

Guildford in Surrey is often considered the archetypal commuter town, located as it is some 31 miles south west of London, with excellent transport links. However, the upmarket types who make up the majority of residents are increasingly demanding a more chic way of life than is normally associated with London's 'bridge and tunnel crowd'. So when the owners of Windsor-based The Eye Academy considered it as a location for their new venture, the idea quickly took hold and eventually culminated in the Guildford branch becoming the Fashion Frames Practice of the Year.

'Guildford was ideal from our point of view,' explains Ruby Hashim, co-owner of The Eye Academy. 'It is known as a fashionable town with lots of wealthy style-conscious people and trendy students too. The high street is extremely busy and we aimed to offer something exclusive and different from the existing chains and practice – something more akin to what they could find in the west end of London. We opened the practice in December 2007 and it has gone from strength to strength.'

Frames in stock

The practice typically stocks between 1,500 and 2,000 pairs of frames and has exclusive stockist status on collections from Tag Heuer, Tom Ford, Oliver Peoples, Bollé, Mykita, Orgreen, JF Rey and Lafont. To reinforce the high fashion aspect of the practice, window displays are changed on a monthly basis, by a professional window dresser, with brands showcased in rotation. In store the displays are kept fresh and up to date with key looks placed at eye level for maximum visual impact and reinforcement of external advertising.

'This year we have also embarked on a joint venture with Luxottica to try and maximise further the impact

Chic for the suburbs

Mike Hale finds out why the judges acclaimed the Guildford branch of The Eye Academy as top of the fashion frames class



of the window display and promote our fashion offering,' says Hashim. 'As one of their Elite clients, we have custom-built display units that are unique to the practice. This allows us to differentiate even on the mainstream brands such as Prada, Bvlgari, Chanel and Dolce & Gabbana. We feel this succeeds in bringing Bond Street chic to the suburbs. A particular success was a minimalist but dramatic Prada display tower proving to be a real head turner and driver of footfall into the practice.'

While the practice trades on a fashionable image, it is backed up by top-notch clinical staff and equipment.

'If you are aiming to sell exclusive high-end frames you must ensure all aspects of the practice reach high standards as the sort of customers you are trying to attract expect it. The Guildford practice boasts a cutting-edge interior design plus a full pre-screening suite with the latest technology including a retinal camera, corneal topographer and ocular visual fields and pressure equipment. In the examination room we have the latest slit-lamp video camera, to enable photography of the surface of the eyes. This will facilitate accurate recording

and monitoring of corneal and contact lens conditions and complications.'

Winners' rewards

Hashim, who is delighted to have triumphed at the *Optician Awards*, stresses the multiple benefits of taking part to the practice.

'Winning was a real buzz for the whole practice and the evening itself was a very memorable occasion. When it was time for the results to be read, the tension was nail-biting and it seemed like an age before the winner was announced. But when it was, those nerves turned to sheer elation – we'd won! We were all ecstatic, we were on cloud nine for the rest of the evening.

'The major positive is the boost it has given our staff. We put a lot of effort into developing our staff. It can be difficult to provide employees with incentives to continually challenge and push themselves. Winning the award gives them a sense of pride in the practice and acts as a spur. But we have also been delighted at the response to our participation from our customers. We received many messages of goodwill and best wishes both before and after the announcement.' ●

FASHION FRAMES PRACTICE OF THE YEAR SPONSORED BY LUXOTTICA

Winner

- The Eye Academy, Guildford

Runners up

- Kate Hattersley Opticians, Coventry
- Weston Opticians, Basildon
- Goodlooking Optics, Enfield
- Santro & Peche Opticians, London