

Ideals for a high-tech future

Devon is a friendly place. People have more time for you, they take a pride in their work and good service is still in fashion.

The same principles have also been the driving force behind South Devon Optical (SDO) which has built its reputation on providing local practices with good quality optical manufacturing with a friendly and personal touch.

Today SDO has a steady client base and manufactures about 1,000 jobs a week but, says founder and director Steve Brewer, when the firm started out things were very different.

'At the beginning there were three of us in a little room. In the first week I think we did 11 jobs. There we were in a 12-by-12 room on one machine beavering at the back of our accountant's house.'

Brewer had worked for Exe Optical for six years and decided he would like to set up on his own so branched out with two partners. One left after 18 months and the other after 10 years leaving him to manage the business alone. Over the past 30 years the firm has moved from room to garage until settling at its premises on Newton Abbot's Torquay Road. From here SDO offers quality glazing work for local, and not so local, practices. Over time it grew to include a van delivery service and counted practices as far west as Cornwall and north to Bristol. 'We've had our ups and downs,' says Brewer, but the ethos of the firm is as it ever was. 'We offered, and are still offering, a local personal service.' But 40 years, thousands of glazing jobs and two bouts of cancer later Steve has decided to take a step back. 'It's not that I am demotivated, but your priorities change when things like that happen.'

'We are at a point where we stay as we are or we move things forward,' says Steve's son and SDO manager Gavin who is stepping up to take the reins. He's been around the business since he was 12 and shares his father's passion for offering a personal, friendly, quality service to a manageable group of clients. What he wants SDO to do is to embrace technology, more modern machinery and techniques.

The modernisation process has begun with a bang-up-to-the-minute Hawkstone lab management system and in the workshop itself with

Steve Brewer set up South Devon Optical 40 years ago but the time has come for the next generation to take the reins



Steve Brewer and son Gavin are combining traditional values and modern techniques

machinery such as the Nidek ME 1200.

Gavin insists the lab is not looking to specialise or service one particular niche. 'We do everything. You can bring all of your work to us.' Its in-house surfacing allows it to offer lenses quickly if needed and it fulfils other traditional jobs. It has a variation of single vision, bifocals and varifocals in stock which it is happy to work on by return, says Gavin, and SDO will even do the odd frame repair for regular customers.

At the other end of the scale, SDO can offer the latest high-tech, freeform designs and coatings through its Essilor partnership and lenses it sources from elsewhere. Gavin says he is often amused by labs that claim to specialise in high wraps or rimless. SDO handles these along with faceting, etching, slotting and complex rimless. 'People don't realise just what we can do. It's so easy with these new machines.'

High-value growth

By combining traditional values and modern techniques he hopes to provide the very best for SDO's customers and give them the confidence to increase their high-value dispensings. What he brings to SDO is a youthful passion for technology and an understanding of how it should be harnessed. He insists: 'The quality of work that goes out of here is as good as it gets, but machinery has to be looked after and it all has a lifespan. You have got to keep on top of the machines, in terms of calibration, dressing them, the pressure of the polish, but eventually they get to an age where they have to be replaced.'

While Gavin concentrates on the workshop side, Keith Brooke is the lynchpin in the close relationship SDO has at the customer facing end of the business. Brooke has been with the firm for 25 years and Steve describes him as 'the voice of SDO'.

Brooke advises customers and talks them through lens and frame options to troubleshoot and maximise the quality and aesthetics of the finished product. He's on first name terms with many of those ringing in. 'When I'm handling their job it's their job and they trust you. I go and get the job so it's in my hand when I talk to them. When you go to the bigger companies you tend to be a bit of a number. The customer call operator will just tell you what the computer says.'

That personalisation also feeds through to each job, says Gavin. He checks every job that goes out of the lab but SDO also adds other routine touches. Little things such as tracing each frame, even if it's in the edger's catalogue, make all the difference. People think volume frames are all the same but they're not, he says. 'You can easily get as much as a 1mm difference between each lens in the same frame.'

Gavin sees a high-tech future for SDO but he is adamant to stay close to the ideals his father has pursued for the last 40 years, ideals that have built SDO a loyal customer base. Eventually he expects the lab to be totally networked up and all of the surfacing carried out by freeform generators on site. He is pragmatic about when he will make that next step. 'When the price becomes affordable,' he concludes. ●