



From locum to lab owner

For the independent business, by an independent business is a slogan which Sheeraz Janjua, owner of the Spectacle Lens Company, believes best sums up his trading ethos and emphasises the key strength of his lab.

Optometrist Janjua has had a busy decade in optics since graduating from the University of Bradford in 2000. He spent his pre-reg year in 2001 working for Dollond & Aitchison, followed by two years as a locum.

Janjua says it was during this period that he discovered that he enjoyed the flexibility of being a locum, which gave him a broader knowledge of the optical sector beyond the consulting room. 'I enjoyed the control I had over where I worked and just how many hours I worked,' he says. 'It made me realise just how much I wanted to be my own boss and buying my own practice seemed like the obvious next step in retaining this independence.'

In December 2003, he bought the first of his three practices, taking over O'Brien's Opticians, in Brigg, Lincolnshire. Its success, he says, gave him the confidence to expand. Then in February 2007, he bought Burrows Opticians, one of the oldest practices in Derby, which was established 1937, going on to buy Gray & Bull Opticians in Nottingham city centre in June 2010.

Room to grow

It was in the extra space located directly behind the Derby practice that Janjua set up a glazing lab called the Spectacle Lens Company in mid 2007. 'I wanted to fully utilise this additional space and starting up the lab seemed to me like the obvious next step to diversify,' explains Janjua.

'At the time, I wanted the best for the lab business and therefore I invested heavily in the latest Nidek equipment. I started doing glazing for my first two practices before taking on external work from other independent optical businesses from all over the country,' he adds.

'In the beginning, I had very little money left over for marketing, and therefore our client base has been purely built-up from word of mouth and recommendation. This is the first year when I have considered advertising the lab business.

'Optics is a small world and people

Perry Thakrar travels to Derby to visit a lab that has grown out of an independent practice



It's all about service, says Sheeraz Janjua (centre)

tend to know each other. Word spreads and if you provide a good service at a good price then people will come to you.'

One of the benefits of having a lab adjoining a practice is that the technicians have easy access to the four on-site optometrists if they need clarification on anything and in turn optometrists can assist in the final checking of orders. 'This ensures our customers are guaranteed a very high level of service and error-free work.'

Janjua seems unfazed by the competition he faces from his bigger rivals. 'It's all about service,' he says. 'I'm a firm believer that there is a role for the independent business to play in any sector and optics is no different. There will always be patients and clients who want the personal touch offered by the small independent business and that can't easily be matched by the bigger companies.

'We're essentially offering a service from one optician to another. We understand each other's needs,' he adds.

Experienced staff

In total, Janjua employs 20 staff across his businesses, including three full-time lab technicians. He says he inherited most of his staff from the optical practices when he acquired them and he firmly believes that this factor has been of great benefit to him. 'One of the lab technicians

has been affiliated with Burrows Opticians for nearly 40 years. Another has been working in optics for the past 20 years and the third technician has worked as a dispenser in one of my practices before switching roles. I know that the lab and the optical practices have greatly benefited from the experience they bring.'

There are other benefits to having an in-house lab, he explains. 'We get good deals and we pass on the benefits to patients. We are also in total control, guaranteeing a high level of satisfaction for all our practices. We can also speed up the turnaround time for jobs. The staff who commute between the three practices pick up and drop off orders on a regular basis.'

Progressive move

The lab is affiliated with the larger lens suppliers, including Hoya and Essilor, and Janjua has also launched his own branded freeform prescription and progressive lenses.

Janjua has noticed a marked increase in the number of requests for reglazing over the past 18 months from customers to his practices and from external clients. 'You have to look at the bigger picture when a patient opts not to buy a new frame but decides instead to re-use their existing one.

'If you want to retain that patient, you must give them the best possible product that meets their needs and budget. The hope is that they will return and maybe spend more the next time there is a change in their prescription.'

Janjua is also a committee member of the Nottingham & Derby Optical Society and works twice a month with the North Lincolnshire Primary Care Trust's ophthalmology referral programme. He has also recently completed a diploma in sports vision and he is currently on his way to completing his ophthalmic doctorate course at Aston University.

Looking ahead, Janjua says he has no immediate plans to buy any other practices, adding: 'I do want to build the lab business and I have plans to extend the existing lab area to accommodate an additional machine.' ●