

# Global ambitions

Newly established UK lens manufacturer Optimal Vision has come a long way from its Romanian roots. **Bevis O'Neill** met up with some global entrepreneurs with independents in their sights

**H**ertfordshire-based photochromic lens manufacturer Optimal Vision is a new entrant onto the UK stage, but more to the point is that independent opticians are its main market. By providing high quality photochromic lenses at a very competitive price, the company believes it has a definitive advantage.

Optimal Vision's arrival in the UK has been a something of a geographic road trip. The company was conceived and created by Andre Hancu.

A former Romanian Chess Master in the 1980s, Hancu sought and was granted political asylum in Austria

when touring Europe with the national team. Later moving to the US, Hancu wasted little time in establishing his company, he quickly set up his first outlet in California supplying lenses to various customers. Moving to Mexico in the 1990s, Hancu set up a manufacturing laboratory and Optimal Vision began to go global.

Today, Optimal Vision is expanding with tie-ups and ventures in Mexico, Spain, China, Romania and South Korea.

### The new generation

Hancu's son Dan recently relocated from the US to the UK, and is now based at the company's Baldock offices

in Hertfordshire. Hancu Junior has grand designs for Optimal Vision in 2008. 'We have recently signed a joint venture with a Chinese factory to produce photochromic lenses for its home-grown market and production is expected to start this year. This will lower our costs, while significantly increasing our production capacity. And, of course, it will benefit our customer base,' he explains.

'Casting photochromic lenses is more difficult than casting clear lenses, and most Chinese factories do not yet know how to do it. This is a natural relationship for us because we provide the skills and technology that they lack. In addition, we can greatly increase our production capacity. Our research and development is still several years ahead of what we currently produce and an increase in production will allow us to bring new products to the market much more quickly.'

### Helping independents

Helping independent opticians compete with the multiples is high on the company's agenda, says Hancu.

'We want to help the independent compete against the larger firms by providing them with lenses at the price the conglomerates already get due to their buying power. When a customer buys a pair of photochromic lenses several people are getting paid down the line – the optician, the glazing or surfacing lab, the distributor, the lens manufacturer and the monomer manufacturers – and that's not accounting for the suppliers of the raw materials at various stages.'

Optimal Vision's selling point, however, is combining the lens and monomer manufacturer's output as well as the distributor's.

'We can eliminate two of the stages of profit-taking from the price chain,' continues Hancu. 'Our customers are effectively buying direct from the manufacturers. Another way we've reduced costs is by not stocking finished lenses with only a hard coat. All of our finished lenses have an

## What are photochromes?

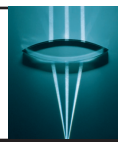
Photochromes – the components which make photochromic lenses turn dark on exposure to ultra violet light – do not react as well in the heat. This means the lens won't get as dark when it is hot outside. One way to reduce the effect of the heat is to use chemicals which also slow down the rate of darkening. Optimal Vision customises its lenses for colder weather, for example the UK and northern Europe, so it doesn't have to slow down its lens reaction to counteract the effect of heat.

Photochromic dyes undergo a chemical reaction when exposed to UV light, allowing less light to pass through them. When the UV

light source is removed they return to their inactivated clear form. Heat above 30°C and coatings inhibit some of the effects of UV light. Most photochromic lenses last roughly one to three years, although most manufacturers tend not to provide longevity data.

Optimal Vision's lenses incorporate the photochromes in the lens making a darker and faster lens possible, while maintaining a longer lifecycle. The lenses activate in less than 20 seconds and on returning indoors 90 per cent of the photochromes will deactivate within three minutes. Hancu says the lenses last about three and a half years.





**Dan Hancu: 'We want to help the independent compete against the larger firms'**

anti-reflective coating, partly because it reduces our inventory costs, and partly because we would never wear lenses without an anti-reflective coating ourselves.'

It is still early days for Optimal Vision's UK expansion, but Hancu is adamant that the company's success will hinge on strong research and development, and the ability to deliver 'what independents really want'.

Hancu is particularly proud of the company's own-brand Optimal Brown and Grey lenses, which are designed to complement the skin colour of the customer. New tones such as green are planned over the following few months.

'Due to our small size we are an agile company,' he says. 'Consequently, we have taken feedback from our customers into consideration and have developed this whole new generation of lenses. These will also be faster to darken and lighten and they will have less residual colour – no photochromic lenses can get completely clear yet.'

### New materials

With most of the company's materials being sourced from the EU or the UK, Hancu is keen to point out that: 'The next step in terms of research will be to work more closely with our UK and European suppliers, such as James Robinson in Huddersfield, to develop new materials and processes to make a monomer with even better properties.' He is confident the company will be taking online orders by March, although he suspects that as much as 95 per cent of the company's future customer base will prefer to order by

telephone or fax.

Last summer the company brought in the services of an experienced new business manager Georgie Russell. She describes the new venture as 'an exciting new project'.

'I particularly like the fact that Optimal Vision is in its infancy as far as selling lenses in the UK is concerned,' she says. 'We put a strong emphasis on our relationship with our customers. We really do take any concerns and suggestions seriously. Having worn reading glasses for four years now, I decided to test run the lenses myself and immediately had them put into frames by Helen Kelly Opticians. I have been very pleased with them.'

Thus it was that *Optician* visited dispensing optician Anne Cavalier at Letchworth-based Helen Kelly Opticians, who was herself sporting a pair of Optimal Vision's latest photochromics.

'We were tipped off early about Optimal Vision. The company's turnaround, quality of product and toughness of coating suit our needs very well. What's more, Optimal Vision offers attractive prices and easy terms and conditions,' Cavalier concludes. ●

## The New Alta Generation

The Alta XS Centering Unit with Alta NX Edger

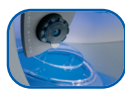
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