



With the financial markets once again in freefall, it is a big ask to set up any business at the moment, let alone one in the competitive field of optical prescription houses. However, David Maris has recently set up a new lab in Derby and has big plans for the future based on his experience in the industry.

Maris was 17 when he first moved to the Midlands in 2001 and started working in optics. 'I was planning to work as a personal trainer but when I arrived a friend offered me a job in an optical practice. That was on the shop floor as an optical assistant and from there I became store manager and eventually decided to move into the lab. There I learnt all about lab management and the skills required to glaze and surface lenses. I love lab work; it is really satisfying to help improve someone's sight.'

More recently Maris has worked in an independent lab in Derby. 'I was there for six months but got laid off. At that point I already had plans to set my own lab up but losing the job gave me the impetus to actually go for it.'

Expert advice

In this endeavour Maris benefited from the support of the Prince's Trust, a charity founded in 1976 by Prince Charles to help young people.

'I was looking for funding and saw it on the internet,' explains Maris. 'The Prince's Trust is open to anyone who is under 30 and unemployed. I went to a taster day to see what they offered and then I was put onto a week-long workshop that covered areas of business practice including

Starter's orders

Mike Hale travels to Derby to visit Myoptical, a new lab set up with the help of the Prince's Trust



Maris: doesn't charge any extra for glazing into supra or high wrap frames

writing a proper business plan, how to gain and retain customers, and taxation issues.'

After that Maris had to present his idea for a prescription house business to a panel who would decide if it warranted investment.

'The presentation is a bit like [TV show] *Dragon's Den* in that they grill you about you things like funding and cash flow. They also ask about your future aspirations because there is no point in helping to set up a business if it is just going to stagnate.'

The outcome of the pitch was that the Trust provided Maris with the maximum possible grant of £2,000 plus a loan of £500 to invest in Myoptical and, just as importantly, put him in touch with a business mentor.

'The mentors are people who are already successful in business and want to give something back by giving their time to others. My mentor is Chris Griffin and I see him once a month in person and he is always available for day-to-day advice via email or phone.'

The Myoptical premises are in central Derby, a location from which Maris aims to service both the surrounding area and the wider country.

'For the first six months the landlords have given me a third off the rent, which will help with overheads as the business builds up. I'm looking for clients across the country as well as in the local area. Derby has a lot of glazing houses

already but I am offering a personal service in that I will deal directly with clients. Pricewise I am very competitive and I don't charge any extra for glazing into supra or high wrap frames.'

Myoptical currently only offers glazing but in time Maris plans to offer surfacing as well.

'That will help keep costs down as I won't need a third party to do the surfacing and it will allow a faster turnaround. I will be in a position to start surfacing in a couple of month's time. Everything is in place, I have the equipment already.'

Maris was fortunate to purchase glazing and surfacing equipment from a recent bankruptcy sale.

'The premises have three phase electricity, which is much smoother for the machine motors. The machines themselves are terrific and allow me to produce high quality work including rimless.'

Understanding the customer

Maris is hoping that enough practices will send him work for him to execute his business plan and develop the business.

'It is a tough time to start but it is the right time for me. People can be hesitant to change to a new supplier but if they give me a chance I'll do excellent work for them. Having worked on the retail side of an optical practice I can empathise and understand what they need – quality product at a good price and personal service.'

So where does Maris want to be in a year's time?

'Hopefully when you knock on the door, one of my staff will open it. The current machines and an additional glazing machine will be running constantly because we've got lots of work from independent opticians. We will have our display area at the front of the workshop and a nice working environment for the staff. On that subject, I would like to give something back by training up unemployed people if possible. It would be a dream come true if eventually I was able to mentor for the Prince's Trust.' ●



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