



Rory Brogan visits Essilor UK and finds that the company has a very clear vision when it comes to its latest product

Optifog seems to be all around Essilor UK's Thornbury headquarters, with the new lens treatment the hot topic of discussion as the company plans to make a major push to practices, press and consumers.

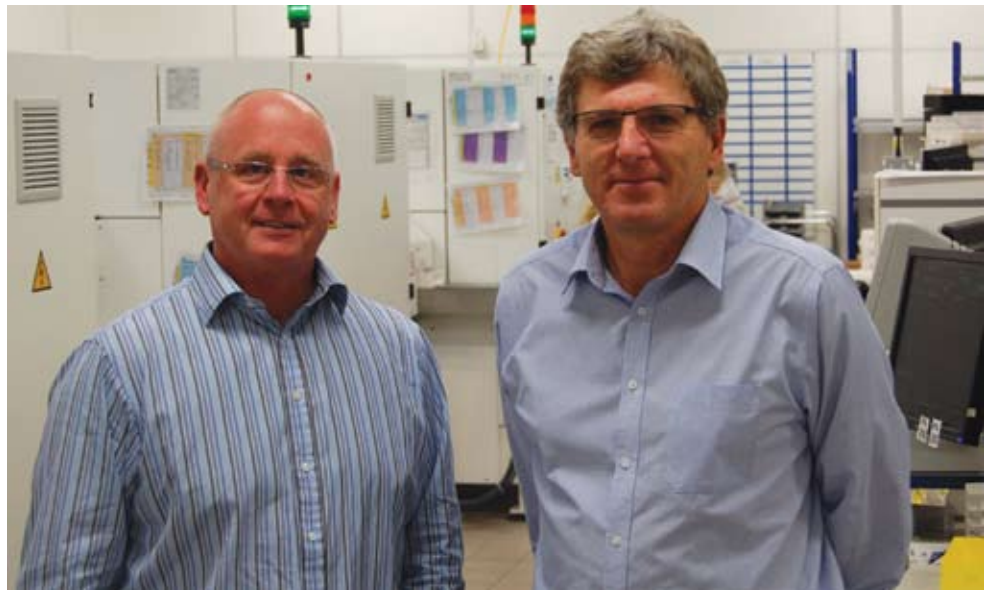
The just-launched coating, already a Silmo D'Or winner, has been scientifically developed to stop lenses misting up. Essilor UK managing director Mike Kirkley explains that, while such a product was first mentioned 20 years ago, in the space of a few weeks it has already made an impact in UK practices. As well as giving his sales force something new and exciting to focus on, he has had positive reports from eye care practitioners (ECPs), with one reporting she had dispensed four pairs of the premium coating in one week.

'Optifog gives a buzz to the market. It's the top end of the market and a unique product. It is the sort of thing that may help when there is a lack of footfall as it gives the practice the opportunity to make a higher value sale. We are trying to stimulate the consumer to go and visit practices and drive footfall,' he says.

Improving products, or adding new lines, gives an added chance for ECPs to talk to patients when they visit. 'If you work on a two-year cycle it's good for ECPs to be able to offer something as a benefit and to educate patients. Optifog can go on any lens and while fogging up is a big focus of the winter months it is also about problems in everyday wear. As a result, sales will continue through the summer. For a lot of people it's something they will tell their friends and family about.'

The lens requires the application of an activation fluid, with a free bottle to begin with, that needs to be replaced every six months, giving further opportunity for communication with patients.

Product and services project manager Lynn Constant explains that Optifog has had three years of testing, without degradation and there is a two-year guarantee against manufacturing defects and scratching. If the activator is not used once a



Mike Kirkley (left) and Kurt Schranz are pictured in Essilor's Thornbury laboratory

Forging ahead

week then the properties reduce, to be re-energised with one drop spread across the lens. 'The coating is a top layer on the back and front surface of the lens and gives you advantages indoors and outdoors. Sport is another potential market,' she adds.

So impressed were Essilor's product sales team at a demonstration of Optifog that Kirkley says they gave a spontaneous round of applause. 'There's been a real buzz internally and people are excited. It's probably the first time anyone has clapped a spectacle lens. Everywhere I go people in practice say they didn't expect Optifog's performance to be that dramatic.'

Having worked for Essilor for 30 years, Kirkley took over last year as managing director, and doesn't seem fazed that his new responsibility came at such a tough time for the economy. 'You don't decide when you get promoted,' he says, adding that in difficult times you manage your business accordingly.

He can also point to the fact that Essilor has been doing particularly well, with strong figures in recent months. 'We had a good first quarter. September did nicely. October was our best month for growth and November is very positive. We have also had to have overtime to cope in recent weekends.'

As well as stimulus from the new product, Essilor has just run a

television campaign for Crizal in the Midlands, helping to boost sales and there are major plans to promote Optifog, both to consumer journalists and the profession.

Lean manufacturing

This positive sales performance does not just happen by chance. Kirkley is regularly out on the road visiting practices, supporting the sales team, much as he did when he was Essilor sales director. The company is also in the middle of piloting a new fast-track production service for its best customers which will be launched fully early next year. This is a guaranteed 48-hour turnaround for premium product that production director Kurt Schranz is confident will work. 'We have been piloting it for three months with practices chosen in terms of proximity and we know it is robust. We made sure that we aren't going to the market too quickly.'

Kirkley already has first-hand experience that the service works, having bought three pairs of spectacles with premium Essilor lenses at an Essilor Signature practice, all of which were delivered on time.

A whistle-stop tour of the manufacturing plant, which has seen an investment of £4m in the past four years, backs up Schranz's confidence in Essilor's ability to meet the 48-hour deadlines. A trained mechanical engineer, he joined Essilor five years



ago, having worked for Carl Zeiss and Rodenstock previously. He is behind the streamlined processes at the plant, with in-line working for traditional jobs and production cells for digital surfacing (DS).

With DS, 'top end with all the trimmings', now making up an estimated 35-40 per cent of the jobs, there is 24-hour production in three shifts. Not surprisingly, this brings with it a need for more DS capacity, with the potential to add another cell in the existing lab.

With thousands of lenses in circulation around the plant at any one time, lean manufacturing and a tight scheduling of the flow means that there is no sign of any build-up of work. When the plant was expanded, changing rooms, toilets and locker facilities were created away from the manufacturing area, keeping the production area clutter-free. Visual management information runs continuously in the lab, with screens highlighting products, key performance indicators and health and safety messages. Teams are briefed on quality by shifts, so that each member knows exactly how they are doing.

'We have given the operators the opportunity to show where people can improve on something and this is noted on a board in the cell with a status report and symbols to identify if it has been closed out,' says Schranz.

The boards follow lean manufacturing's 5s phases of sorting, straightening, systematic cleaning, standardising, and sustaining, and sure enough each cell has its own cleaning equipment on hand.

Speaking specifically about the 48-hour scheme, Schranz explains it is all about making premium product in the UK and allocating resources for this. 'We are competing with other companies and if we're faster and better, then customers will come to us.'

Operators validate the equipment and take responsibility for the tolerances, making sure it is all aligned. 'The quality is improved because we have such tight ownership of each process and check the lenses right at the end. For me the objective is that every operator has to be quantifiable, with good lenses that are right the first time. That's lean manufacturing,' he adds.

Quality rather than quantity is the main driver. 'There's no point having 100 lenses a day from an operator if 50 are bad. We give people pride in the job and I would prefer 90 lenses that are good. It's about attention to detail and trying to produce a top-end

product for customers.'

Checks in the process include dedicated staff testing the thickness and viscosity of coatings, validating and guaranteeing the process constantly, as well testing lenses for antireflection adhesion. A giant lens verifying machine places varifocals in the correct position, with a probe that checks the lens substance, as well as far distance, prism thinning and the reading portion.

'They are tested against a tolerance table so there is no grey aspect – they are either inside or outside of tolerance,' says Schranz.

He describes the greatest challenge at the plant as running with lean manufacturing, making sure the materials are provided, the jobs are on time and the process is working. This, he says, is made possible with a strong team and good managers, including maintenance and facilities.

As well as a major investment in glazing machinery last year, with a large hub working strictly to date and order, there is a personalised glazing area for the tricky jobs. Rather than remote edging, an operator will glaze high end frames that may vary a little in sizing. 'We don't charge more but it costs more for us because it is much more time consuming,' he says.

Independent ethos

Essilor UK's main mission is to have strong brands to support the independent optician, explains Kirkley, and this includes both Optifog and the new fast-track service. With Optifog, he is adamant that the multiples will not be undercutting independents. 'We can never restrict supply, but the multiples will not have a price advantage over independents.'

He is not unduly concerned by recent figures that claim the UK independent market share is 27 per

cent of the total. 'There has been some shrinkage, but everyone has different figures – some put it as 40 per cent versus 60 per cent. In fact, by bringing out good priced product is one way of helping independents survive. Optifog is a big story and gives the chance to increase footfall.'

Practices will be supplied with full demonstration kits to show how good Optifog is, he says, highlighting the importance of educating the consumer on the technical aspects of the lenses. 'Most are focused on the frame. They need to understand the quality of lenses, as vision is the most important part.'

Essilor has already targeted consumers with Optifog via three humorous videos on Youtube and the product gives the opportunity to tell a story visually.

'It's a unique opportunity for us. Varifocals are a very technical product to demonstrate. With Optifog we have the problem of steaming up from the heat of an oven or over a dishwasher. It's a very visual benefit that enables you to make good use of social media.'

The idea of a fog-free lens was first mentioned 20 years ago by the current chief executive officer of Essilor International, explains Kirkley, and the fact that it has now been perfected is the mark of a company that was listed as the 25th most innovative in the world.

He points out that the parent company has continued to invest in difficult times, and, subject to expected demand for Optifog, there could be further development at Thornbury as the processes differ from that of existing coatings. 'The product is currently made in Poland and Portugal, but as the volume increases it must be in the local labs. That's what we want. We do top-quality product here.'

Kirkley also highlights Essilor UK's continuing investment in practitioner education, with a series of Optifog roadshows to come in the new year. 'We put an awful lot into training, with Varilux University, roadshows and CET events.' These are meetings that are also open to non-customers, with discussion that is not solely confined to Essilor and its products.

As to the future, he has no plans to give up on visiting clients. 'I'm very hands-on with the customer base. We are a large organisation and you still need the personal touch, making sure people are happy and looking after them. That's why it's great to have people like Kurt to support the business when I'm not here. We have a good executive team here.' ●



Sport is another potential market for Optifog