



Upgrade to shade

Six months ago Webb & Lucas won the opportunity to upgrade all of its customers from a traditional lens to a Transitions VI lens, **Chris Bennett** returned to Stafford to see how the project progressed

When Transitions VI was launched last autumn its arrival was celebrated with a competition allowing one practice in the country to offer Transitions lenses at the same prices as clear lenses. The upgrade could be made to patients for a maximum of six weeks but the practice was only charged a clear lens price for the photochromics by its lab for the full six-month period.

One of the most fundamental decisions any winner was going to have to make was how the offer would be presented and whether the benefit of free upgrades would be taken by the practice or the patient.

That question didn't take Webb & Lucas long to answer says dispensing optician Sarah Thomas. 'Transitions came to us with certain suggestions but we already had our own ideas.' Luckily for consumers in Stafford, Webb & Lucas had decided that it wanted to share its good fortune with its patients. 'The benefit needed to be shared out,' says optometrist Ian Lucas who explains the practice prides itself on offering patient-centred eye care. But, he adds quickly. 'It also had to have some benefit for us.'

Offers

Webb & Lucas and Transitions came up with a range of ideas that ran through the six-month offer period supported by Transitions with in-store staff training and demonstration tools. These were designed to promote Transitions while also promoting and building the practice's business. A range of offers was made and, other than in the six weeks to Valentine's Day, most patients were encouraged to pay towards an upgrade to Transitions. The one big group getting free upgrades was children when buying a frame.

A voucher for a free pair of single-vision, stock tinted lenses was offered to those ordering a pair of Transitions lenses with the proviso that the lenses had to go into a frame purchased from the practice before the end of May

- December 2008 - 29 per cent penetration
- January 2009 - 49 per cent penetration (full month at free upgrade to Transitions for all)
- February 2009 - 48 per cent penetration (2 weeks at free upgrade to Transitions for all)
- March 2009 - 26 per cent penetration
- April 2009 - 29 per cent penetration
- May 2009 - 24 per cent penetration

2009. Alternatively, the patient could enjoy £50 off Drivewear or polarised lenses. Those ordering spectacles funded by an NHS voucher were offered an upgrade to Transitions for £10.

These offers provided varying degrees of promotional oomph for Transitions but even the lower key promotions resulted in TVI dispensing rates at double the national average.

Luca Conte, country manager, UK and Ireland says the penetration was highest when Transitions was offered at the same price as clear lenses. 'This demonstrates that clear lens wearers are ideal targets for a modern photochromic lens, that are clear when required with the added benefits of protecting from glare, reducing eye and blocking UV rays.'

He says the exercise was interesting to assess where the balance point would be which would encourage more patients to opt for photochromics. 'Ultimately, a price point could be found where the profit margin could be reduced but the price margin over the equivalent clear lens could still be better. It demonstrates there is still massive potential for most opticians to maximise takings and improve average dispensing values and satisfaction levels from their current patient base.'

There is a call to action for other opticians he says to recommend added value 'best' products, rather than assuming patients wish to buy something as cheap as possible.

Both Lucas and Thomas were also surprised by some of the responses on the various offers, notably the £50 voucher for Drivewear or free tinted lenses which just two people took up.

This they suggest may have more to do with the performance of TVI lenses and the willingness of patients to pay full price for Drivewear. Patients may

not have wanted the free sunlenses because the TVI are so good, says Lucas.

Both were surprised by the negative reaction from some teenagers to variable tint. Parents are won over by the health benefits, says Thomas, but some over 10s often didn't like the idea of standing out from the crowd. However most teenagers did take up the offer.

Thomas is keen to stress that even before the promotion Webb & Lucas was very proactive and that remains the case now it has ended: 'I always demonstrate polarised lenses and Drivewear, Ian will still send patients out who ask for them.' That isn't something that finished with the programme, she adds.

Education

'It's all about education,' says Lucas. 'If the profession doesn't tell the spectacle-buying public about new products how are they supposed to choose them? We brought Transitions into their sphere of knowledge and they chose them.' This included people who had tried photochromics in the past and had preconceived ideas about their performance.

And this education has to be backed up with good dispensing, says Thomas. 'I have seen people who are -7.00 who have never been offered high index lenses or a coating.' There will always be one-off situations where variable tints are not suitable, such as vicars performing funerals, but the ultimate choice is the customer's. There will always be people who just don't like them, says Lucas, because they activate in dull sunlight. 'It's a bit like Marmite, people love them or they hate them.'

It was always going to be a tall order to see dramatic improvements from a practice as proactive in promoting lenses as Webb & Lucas but there are definite links between patient education, offering high technology products and take up by the customers. Lucas has his own theories as to why the offer of free second lenses didn't work. 'TVI might have been so good that they didn't need an extra pair. That could mean that Transitions really is an everyday lens.'

That is not something Conte would argue with: 'For most of the six-month period patients paid full retail price and for a shorter period paid no extra charge at all. As a result, penetration rates varied between double and quadruple the national average of 14 per cent. This demonstrates that when clear lens patients have the benefits explained in a systematic manner they are happy to choose a photochromic lens as an ideal clear lens replacement.' ●