

The ophthalmic instruments industry is changing fast with a new breed of high tech instruments and software driving growth in the market and changing the way optometrists work. Grafton Optical, a leading player in the sector, sees itself leading the charge on this change by bringing to the market high-tech instruments to suit all budgets and practice requirements.

The company started in the early 1950s as an optical frame importer and continued as such under various ownerships until 1982 when its present managing director, Brian Bowles, purchased it from its then owners. Employing just 16 people, the company posted a £3.5m turnover in its last financial statement with its main trading base being its recently acquired premises in Watford, North London. The facilities are impressive, encompassing an administration area, showroom, storage and loading area.

Grafton Optical acts as the UK agent for numerous manufacturers including Reichert, Shin Nippon, Frastema, Medmont, Optovue OCT, Synemed (EyeScape), Paradigm (Dicon) and DGH (Pachmate). It is also the parent company of Eyco which offers a budget ophthalmic instrument range sold solely online with products sourced from the Far East. Since taking over more than two decades ago, Bowles has witnessed first-hand just how new technology has changed the way optometrists work.

He believes the company's independent status has helped it achieve growth over the years because of the speed at which it is able to introduce new products to the market. 'Being an independent business means we are not tied to any one supplier and we can act fast to launch a new product into the UK,' says Bowles. 'We are not a company that wants to grow too fast. We want steady growth which allows us to continue to offer the high level of customer service that we pride ourselves on. We want growth that is sustainable – not growth that is here today and gone tomorrow.'

'More importantly we want to be known as a company that supplies fantastic high-tech diagnostic equipment that improves the ability of optometrists and contact lens practitioners to do their job.'

Bowles is also keen to point out that part of the company's success has been having a dedicated team in place which has largely remained the

Technology at work

After two decades at the helm of one of the country's leading ophthalmic instrument suppliers, Brian Bowles has witnessed a great deal of progress. **Perry Thakrar** spoke to him about Grafton and his predictions for the future of the industry

Brian Bowles



same since the outset. The company sources its products from around the world including Italy and Australia but predominantly America. 'America is at a forefront of new technology when it comes to optical instruments. There is a larger home market there, which encourages innovation as manufacturers can cater only for the domestic market and still have a viable business,' explains Bowles.

He travels to various trade shows around the world to ensure that the company is at the forefront of bringing new instruments to the UK market. Traditional best-sellers for the company such as its extensive range of chair stand combi units continue to sell in impressive numbers but new instruments such as the Pachmate – a hand-held pachymeter, retinal cameras and digital acuity systems are really taking off, according to Bowles.

He points out that practices are now more open to embracing new technology, especially if the company is able to demonstrate the benefits at first hand. 'Optometrists spend their working day in the consulting room and they want do the best they can for their patients. If we can demonstrate that a new piece of diagnostic equipment can actually help them and their patient then they get really excited about it,' he says.

The cost of the latest ophthalmic instruments can vary greatly – practitioners can expect to pay between

£4,000 to £6,000 for a triple chair stand unit and up to £50,000 for the Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) kit. According to Bowles, retinal cameras are fast becoming the 'must have' diagnostic equipment for optometrists. 'Retinal imaging cameras are now popular purchases by practices despite prices ranging from £11,000-£50,000. This requires big expenditure by optometrists but the benefits override the expenditure,' he says.

Bowles also points out that digital imaging gives optometrists more information than ever.

'One of the big problems for opticians in the past was maintaining accurate records of patient history. Traditionally, when an optom saw something in the eye of a patient the only way to record it was by drawing a map and keeping it on file,' he explains.

'Digital imaging means optometrists can keep a precise record of the consultation and diagnosis. And on the patient's next visit this picture can be compared with a new picture to determine if there have been any changes.'

Top of the wish list for practices are OCTs which retail at between £38,000 and £50,000 for a top-of-the-range model. 'These are mainly purchased by the larger practices which have a clientele willing to pay a premium for this service,' he says.

Looking ahead, Bowles believes the growing consumer awareness of eye health driven by the various health bodies and the media can help optometrists promote the benefits of paying for premium services such as retinal imaging. 'The general public's interest in eye health is increasing. For example, the controversial issue of the ageing population and the availability of AMD drugs in the NHS has received widespread coverage in the media and heightened awareness of the condition,' he says. 'Now more than ever before when a patient comes into a practice they may be more willing to pay for a test if it can detect the early signs of AMD. OCT technology is at the forefront of leading this change.' ●