

Design Details

SIMPLE STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING CUSTOMERS TO YOUR OPTICAL DISPENSARY

by Donna A. Suter

Of all the diverse issues facing ophthalmology practices, one of the most pervasive forces of change involves repositioning “the optical department” for greater profitability. What MDs are now realizing is having a dispensary alone doesn’t improve patient satisfaction or the practice bottom line. It takes the support of management and the professional know-how to guide it.

In our consultations, we find that practices wishing to improve optical performance often overlook simple solutions. Changing the appearance of the dispensary is one such obvious option. A facelift can and often does make a dif-

ference in the bottom line. In fact, this principal holds true in a variety of situations. This past August, my husband and I sold our home in ten days for 5 percent above appraised value. Why so fast in what real estate agents describe as a buyers market? We followed the advice of Terry Eilers, the author of *How To Sell Your Home Fast for the Highest Price in Any Market*, who wrote, “A home that looks well cared for sells quicker than one that looks like it’s simply a house.”

Eilers selling tips can be easily applied to optical merchandizing. Research confirms that consumers form opinions about a business within the first three minutes of entering the store. Unconsciously, they are taking in data that the mind will then use to either validate

their choice or “prove” that they should go to another shop. Because between 70 and 80 percent of this pivotal, decision-making data is visual, consider the message the appearance of your dispensary sends to a stranger.

When I go consult with a practice my mental checklist covers housekeeping items as well as decorative touches:

1. *Look at your dispensary from the patient’s point of view.* Be objective and honest. Consumers often make the decision on whether to buy from a specific store before they even go inside. The patients’ seated view of the dispensary from the clinic is their “snapshot” of the quality of its service and merchandise. Make it attractive and inviting. Glare-free windows and attractive displays raise patient awareness. Sit in your wait-



Courtesy Eye Designs

Courtesy Fashion Optical

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conduct your own dispensary walk-through and evaluation using this basic checklist:

TO FIX:

- Dust**
- Back of counters visible**
- Items stacked on floor**
- POP displays on floor**
- Frames easily dislodged by shaky hands**
- Door to messy lab open**
- Only one sales person and locked display cases**
- Too many frames that look alike**
- Displays crammed with product**

TO ADD:

- Lens center near dispensing tables**
- Fashion-forward frame displays**
- Easily identified men's, women's and unisex areas**
- Greenery to soften utilitarian look**
- Display Cases**
- Walkways wide enough to accommodate customers using walkers or carrying large purses**

ing rooms and look into the dispensary. Does it look inviting or are you looking at frames that need dusting?

Next, look at the dispensary from its outside entrance. Make sure the entrance area is immaculate and uncluttered. Is it sterile and abandoned looking or warm and inviting? Is a direct phone number printed on the door or is the door covered with a hodgepodge of crooked vendor decals? Use bright-colored flowers to decorate in spring and summer.

2. *Stimulate the patients' imaginations by setting scenes.* A dispensary with 700 square feet can easily display enough merchandize to serve the patient load of a solo generalist. A good rule of thumb is that 40 to 60 percent of all refractions (with change) will purchase new frames. Therefore, 600 well-chosen frames can work in a practice that sees 30 to 45 comprehensive exams four days a week (3,600 to 5,000 optical purchases typically means 1,800 to 3,000 frame sales a year).

If the square footage of your optical is larger, don't overload on products. Use the space to merchandize. In a spacious dispensary, display polarized sunwear with fishing gear, high-end women's wear with handbags and pumps and status brands center-stage in high traffic areas. Create a lens center that identifies and accentuates the positive features of each lens product.

Use props such as a brightly colored umbrella during rainy season to draw attention to specialty eyewear. Place 3- or 4-inch clear shelves inside frame boards and decorate with small plants or collectibles to draw attention to premium products.

Hire a professional decorator to make sure your merchandising efforts will appeal to the masses. Services typically average \$30 an hour. A large practice in Texas did this and, for an invest-

ment of under \$300, they totally changed the feel of their dispensary from dull to dynamite.

3. *Display frames logically, from the patient's point of view.* Patients I've spoken to say it's difficult for them to find a particular style (silver rimless, for example) when product is organized by collection or brand name.

This also makes it difficult for someone other than the floor optician to quickly show a patient a frame in a specific eye shape, size or color. I recommend organizing frame inventory first by gender, then by material, design/style (oval, large rectangle, aviator, smaller rectangle, and cat eye, etc.) and, lastly, vendor collection.

4. *Don't overbuy.* Overall, inventory should "turn" three to five times a year. Let's say you have 1,000 frames on hand (include the ones stashed under counters or in a closet). At \$45 each, that represents \$45,000 worth of inventory.

The question you have to ask yourself is, How much of that \$45,000 is working for you? How much is just sitting there as dead inventory? The answer to that is in the "turns."

5. *Manage your frame boards in a manner that reduces cost of goods.* Sound frame board management allows opticians to jump on trends quickly and return slow moving merchandise just as quickly. High-traffic dispensaries purchase "the kit" (all varieties and styles) in best sellers and work with their sales rep to identify their top-selling colors as well as their most popular eye sizes and shapes. This more proactive form of frame board management gives the optical depth on the board.

6. *Use well-known truths when internally marketing your dispensary.* There are things about your practice that just won't change. For example, some ophthalmologists are infamous for recommending drug-store readers and often won't recommend custom spectacles for near work. Use it. On the clinic side, sell quality readers from display cases located in the dilation area.

7. *Buy with logic.* Not only do you need to keep costs down, but you also have to carry the inventory that will attract new customers.

While many of these suggestions may seem small and inconsequential, patients often need just "one more small reason" to purchase from your dispensary. It is imperative that you stay on top of the "plain" things. And, visual merchandizing or the lack of it is as plain as the nose on your face.

My husband and I prepared our home for sale by remembering two things: that cleaning is one of the most important sales tools and that we should decorate in a way that doesn't distract the buyer from the sale. Isn't it logical to assume that the changes discussed here could have a similar dramatic impact in your practice? □