



Looking at lenses

Offering free re-branding, design for promotional campaigns, web listings and a free PR service, the Kodak Lens Vision Centre (KLVC) concept sounds too good to be true – especially when it is in return for a simple commitment from partner practices to buy 50 per cent of their lenses from Signet Armorlite (SA), contribute to advertising and not to promote any other lenses in store.

Other benefits include preferential prices for Kodak lenses, a dedicated marketing co-ordinator, a marketing budget and training for practice owners and their staff.

The prospect of having the marketing power of a multinational company behind them, as well as being able to use the allure of a trusted brand name like Kodak has persuaded nearly 150 practices to become KLVCs so far.

Tony Lawrence, whose Gloucester practice became the first KLVC in 2003, was drawn to the KLVC concept for precisely these reasons. Having previously owned a franchise with a national chain, as well as an independent practice, he missed the strength of a national brand and the power and support of a marketing group.

Speaking about the recognition of the Kodak brand he says: 'I do leaflet drops and talks in local schools, like I did when I was an independent, but the difference now is when I say I'm from a KLVC, everyone's eyebrows raise, they know who we are and what Kodak stands for.'

Lawrence's appreciation of the value of branding means he has not even included his own name in the Kodak fascia – 72 per cent of which is usually dedicated to the practice's name – as he claims this would mean 'your patients want to see you all the time which is good if you're a one practice business, but I do have ambitions to open more practices. Also I'm a dispensing optician rather than an optometrist.'

Another KLVC owner, Andrew Pitman, notes that people became more interested in the products they were purchasing because of the Kodak name after he re-branded his two Oxfordshire practices three years ago. 'They are sold on the idea early on that they're getting a quality product and also a branded product.'

Explaining his decision, Pitman says: 'As an independent practice you're on your own a bit.' He was offered several opportunities to group together with other businesses during his 27 years in practice with his wife and claims SA's



The Kodak branded fascia

Snapping up Kodak

The prospect of harnessing the marketing power of a multinational has its attractions for the independent practitioner. **Alex Thomas** reports on the benefits of becoming a Kodak Lens Vision Centre

proposal was the best offer. Like his customers, Pitman seems sold on the Kodak name. 'They have a simple price structure, produce quality goods and everything comes in a little box with Kodak on it.'

Lens promotion

Speaking about the changes involved in re-branding he reveals that from signing the contract to receiving the new fascias and getting going, the process took three months. Under the terms and conditions of becoming a KLVC, he has undertaken not to promote any other lenses in his practices; although he can supply different lenses and promote whichever brands of frame or contact lens he chooses. Detailing the practicalities of this arrangement, Lawrence states that he sells SA lenses across the price spectrum. 'Over four and a half years our spend with Signet Armorlite has grown each month. We probably buy 90 per cent of our lenses from them now and that's because the portfolio of Kodak lenses has grown quite significantly.'

Coupled with the commitment to buy lenses from SA and the agreement

to promote only Kodak lenses, there is a mandatory contribution to a central marketing fund which costs £500 each month for each of his practices. 'There's a scale of charges and the band your turnover falls into will determine how much you contribute.'

He acknowledges the size of the payment and says: 'It's relatively serious money for a small independent, but you've got to think about what you get for it.'

His sentiments are echoed by Lawrence: 'Having come from a multi-ple, I'm very aware of the importance of good PR, marketing and branding and SA does it all for me.'

'If you said to me what's the thing I appreciate most about being a KLVC, it's the professionalism of the marketing and PR department. I can have marketing material produced for me that's of the quality of anything produced by the multiples, but done uniquely for me and very quickly. I can ring them up with an idea and in a few days I'll have a few poster proofs and after I've decided on the options, the poster arrives within a day or two.'

Giving examples of personalised marketing campaigns by SA, Lawrence



highlights a one-page article written in the local newspaper about the home visiting service the practice provides. 'There are 19 billboards in Gloucester advertising us.'

The cost of advertising is shared by SA which contributes a higher percentage than the outlay of the KLVCs. It is also spending £2.2m on a multimedia campaign including television commercials that began on February

Growth in demand for SA lenses is being met by the refurbished plant in Gloucester



4. SA UK's managing director, Mark Dingley, claims that: 'As a concentrated effort, our advertising spend is second only to Specsavers.'

While there are numerous advantages to the partnership agreement for independents, SA's objective is a simple increase in lens sales. The growing demand for its lenses is met by its newly refurbished plant in Gloucester, whose capacity was greatly increased through a £5m expansion in 2007. The automated plant now produces 2,500 lenses per day and growing. It includes two Weco 990 robotic glazing machines and three new AR coating units.

The bottom line

Dingley adds that SA has already seen a sizable increase in lens sales thanks to the KLVC concept and hopes that sales can increase by as much as 300 per cent.

Eastman Kodak – which makes a royalty fee from every SA lens sold – also seems satisfied with the arrangement, recently signing an extension of its licensing agreement with SA. Asked about maintaining the Kodak brand image, so valuable to all parties, Dingley explains that SA has

been careful with its selection over which practices became KLVCs.

'We wanted the best independent or the best independent with the potential to grow within a catchment area.'

Both Lawrence's and Pitman's practices have been experiencing positive results since becoming KLVCs and since the national advertising campaign began. For Lawrence, February sales were more than 50 per cent up on February last year. 'We are a fairly new practice and still growing so we normally achieve growth of about 20 per cent, but this more than doubles that.'

Pitman hasn't seen such a dramatic rise in revenue since the beginning of the national campaign, but says that people are very much more aware of the brand now. 'They come by the store and say they've seen the advertisement on TV.' He adds that his practices are managing to retain local business better since becoming KLVCs.

Yet despite all the positives so far, both practitioners and Dingley agree that it is still too early to judge the success of the concept. Dingley summarises: 'This 12-month campaign will really prove whether we can get bums on seats.' ●

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