



Freeform on the farm

For Focus Optical Laboratories the prescription house business is all about service. Focus Optical is situated in one of the outbuildings at Priory Farm near Redhill in Surrey. The farm attracts many visitors to its acclaimed food shop and the idyllic grounds, which are in sharp contrast to the locations of most other prescription houses.

The lab was set up by Matthew Byrne and his business partner Anthony Edwards in 2000 and was the first business to locate on the farm.

'We were both formerly technicians at Vision Express, which is where I learnt the trade,' says Byrne. 'I was there for two years as a technician and was being trained up as a dispenser too. We decided to set up our own lab because we felt that there was space in the market for it and we knew a handful of practice owners that would work with us if we set up on our own.'

Despite his prior experience in the industry, Byrne feels he has mainly learned on the job with Focus Optical and says that the formative years of the company were tough.

'Going from working in a practice to running a lab was a steep learning curve. You are presented with a world of products that you have to become expert on. As there were only two of us it was quite slow to build up; the pricing had to be competitive and a lot of hands-on work went into making relatively little profit. When we started the machinery was quite basic – back then we could only process 30 or so pairs of frames per day.'

Mr Blue

The lab's increase in production capacity over the years has been partly facilitated by investment in equipment. Eighteen months ago the company elected to put in the Mr Blue system from Essilor after testing it against two other leading brands.

'We've been very happy with the performance of Mr Blue and just over a month ago we added a second unit in order to give us more capacity.'

The gradual increase of capacity means that the lab now employs five members of staff. Byrne operates in the role of managing director and oversees all aspects of the business, although his confidence in his staff

Focus Optical in Surrey has come through tough times by working closely with customers and adopting a competitive pricing strategy. **Mike Hale** talks to managing director Matthew Byrne



Matthew Byrne: 'Because we have no preference for any particular lens supplier we can give independent advice'

enabled him to take paternity leave earlier this year. Most of the other staff have dual roles; the most recent recruit works primarily as a driver but is being trained to take responsibility for some of the marketing duties.

Price promotion

While the tough economic conditions in recent years have not stopped the lab from expanding, they have changed the way that Byrne runs the business. 'You certainly learn a lot from the hard times. We changed our pricing strategy back in 2008 after a rock bottom price promotion worked very well. Since then it has very much been my policy to keep prices as low as we can afford while still providing top quality products.'

Byrne feels that, with the market being so competitive on quality and price, the success of an independent lab rests on the service it gives to its customers. 'You can never take any of your customers for granted,' says Byrne. 'Looking after your customers and keeping them happy is crucial and I feel this is an area that we stand out in. We do things like starting our working day very early so our

customers can get deliveries first thing in the morning but service is really all about communication and understanding your customer.'

Byrne continues: 'Because we work closely with our customers we understand what their expectations are. We aim to function as a practice's own lab that happens to be in a different location. It is our responsibility to save practices money and because we have no preference for any particular lens supplier we can give independent advice. Our loyalty is to our customers, not a supplier.'

The lab's client base is mostly independents in Surrey, Kent and Sussex, although it also serves practices in the north of England and Scotland.

'Our van service covers the key areas and we use direct delivery for more distant places. We were approached by someone in the West Indies once, but for practical reasons I had to turn that down.'

Own label

In addition to offering lenses from all the major lens suppliers, Focus Optical has its own brand called the Focus Classic Range.

'The Focus Classic range comes with preferential glazing charges and a two-day guarantee – so if we fail to process the job two days after receiving the order there is no charge. It is available with various coatings and, with the milling function on the Mr Blue edger designed to reduce drag, we are well equipped to deal with super hydrophobic coatings. We are about to bring out our own freeform lens called Odyssey, which will be available in two corridor depths and will be a very competitive product. We are also a member of the Anyview Alliance which enables easy measurement for individualised lenses.'

Looking to the future Byrne is keen to expand the lab and is working towards achieving this. 'We've added the new glazing machine to increase our capabilities, the next step is to update our pricing and boost our delivery service to deal with new customers.' ●