

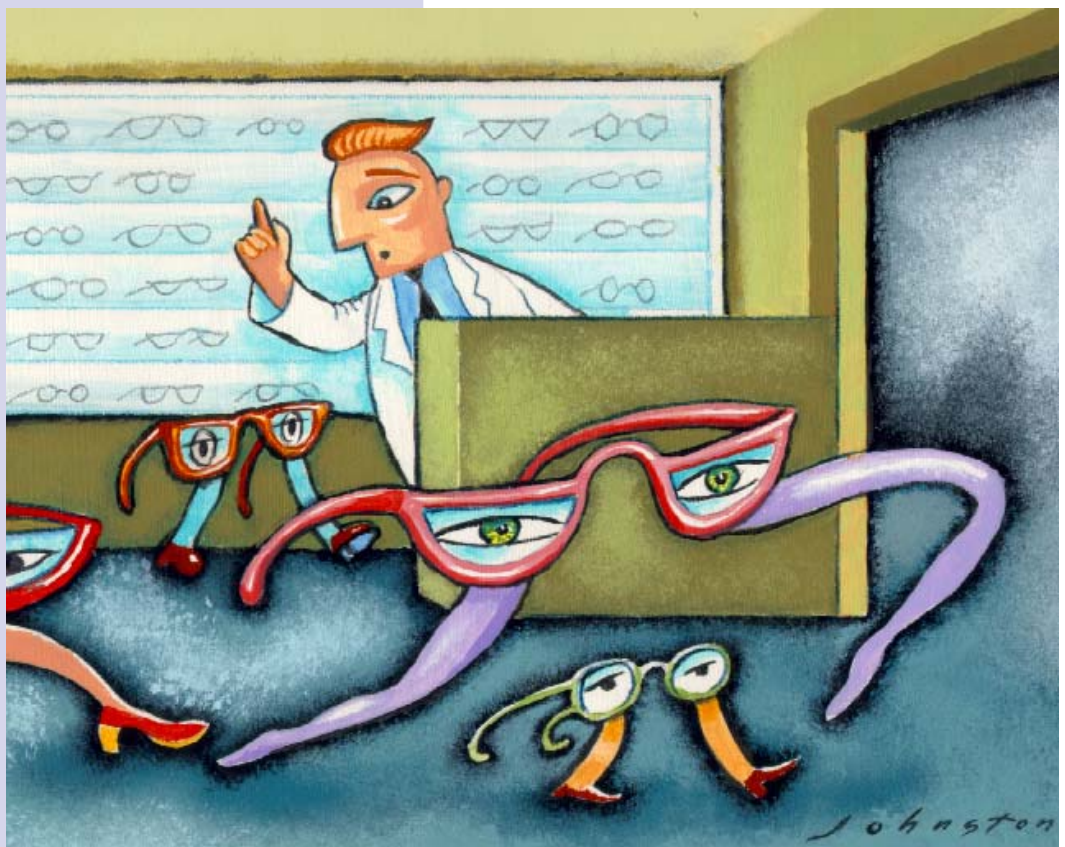
Symptoms:
Glasses with Legs and
Patient Refund Demands

Diagnosis:
A Retail Business
Called Optical

Cure:
Consumer-Focused
Systems and Procedures

Dealing with optical customers demanding refunds, unhappy customers wanting exchanges, upset customers talking about price gouging, stolen merchandise, and myriad other optical-related issues can be frustrating at best. At its worse, I've seen doctor-owners and administrators throw up their hands and close their optical dispensaries.

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The challenge is to use the same analytical skills and calm that allow the office to efficiently handle the battery-acid-in-eye and glass-in-eye victims on the clinical side to sort through and “cure” optical headaches.

The first hurdle to overcome is mental. It’s remembering that patients magically become consumers when they enter your dispensary and that they expect the same level of service from your establishment as they do from the finest retail store or restaurant in your area.

“Why?” you may ask. “We don’t sell high-end merchandise.” When opening a dispensary, a practice makes two unspoken promises. The first is that the same level of competency exhibited by the physician during surgery will now be found in the optical dispensary. Think about it from the patient’s perspective. He or she comes to you because you’re trusted. He or she trusts you to fix his or her ocular problems. Therefore, patients are very disappointed when your policies and employees don’t fix their optical problems.

The second unspoken promise opening a dispensary sends to the patient is that now that the practice is selling merchandise, like a retail establishment, retail customs apply. Take these two unspoken promises and picture a woman who picked out her frame with dilated eyes. When the glasses are dispensed, her husband tells her the frame is ugly. You now have a retail nightmare.

The woman made a mistake. Some research suggests that as many as 30% of all complaining customers directly or indirectly cause the problem they now expect the merchant or service provider to fix, regardless of their culpability. Sears, Nordstrom, and Land’s End, as well as your local grocery, have been in the business

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of customer satisfaction longer than you. Learn from them. The grocer will give you another chicken if you say your bird was bad. Sears and Nordstrom both take back merchandise they don’t sell. (The story of the bald tires returned to Nordstrom is famous, appearing on the front pages of several newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*.) As my encounter with Land’s End testifies to, a savvy merchant may even volunteer to replace merchandise purchased 12 months ago and outgrown by a teenager before being worn.

Listen and Learn

Customer service author Janelle Barlow¹ reminds us that complaining customers are giving us an opportunity to find out what their problems are so we can help them. When we do, they will be encouraged to come back, use our services, and buy our product. It is as though they are giving us a “book” entitled *A Chance to Survive: Listen to Me and You’ll Stay in Business*, Barlow says.

On the surface, a customer may complain that the progressive lenses she just purchased aren’t the correct power. At a deeper level, she is saying she may buy her next pair from your optical dispensary if she is satisfied with how the practice handles this small problem. The customer is testing you.

On the surface, the customer complains that the frame you dispensed isn’t the one she picked out. At a deeper level, the customer is wondering whether the optician will take her word for it and how the optical dispensary will compensate her for her disappointment.

On the surface, customers let your office manager know in no uncertain terms that when they call the optical dispensary to find out the status of an order, their calls are not returned for days. At a deeper level, customers are warning you that they may look at a competitor when it’s time for cataract surgery.

What do you suppose most practices hear—the surface complaint or the deeper message? All too many practices hear only the direct, surface message. The result is mismanaged complaints and a loss of optical consumers *and* patients for the clinic.

Outback Steakhouse knows the value of a happy patron. It is this chain’s policy that a person reporting a “foreign object” in his or her food will be compensated by the restaurant paying for everyone’s meal at the table. No questions asked. Desert and bar tab included. Do some customers try to rip off the restaurant? No doubt. But just as practices cannot treat all patients as though they were thieves to protect themselves against the few who are, neither can Outback Steakhouse.

It is estimated that approximately 1% to 1½% of customers will

systematically try to cheat. Research by Day and coauthors² suggests that the number of chronic complainers is small. My advice is to factor in this kind of behavior as part of the cost of doing business. If someone does try to take advantage of the optical dispensary through exaggerated claims, chances are that other customers who witness this interaction will be impressed that the optician did not make the customer feel guilty even though he or she could have rightfully done so.

Price Complaints

Perhaps your optical customers are writing letters to the physician protesting that your prices are too high. Well, *are* your prices too high? Does someone do a price check of two competitors every 6 months? Let's assume that you know your marketplace and your prices are competitive. If your capture rate (the number of adult refractions with change versus the number of optical sales) is acceptable, chances are your general patient population is satisfied that the value of your optical goods is worth the price charged.

If this is the case, consider sending well-written letters responding to complainers with a discount certificate for that person's next optical purchase. Because the general public will never know about your policy of sending discount certificates, the fear of hordes of patients requesting certificates under false pretenses is groundless. Second, if you send discount certificates, people are likely to use them, which means that they will become customers again. The optical dispensary then has a chance to provide good service, make it up to patients who think your prices are too high, and retain them as loyal customers.

When should the practice take complaints about prices in its

optical dispensary seriously? Ironically, your price points can perfectly reflect your target market and patients may still complain about your prices. Poor product knowledge is linked to price complaints.

John Goodman, president of Technical Assistance Research Program, estimates that about a third of all customer complaints arise because customers do not know how to use a product, so they break it or wash it improperly or install it in a way so that it does not work. Then, he says, if you add in the people who bought the product for the wrong reasons (the store assistant assured them it would work) or who have mistaken beliefs as to what the product can do, you have a much higher number than one third.³

Thus, price complaints may mean that one of two things are happening during the selection and purchase process:

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1. Opticians aren't taking the time to listen to the consumer when the visual need is explained.
2. Opticians aren't taking time to match the consumer's lifestyle to the proper frame and/or correct lens type and material (e.g., selling a person who uses a computer 5 hours a day general-use progressive instead of computer lenses or progressive lenses designed to be worn when working on a computer).

Frequent price complaints might therefore alert management to staff training problems. Consumers are usually the first to know when the optical staff is poorly representing the practice. In fact, managers may never learn about poor treatment of consumers through simple observation because in general, employees behave better when their managers are around.

Seek Out Complaints

Rather than trying to reduce the number of complaints, practices need to encourage optical staff to seek out complaints because this will define what customers want. If a practice's goal is to have fewer complaints this year than last, it is easy to accomplish. Staff will get the message and simply not report complaints to management. How many times have you delivered a written complaint to the host at a restaurant and wondered whether your complaint was passed on to the general manager? I have gone to the trouble of filling out response forms in hotels and checking the box indicating that I would like a response to my complaint and then received nothing. This is extremely poor complaint handling, or the complaint was never passed on in the first place.

Instead of running away from your complaining optical consumers by trying to reduce complaints, become more accurate in measur-

ing what issues are mentioned and how the practice responds to complaining consumers.

Optical Theft

Just as policies that appear to protect the practice's net often decrease sales, procedures designed to protect the practice against theft may also decrease sales. For example, it is logical to put merchandise that seems to grow legs and walk out the door behind lock and key. Yes, those frames are now safe. Unfortunately, your profit has also just been locked up. Patients who have just spent an hour or more in your clinic don't usually want to wait. "I'll have to find the key" sends a message that the optician would rather not be bothered. Would you be eager to buy an expensive dessert if the waiter said, "I'll have to find the dessert tray"?

Although it is a simple solution, I seldom recommend putting expensive frames or sunwear in locked cabinets because of concerns of theft. This is necessary in very few situations. Instead, control theft with procedures and layout. Here are some suggestions that may work for you:

- Rearrange the front-desk counter so these employees can assist in watching merchandise.
- Monitor the optical dispensary with a camera. Post a small sign announcing that the premises are being watched and that those caught stealing will be prosecuted.
- Move expensive frames away from the door and busy waiting areas. Place designer sunwear behind the table most often used by your opticians.
- Fill in holes on frame boards with merchandise from understock as soon as a frame is sold.
- Don't leave frames lying on counters or dispensing tables.

- Count frames every morning and evening.
- Don't leave patients alone. Assign one eyewear consultant as the dispensing optician and one as the person who assists during the selection process. Each has a backup. The front-desk staff can call on the insurance and buzz the lab when there are walk-ins.
- Ask a technician to escort the patient to the optical dispensary and not to leave until the "selection eyewear consultant" is with the patient.

Most important, don't assume that patients are the ones stealing from your office. Unfortunately, an employee is often the thief.

Word of Mouth

Before managed care, physicians used to brag that their practices would grow by word of mouth without marketing.

How you handle patients asking for refunds, replacements for scratched lenses, new eyewear for children who break glasses once a month and, yes, glasses that grow legs and walk out of your optical dispensary becomes the fuel and fodder for word of mouth. When consumers have a problem with something, they tell someone about it. In fact, research shows that people who have a problem are likely to tell 8 to 10 people about it. In the past, too many patients found a deaf ear when trying to complain about a problem to a doctor. Fortunately, health care providers are changing how they look at and treat patients who have problems.

Word-of-mouth advertising can make or break an optical dispensary. Every dissatisfied consumer who leaves your optical dispensary angry, upset, offended, or just ticked off represents a potential threat in the marketplace.

Eyewear can be purchased anywhere, not just in optical dispensaries and optometric offices but in department stores, discount chain superstores, pharmacies, and malls as well. With so many choices, it's a miracle when your patients choose your optical dispensary. Treat them well. They are your compass to fixing the underlying causes of the problems as well as your best marketing tactic.

People are much more likely to believe a friendly recommendation than your solicitations. Perhaps you have seen a sale come to a halt as a person standing next to a shopper says, *sotto voce*, "I wouldn't buy that. I have one and it breaks easily" or "You can get a cheaper one someplace else." But the sale will likely be made if the person says, "Oh, I have one of those and it's great. You'll love it. And the guarantee is very good. Definitely get it, and you'll think it was one of the best buys you ever made."

Every bad word told and retold about your optical dispensary becomes that much more difficult to overcome through marketing promotions and price cuts. Let the words of my friend and mentor Harriett Stein become your mantra: "If they love you when they leave you, they'll be back!"

References

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