

The positive promoter

By investing in technology and support and building partnerships with eye care practitioners, Claire Ferguson believes Johnson & Johnson can grow the contact lens sector. **Chris Bennett** reports

I'm a bit of an oddity really,' says Claire Ferguson, general manager at Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, quickly qualifying the comment with her reasons why. Despite her training as a medical scientist Ferguson opted out of a life in the lab to spend more time at the sharp end of healthcare among the practitioners and patients.

'My degree was in medical science. I always knew I wanted to go into healthcare but I didn't know exactly where. For me it was always healthcare and will always be healthcare. I've worked with dentists, GPs, nurses and consultants. Having that extra professional element is what really interests me.'

Ferguson has tackled a range of roles across markets as diverse as diabetes, dentistry and beauty before taking over the helm at J&J Vision Care last October.

'I think I'm a bit of an oddity because of the fact that I have worked in pharmaceutical, consumer and diagnostic devices,' she says, of a list that could clearly continue. It is not just the markets she has been in but also the roles she has held across sales, marketing and management. 'That is a bit rare, because people tend to stick to one or the other. I haven't crossed between sales and marketing. I've gone into both.'

That cross-pollination of roles and markets has provided Ferguson with insights but she is characteristically diplomatic about her achievements to date. 'I have been really lucky in that I have had great teams who are the functional experts. I'm not optically trained, but there are phenomenal, professionally trained colleagues here so they can bring that to the role.'

Her task, along with everyone in the contact lens business, is to grow the sector, something she says J&J is better placed to do than most.

'This is an incredibly successful business – it's brand leader with phenomenal growth. The thing I love



Claire Ferguson: the ECP is at the heart of everything

about J&J, and it's part of its credo, is that the patient and the healthcare professional come first. If we can increase penetration it's better for the patient because they are getting a wider option of eye care correction and it's better for the healthcare professional because it's giving them a wider set of tools. If I can increase penetration I think I will have been successful and the business has been successful.'

And getting that done has to be a two-pronged attack. 'We have an awareness job to do and we have an obligation to ECPs [eye care practitioners] to be driving footfall into their stores. There's a lot we can talk about in terms of kids, presbyopes, UV – we can increase that awareness. We can definitely drive footfall. But the ECP is at the heart of everything.'

'We know penetration is low but we know there is this huge stream of people going through stores that aren't even being offered contact lenses. We need to talk to ECPs about how they

engage patients in contact lenses.'

She says J&J's commitment to that couldn't be stronger: 'I have never worked in a business where our growth investment has been so high. We invest incredibly heavily and have massively ramped up our investment in the professional side of the business in terms of training, in terms of events such as roadshows or "question time" and we will continue to do that. We can continue to do that because we get such high growth from our products.'

'I didn't believe it before I joined J&J, but our credo genuinely has it. It says if you deliver to the patient and you deliver to the healthcare professional the business results are at the bottom. If you get those two right then the business results will be delivered.'

The evidence for this is the positive net promoter scores (NPS) which are fed back through the business. 'We know exactly how our customers [ECPs] are feeling about us. If they have anything to say, they generate a hot sheet and that hot sheet is pinged to every single one of the management team and people on the management board.'

This creates a very tangible score in terms of the NPS but it's coupled with a much softer more subjective 'this is what I think, this is what I feel' dialogue. The business currently has an NPS of 50. 'That is considered world class but we are aiming for 60,' she says.

'If I'm driving penetration then I'm driving the customer experience and people are happy with me,' she says.

Quality time with customers

Ferguson says ECPs value the time they get from J&J so it has invested more in fulfilling that. 'We are very proud of our clinical training through The Vision Care Institute (TVCI), and we will be supporting that with business training in practice.'

The message from customers, she says, is: 'We love your clinical training, we really want your help to run our business as well. The courses we are

running at the TVCI linked to that are really popular.'

The relationship also suits Ferguson's style. She says her favourite time is when she is out in the high street with customers. 'There's a real warmth and closeness. If they see us as absolutely a partner then I am happy.'

Ferguson is also happy to talk about the latest research which shows TruEye to be as healthy as the naked eye or Oasys to be the choice of practitioners. But she shies away from talking about particular modalities or champion products, insisting that contact lenses should be an integral part of a wider vision correction conversation.

'It cannot be about products alone. ECPs are running businesses and dealing with customers. We have to have the best back up and the strongest training support. We do invest heavily in the brand and making patients aware of contact lenses to drive the patients in. It's got to be the whole package.'

'We have the products, it's not just about commodity for us. We don't make own label products; it's something we are proud of that goes across J&J. That allows us to focus on growing innovation through R&D.'

Problem of drop-outs

Ferguson's fresh eye on the business also noticed other issues to be addressed. 'The toughest thing for me to get my head around is drop-outs. It's almost something that's accepted within this category that a certain number of patients will drop out, so we have to keep driving wearers. We have that leaky bucket. We know 25 per cent of patients drop out in the first month and we firmly believe that if we fit the best first rather than going through the upgrade, you avoid that. It's really about making sure patients have the right product for them.'

'I would hate us to go out and push that it's all about contact lenses. I think that would be detrimental for the ECP – they have got a wider business. We have to go out as brand leader and talk about vision correction. Talking about contact lenses in isolation sets them apart. We want to communicate how contact lenses fit into eye care correction, to find the right solution for the patient. In practices where the whole staff "gets it" penetration may be as high as 40 per cent, but they are talking about vision correction not just contact lenses.'

She gives an example of two stores in Birmingham just doors apart but with radically differing levels of success in contact lens sales. 'Penetration isn't about price it's about value for money and that means providing the patient with the right option and not making assumptions on their behalf.'

'Clearly the ECP will remain central to choosing the right option. The ECP is absolutely critical and that's where we can help them by helping with the conversations.'

She says talking about technology isn't the best approach. You have to understand the patient's lifestyle, triggers for wear and explain which products are suitable for them.

'Although I come from a research background I do worry that people can get too focused on the theoretical side of the research. Something can be fantastic but unless it works for an ECP in practice it's not innovative.'

'The ECP, and rightly so, will still steer the patient and that's why we have to do a good job in talking about all the segments. If we as brand leader went out and concentrated on one segment we would be letting the market and the category down. I'm not interested in stealing share, it's not going to help me and it's not going to

help the market.'

Ferguson maintains that the practices that genuinely talk about contact lenses with the patient are the practices with the higher penetration and retention. There is great potential for all modalities. 'If we are going to grow penetration it's not going to be one or the other, it's not one size fits all.'

'It's a high investment strategy to say we want to talk about all segments but it's what you should do. We are driving it now but if we want to get that step change the effort has to be massive.'

Investing in the real world

Ferguson believes many of the schemes being pushed at practices are based on data. They don't work in store because it's not the real world. She draws an analogy with mouthwash and the experience of dentists and hygienists in the US. 'It's only when people stepped back and invested that it started to move. It will not payback in a year. It's our responsibility as market leader to make that investment for the good of the category.'

By investing in technology and support and building partnerships with ECPs, Ferguson believes J&J can grow the sector and its share of the contact lens market. There is no magic bullet, it will take time. ECPs are central in communicating the right messages to consumers but they have to work with wearers, she cautions.

'Customers don't like people making assumptions about what they want. If you are told what you need you don't stay a customer for very long.' She says ECPs have to make contact lenses part of vision correction and understand wearers' needs. 'When that customer comes through the door do not assume, absolutely do not assume what is right for them. If that happened tomorrow the contact lens penetration would absolutely move.' ●

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