



# Working smarter with Nikon

Nikon's Eyecare Professional scheme offers practitioners with a reputation for high standards and technical expertise the opportunity to develop their business. **Alex Thomas** reports

**H**aving celebrated its 10th anniversary last month, Nikon Optical UK feels it has established a reputation for producing optical products at the cutting edge of technology. Produced at its Milton Keynes plant, the recently released SeeMax lens and SeeCoat lens coating are its latest pieces of evidence to attest to this argument.

Now that it has become an established player in the optical market, Nikon Optical UK's managing director, Martin Thompson, has been preparing for the next stage of its growth. Having worked for Nikon Optical – and its former distributor for a total of 20 years – Thompson has risen through the ranks, having started as a sales representative for the northern region. He has been part of an evolution that has seen the company grow to employ over 100 staff as well as providing lenses to continental Europe and even China and India.

Yet Thompson believes this success story is no way near its conclusion. Perhaps surprisingly one of the main areas he wishes to address as he seeks to increase Nikon's market foothold, is its reputation. 'Historically Nikon lenses were often perceived as expensive, but I don't think that is the case,' he says. 'Ten years ago yes we were expensive and we didn't have such a broad appeal, but things have changed.' Drawing a parallel between Nikon's product positioning and that of the car



**Martin Thompson: ultimately if you want the best product you have to pay for it**

manufacturer Mercedes, Thompson explains that both companies make a large variety of products that are prestigious in every class.

'Mercedes has a range that goes down from the S-Class to entry level models such as the A-Class which are affordable to most people earning a realistic living.'

While not wanting to be a 'one-stop shop' that supplies 100 per cent of a practitioner's lenses, Thompson feels Nikon Optical's current product portfolio is extensive enough to provide Nikon lenses to suit most budgets.

'But ultimately if you want the best product you have to pay for it,' he says. Taking into account the power of the Nikon brand image, Thompson also reckons that if the product lives up to people's expectations then they are willing to pay a bit more for it.

### Help and advice

Another area that he sees as crucial for the company's continued development is its relationship with the practices it supplies. This is especially important at a time when rivals such as Signet Armorlite and Rodenstock are recruiting members to their Kodak Lens Vision Centre and Star Club loyalty schemes. Nikon also has its own scheme, Nikon Eyecare Professional

(NEP), through which it aims to help practitioners develop their business by acting as a consultant, giving them help and advice if they want it.

Nikon has been supporting practices through the programme for over four years. Expanding on what Nikon does to help them, Thompson says: 'You can't make a strategy that's all encompassing as they all have different needs and demands. Every business is unique, so it's very difficult to make a universal solution.'

'The idea from our perspective is to support them, whether that's by providing financial contributions for marketing, taking them to an optical show, or by providing them and their staff with CET training.'

Nikon has also recently installed 'multimedia kiosks' – flat screen televisions dedicated to promoting the practice and Nikon products – in 20 practices initially.

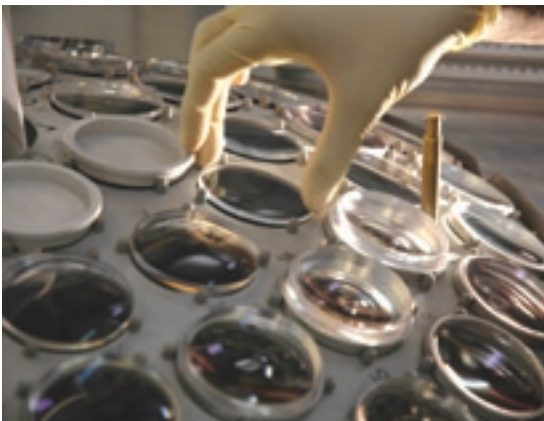
'We listen to their goals and see what we can do to work together. If they want to increase footfall, or install a new IT system, we'll look at ways of doing that. We wouldn't rule out putting in a window or fascia. We wish to be flexible in our approach to our customers,' reveals Thompson.

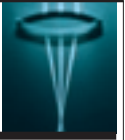
'For instance, a lot of practitioners who work with us do not necessarily want to see more patients through the door, but would rather talk to the ones they have about multiple quality dispensing and the benefits of new technologies.'

Asked how Nikon benefits from the partnership, Thompson says: 'We don't specifically say you have to buy a percentage of lenses, but there is an expectation to receive a certain amount of sales, but there's no hard and fast rule. It's an open agreement.'

Thompson also explains that Nikon is very careful over whom it chooses to become an NEP. 'For us as a product it's not every practice we want to be associated with. We think we have a great brand and very clear positioning in that respect. We don't want to be displayed in practices that don't portray our core standards of excellence.'

'We like to select practitioners





with a sufficient amount of technical expertise to emphasise the key benefits the product. With products such as the new See Series, selling is more intricate than with past lenses, since the qualities and features of the products have become more advanced.'

## Investing in practitioners

To recruit new NEPs, Nikon has employed four new sales representatives taking their total number to 10; although Thompson does not see them as traditional sales 'reps', but more as business advisers. 'They are looking for opportunities and niches in the marketplace and certainly when they go into towns they look for practitioners with similar fundamental beliefs to us with the same standards of excellence.

'We want to get more wearer trials and get spectacles on the faces of people in the profession who would appreciate and understand the differences, benefits and key features of the product.'

Nikon's view of how to support practitioners differs considerably from some of its competitors. 'From our perspective we're looking at the investment of what people buy into,

**Nikon supplies lenses from its plant in Milton Keynes**



which is the individual practitioner themselves. When you go to a dentist, you don't want to see a different dentist every time you visit; you want to see the same practitioner. This is no different from what people want from their optometrist. Therefore our philosophy is more about supporting practitioners than just providing outward marketing,' Thompson says.

The NEP programme means that Nikon and its practitioners will not necessarily be 'working harder, but working smarter', according to Thompson. He feels that Nikon's strategy has been vindicated by the fact that 'our business is picking up

significantly during a difficult period for the lens market.' He added: 'We've grown because we've got it right in terms of service, we have it right in terms of the quality of the product.'

There are other factors which cause Thompson to expect Nikon's growth to continue and he points to the significant investment in the factory as well as the quality of products. Among the new products due to be released in 2008 is a new accommodation support lens that is already testing well in Japan. Thompson also believes Nikon's free-form lenses and new coatings in particular will play a large role in continuing growth. ●

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