering the best possible products to practices.

Despite winning the 2011 *Optician* award, Hoya says that it will continue to innovate and set itself apart from its competitors. The recently-launched VisuReal software is being taken up by more practices and gives them a chance to give patients a visual representation of what frames will look like as well as explaining the benefits of specifying additional coatings. This, coupled with a number of new lens products, should see Hoya continue to develop its reputation as a leader in the optical industry. ●

OPTICAL SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR

- **Winner** Hoya Lens UK
- **Shortlisted**
Essilor
Focus Optical Laboratories