Eye for the sporting chance

Sports eyewear presents a dispensing opportunity for the independent practitioner. Alex Thomas reports on the efforts of Adidas to inform and enthuse the profession.

Working with professional sportsmen to develop eyewear tailored to the specific visual needs of their sport, Adidas sports eyewear is aiming to position itself as the most technically advanced sports eyewear brand on the market.

Among the athletes with whom the brand has collaborated are the England cricket and British Olympic teams, professional golfers including Justin Rose and Nick Faldo, as well as a large number of skiers, cyclists, climbers, triathletes and other sportsmen. Through their input, Adidas sports eyewear has developed a large range of sports eyewear suitable to be worn by both elite athletes and casual sports enthusiasts.

Silhouette, which has designed, manufactured and distributed Adidas sports eyewear under licence for the past 10 years, was given a very strong brief by the German sportswear manufacturer, according to the marketing and sales director for Adidas eyewear in the UK and Ireland, Matthias Kosack. ‘We have to be a sports eyewear brand, we wouldn’t have been able to produce a fashion brand and put the Adidas logo on it. The majority of our product has to be sports driven,’ he explains.

Describing the production process from inception to the completed glasses being placed on sale, Kosack says: ‘Whenever we produce any product we start with an athlete’s needs. We meet up with the athlete first and ask them a series of questions such as what are the key visual demands of their sport? Is fogging a problem? Where do they look? How important is the level of impact protection? How important is the weight of the frames? How important is the fit? In what light conditions is the sport played in?’

After Silhouette’s designers have identified the eyewear requirements and issues relevant to that particular sport, they then create a prototype that attempts to meet those needs. According to Kosack each prototype is ‘tested and tested and tested again’. ‘We need to make sure it’s perfect before we release it, as once it’s out with the consumer there are no second chances.’

Catching performance

Detailing Adidas sports eyewear’s involvement with the England cricket team, Dr Nick Dash, an optometrist specialising in sports vision explains: ‘The study we undertook with cricket was to look at catching performance in different environments, with different trajectories.’

After experiencing varying light levels in England, the study was undertaken in India, where the levels of sunlight were both stronger and more consistent, with the England Lions, England’s second tier international team.

Describing how the experiments were conducted, he says: ‘We tested the direction of the light from three trajectories, a high trajectory, a low and a flat, which are part of normal fielding practice. We made them wear different sunglasses during the different challenges they were facing and timed it in order to create conditions that were as close as possible to a competitive environment.’

Dr Dash revealed that the success rate in terms of completing the tasks was 28 per cent greater using Adidas’ Light Stabiliser Technology (LST) lens than with other lens options. ‘In the past, players would often use a grey lens which reduces the whole spectrum of light equally. If we use a lens that filters specific wavelengths and reduces the blue end of the spectrum, we therefore enhance the red end of the spectrum,’ he says, adding that blue light is also more harmful to the eye in terms of UV.

‘While fielding, players, have problems picking the ball up, especially against a difficult background. If there’s a full house at a game, there will be a multitude of different colours in the crowd, which creates a lot of visual noise and picking up a red ball against that background can sometimes be difficult. Therefore anything that
will enable the redness of the ball to pop out against the background would enhance earlier perception of the ball and the chances of the player catching that ball,’ Dr Dash adds.

Marketing bonus
Explaining the value to Adidas of their work with the England Cricket Board, Kosack says: ‘Working with England has been a big marketing bonus, because it’s a mainstream sport, it’s highlighted the very technical work we do to the larger population and it’s a sport that many practices have an affinity with and can relate to.’ Commenting on the publicity generated during the Ashes build-up and the tournament itself, he says: ‘We have quite a few calls every day either from customers or from consumers asking questions.’

Through its research findings with the England cricketers and other sportsmen, Adidas sports eyewear has also developed a sports vision Continuing Education Training (CET) programme for practitioners, worth one CET point.

Intended as a general guide instructing practitioners what issues might arise when dealing with patients’ sporting interests, the programme details the key aspects from different sports they might need to know about when dispensing sports eyewear.

Kosack elaborates: ‘The purpose of the CET programme is to give people an insight into sports vision, such as what an athlete might be thinking in certain situations because a lot of practitioners won’t have been in those situations themselves. We try to make them empathise with an athlete’s needs and understand what is essential and what solutions are available. At the end we tell them that Adidas is one of the brands that can provide those solutions, because this programme is not about what we do as a company. It’s about the risk of UV to sportsmen, the risk of impact, how you can influence the light coming into your eyes and what effect changing can have.’

Ben Ashlin, sports marketing and events manager for Adidas sports eyewear, who was responsible for the programme explains: ‘We tell practitioners about how lens technology can reduce chromatic aberration and what effect that has on sport, in terms of more accurate depth perception and colour vision. Essentially we’re putting things across that practitioners would have already learnt back in optometry school and explaining how it applies to sport.’

Having initiated the programme in June, Kosack says that Silhouette has currently carried out over 70 training sessions. Another programme which will inform practitioners about visual issues in winter sports will start in September/October.

Outlining the opportunity presented to practices by sports vision he says: ‘Sports dispensing is a fantastic opportunity to have better patient retention, by talking about sports, you have a level of interaction with them that they can relate to. It’s also an additional dispense. According to Sports England 40-50 per cent of the population plays a sport, if a patient coming for an eye test has a sports hobby then it’s very likely there will be a need for a sports prescription solution as well.’

Kosack believes that independents are well placed to dispense sports eyewear to patients in a way that the majority of multiples are not, due to the personal touch required to be able to enquire about patients’ sporting interests. Kosack also feels that the additional knowledge needed to understand sports and the lenses required are not present in many multiple outlets.

In encouraging the spread of sports vision practice, Kosack reveals that Adidas sports eyewear has had to dispel many previous preconceptions among practitioners. ‘Practices feel if they get into sports vision, they’ll have to get out to see sports clubs and things like that, but actually it really starts with your existing patient base and asking a little bit more, without looking for a new business straight away. We don’t just do the presentation to those that would be entitled to a CET point, we invite the whole practice so that they have confidence in answering questions about sports vision,’ he says.

Continental Europe provides Adidas sport eyewear with the example of what can be achieved with sports vision dispensing. According to Kosack, in his native Germany sports vision dispensing is an integral part of the majority of optical practices. There he claims customers are instantly asked what sports they do, or what hobbies they have.

Practitioners immediately identify an opportunity to look at whether there is a second or third alternative on top of their glasses,’ he explains. Kosack contrasts this to the UK where he says sports eyewear solutions are often only mentioned if a patient enquires about them.

Yet through initiatives such as its involvement with the England cricket team and its CET training, Kosack hopes Adidas can help expand the market for sports eyewear.

‘We’re trying to raise the profile of sports vision in general in the country and even if that benefits our competitors too, we ourselves will benefit,’ he says.