



# Complete course in dispensing

## Part 1 - Practice development, marketing and communication

In the first of a major 10-part series on all matters relating to dispensing, **Andrew Keirl** and **Richard Payne** discuss how best to promote the service and appliances offered by a practice

In many practices the role of manager is the responsibility of the dispensing optician or the optometrist. Not only must he/she be masters of the frame and lens, but also experts in marketing, practice presentation, recruitment, staff training and customer services. This article takes a brief look at some of the considerations the practice manager/owner should look at when developing an optical practice.

### The shopping experience

Whether we like it or not, in today's competitive retail environment, the optical practice must meet the expectations of its clients and potential clients by providing a pleasant, accessible and visually inviting atmosphere in which all who enter feel comfortable and at ease in their surroundings.

Every aspect of the practice from the use of co-ordinated stationery, uniforms and company logo to the style of chairs, furniture, decoration and position of lighting can be used to create a pleasant shopping experience.

In the larger multiple groups most of this attention to detail occurs during the initial practice fitting and is maintained by a tightly controlled corporate image that dictates every aspect of the practice layout, colour scheme, uniforms and point of sale. Outside consultants that specialise in retail marketing are available to assist in developing and maintaining the company's image, leaving very



An example of a well designed practice: Bennett and Batty Opticians, Liverpool

little for those on the ground to do.

For the independent practice these skills can be illusive and the costs incurred in obtaining such advice may be disproportionately high. So it is often the humble optometric or dispensing manager within an independent practice that carries the responsibility for practice presentation and development. When considering practice presentation, we should look at the following:

- Decoration
- Position of furniture
- Stationery
- Point of sale material
- Lighting
- Staff uniforms
- Frame presentation
- Fixtures and fittings
- Storage
- Communication skills
- Staff training.

### The client journey

To appreciate just what is involved in practice design and presentation, we must first put ourselves in the client's shoes. We must see what they see and experience what they experience. Let

us consider the journey a client makes through a practice by examining aspects of practice design and presentation that may encourage them to stay with the practice.

### From the outside

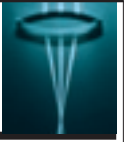
Effective use of any available window space can greatly enhance the practice image. Make use of point of sale supplied by frame, lens and contact lens manufacturers. For larger windows, suppliers will often issue additional material, if you ask for it. Change the window display regularly and ensure that it is clean and well-illuminated.

### Inside from the outside

For many potential clients the final decision to enter the practice is made when looking through the window. Well illuminated point of sale within the practice that follows themes used in the window will draw their attention and encourage them inside. With regard to waiting areas, some practitioners unintentionally appear to run a 'row of chairs' shop, so it is important to try and conceal the waiting area from direct view from the outside of the premises.

### SERIES MODULES

- Practice development, marketing and communication
- Prescription interpretation
- Frame design
- Spectacle lenses
- Tints and coatings
- Dispensing
- Specialist lenses
- Ordering, checking and collection
- Non-tolerance
- Glossary



## First glance inside

Potential clients are interested in spectacles and clinical services, so these should be evident as soon as an individual enters the practice. Maybe an information sign listing the services available or a brightly illuminated display of this month's featured frame range should greet the client as they enter the practice, or why not both? First impressions are as important today as they have ever been and the old adage 'you never get a second chance to make a first impression' still holds true.

## Reception

For most clients, the first point of call, and also the hub for everything that happens within the practice is the reception area. Don't tuck it at the back of the practice but make a feature of it and ensure that it is close enough to the entrance so that new clients are not forced to walk past rows of waiting patients all staring at them. The reception area should be clear of box files and piles of last month's invoices and present a clean organised image.

## The waiting area

For many clients this is the longest time of inactivity within the practice. While clients are waiting they will stare at your carpets, your skirting boards, staff footwear or browse through magazines. This is also the time when your attention to detail will be scrutinised, particularly, the cleanliness of the practice, the staff uniforms and especially the magazines. There is nothing worse than having to rummage through copies of *Slimming World* May '94 for entertainment while you are waiting. Consider sitting with waiting clients to discuss the latest frame ranges and contact lens schemes.

Take time out to occasionally sit in the waiting area yourself, to see what your clients see, and if you don't like what you see, change it.

## Clinical areas

Why do contact lenses and in particular, diagnostic contact lenses, appear to multiply by themselves? A good question, but not one you really want your clients asking. Hide them away. In fact, hide all unnecessary items away. These are clinical areas and as such should look the part, with clean hygienic surfaces, no clutter, just ready for the task in hand, the clinical assessment of your client's vision.

## Frame display and dispensing areas

For the dispensing optician the frame display and dispensing areas of a practice are probably the most important aspect

of day to day work. Remember, just as it is for the market trader selling fruit and vegetables, the frames are your products and your goods, the sale of which will provide the bulk of the profit for the practice. If frames are arranged in groups, with their own point of sale material, it will be easier for clients and staff to find what they are looking for. Highlight featured ranges with special displays and lighting. Rotate the stock regularly to keep it fresh, and keep it clean and clearly priced.

For many clients the purchase of a designer frame is as much about buying into the lifestyle associated with the brand as wearing the frame itself. Highlighting various designer ranges with point of sale, special display stands and lighting can help to reinforce the brand identity and improve sales of that particular range. For those responsible for frame buying remember that you are not buying, what you personally like. You are buying products that will potentially sell in your practice.

## Stationery

'Image is everything', so it is important to ensure that all stationery used within the practice is branded with the practice logo and contact details. Avoid the temptation to use photocopied material. Remember that once the client leaves the practice, the leaflet or appointment card they have taken may be all that they have to remember you by later,

so make it count.

For each client, their experiences as they journey through your practice may be unique, and although it will be impossible to please everyone, careful thought about the type, style and placement of furniture, displays, lighting and point of sale can dramatically enhance the image and appeal of a practice, resulting in increased visitors and improved sales.

## Marketing

It is well known that effective marketing can greatly enhance practice sales, but where do we start? Do we employ consultants? Do we take out a full page advertisement in the local paper? Do we use the local radio station? Whatever method is employed, marketing costs money and especially for the independent practice the costs of running a marketing campaign must be carefully weighed up against the likely returns from increased business.

Before starting any marketing campaign, we must consider what we want to achieve. Obviously in most cases it will be to create more income by:

- Attracting new clients
- Retaining existing clients
- Encouraging existing clients to visit more frequently
- Increasing the average value of each dispense.

With the intense competition today for every patient, playing to our strengths, our individuality, even our location, can often help put our practice in a different market to the local competition. Although it is always wise to keep an eye on what they are up to, trying to compete with them, especially a multiple, may not always be the best option. We can, however, use marketing to sell our strengths, our level of service, or maybe a new retinal imaging system or an exclusive designer range of frames.

It is vital when planning any campaign to have a clear idea of what we expect to gain from it. Think about who we are aiming the campaign at. Examples of this might be:

- Affluent clients aged over 55 to increase progressive lens sales
- Families with children to encourage more children and teenagers to the practice
- Low-income households to build a reputation for affordable eyewear
- Local businesses to increase office and industrial eyewear sales.

It is important to set a clear budget and then stick to it. Take advice from other local traders, professional bodies and suppliers about what types of marketing



Untidy trial contact lenses



# Dispensing

may be best for you and the practice.

Remember, with all marketing we are looking for maximum gain for minimum expenditure. Telephone directory advertisements, for example, can be effective, but may also just prove to be a reference tool for those existing clients that couldn't remember your phone number.

If a campaign is targeting new clients try to put yourself in their shoes. How do you catch their attention? What will make them want to visit the practice?

Finally, when considering a marketing campaign, it is a good idea to start off small. Select an area of the business that needs to improve. Think about what needs to happen to make that improvement and how marketing might bring about such a change. Target the marketing at small specific groups of clients and keep a record of the response.

## Patient records

One of the best tools an optical practice has is the client database. Most practices send out reminders every month, but consider the opportunities if you could send out mailshots to specific groups of clients that you already have on your database. Enclose targeted literature for specific age groups within the reminder letters and send out invitations to special events for the most loyal clients. This technique is used very effectively by the larger multiple groups and even for the smaller independent. Most modern computer database systems offer some form of mailing facility within or in addition to the standard recall functions. This type of marketing can be cost effective and relatively easy to set up.

## Get someone else to pay

It is always worth talking to the representatives that visit our practices. Show them that you will support their product, but make them give you something in return. Most of them have a marketing budget to help you, but often only if we actually ask them for it.

Marketing a new practice is not quite so easy but can still be achieved with the help of new suppliers keen to obtain your business. It is worth considering a launch event. Invite local businessmen, dignitaries, medical practitioners and the press. You can also consider taking part in and sponsoring local events to raise awareness of your practice name.

## The internet

In today's world, a presence on the web is an absolute must. Whether it is a simple DIY website template or a commissioned larger bespoke site, having the practice online can provide



A presence on the web is an absolute must: Turners Optometrists' award-winning site

increased exposure to a larger catchment area and if the latest web technology is used, then you can even make changes and add information whenever you want, allowing you to advertise and change promotions and product ranges regularly.

Whatever marketing you undertake, remember that the overall image and message should be in keeping with your practice image. Make use of the practice logo, use similar typefaces, and most importantly ensure that the marketing is aimed at the type of client you want to attract to the practice. Upmarket practices need upmarket clients encouraged to visit by upmarket advertising.

## Communication

The final part of this article will look at communication. This is the binding that links all aspects of your practice together.

### The bigger picture

The practice image, design, layout and presentation will communicate a certain message to potential clients. The marketing, web presence and even the practice logo must also deliver the same message.

Creating a unified message in all aspects of your practice is never going to be straightforward or instant. It will take time to develop and appreciate just what it is that attracts a particular type of client to your practice. Start by thinking about the type of client you want to attract, for example:

- What do they like?
- What are their interests?
- What sort of lifestyle do they have?

- What expectations are they likely to have?
- What is their proportion of the population in your catchment area?
- What would they expect to pay for your services and goods?

Once you have identified your client group, aim everything in the practice at that type of client. Consider the quality of your stationery, practice décor, point of sale, furniture, waiting area chairs, staff uniforms, practice fittings, marketing, frame ranges, the pricing and even the practice name. It should all fit together to form a coherent and unified message.

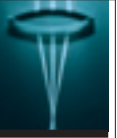
### Talk the talk

One area often overlooked in practice development and marketing is that of simple communication skills. Communication can only exist when a 'message' is actually received by the person it was aimed at. But, communication only becomes 'effective' when the person receiving the message understands it.

Some of the basic principles of effective communication are:

- Be consistent across the practice in how the staff talk to clients
- Focus on the key issues of what you want to say
- Keep it simple to get the message across
- Be professional in every aspect of your communication
- Deliver on any promises you make
- Abide by legal and ethical rules when advertising.

Finally, and probably most importantly, talk in the language of the patient. The local builder may be quite happy



with a 'Yes, mate, can I help you?' but this is perhaps too colloquial for some. Whether it is face to face or within literature, everything we communicate should be easily understood by those we are communicating with.

Communication skills are included in the General Optical Council core competencies for registration as either an optometrist or a dispensing optician. For optometrists, the majority of the required skills relate to clinical matters. The required communication skills for dispensing opticians contain items that have a commercial perspective. Relevant extracts from both sets of competencies are given below:

- The ability to seek and communicate relevant information from and to patients in an effective and appropriate manner (DO)
- The ability to communicate effectively with the patient and with professional colleagues (OO)
- The ability to communicate effectively with the patient, taking into account his/her physical, emotional, intellectual and cultural background, and to take accurate history from patients with a range of ophthalmic problems and needs (DO)
- The ability to deal effectively with patient concerns and complaints (DO)
- The development of the key skills of listening to patients and explaining and discussing with them ophthalmic matters, taking into account relevant individual characteristics (DO)
- The ability to understand the patient's expectations and aspirations and managing situations where these cannot be met (DO, OO)
- The ability to recognise cultural diversity, and to communicate with patients who have poor or non-verbal communication skills, or those who are confused, reticent or misled (DO, OO)

**TABLE 1**

**Organisations offering training programmes and advice on staff training**

Anglia Ruskin University	www.anglia.ac.uk
Clearview Training	www.flamehealth.com/clearview
CIBA Vision	www.Pros.cibavision.co.uk/
Johnson & Johnson Vision Care	www.acuvue.co.uk
Total Marketing Resources	www.tmr.co.uk
Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers	www.spectaclemakers.com

● The ability to elicit issues pertaining to the patient's general health, medication, sports, lifestyle and special needs (OO).

**Staff training**

Of course none of this is going to work unless the staffing levels in a practice are both adequate and effective. Recruitment and the appropriate training of our staff is usually the responsibility of the practice manager. The practice staff will need to reinforce the message conveyed by the practice image, and since the core skill in our profession is communication and conversation with our clients, it is vital that the practice staff are able to converse effectively at all levels. Remember that training is an ongoing cycle that consists of initial training, delegation, supervision and re-training.

Leaving clinical skills aside, one area of training and re-training that can prove especially useful is that of communication skills. Although we may know what to say, knowing how to say it in a way that our clients not only understand but can also relate to, will greatly improve their perception of us as individuals and as a business. Courses held in-house and at local colleges are widely available and can prove very beneficial to both staff and

the business as a whole.

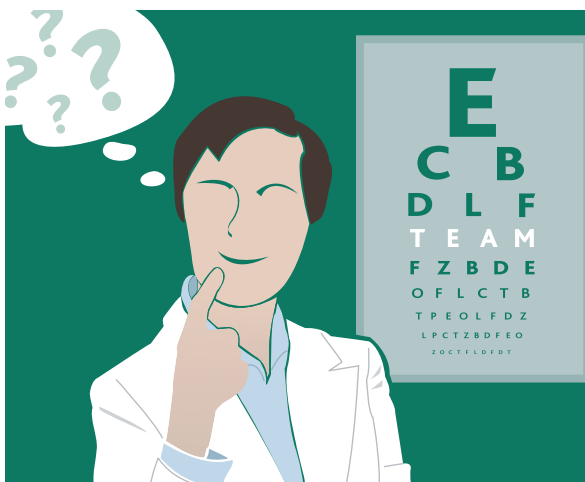
Finally, happy, safe, motivated and well trained staff will be more productive. It is well known that we all sound better on the telephone when we're happy. We also perform better and impress our clients more when we are happy.

Allowing staff to take part in all aspects of practice development can promote loyalty and enthusiasm within the practice. Providing a structured training programme, incentives and fulfilling the legal requirements to provide a safe working environment all add to the overall image and success of the practices in which we work.

**Summary**

Training and development is often less than straightforward, but for many practitioners the real training starts when they own or manage a practice. The skills required to succeed are not easily found in one place and it may take many years to master the marketing, practice presentation and the communication skills necessary to develop an optical practice. ●

● Optometrist and dispensing optician **Andrew Keirl** runs his own independent practice in Cornwall. **Richard Payne** is a dispensing optician working in private practice in Cornwall



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