



How Successful Rx Labs Exceed Customer Needs and Expectations

ANDREW KARP / GROUP EDITOR, LENSES & TECHNOLOGY AND JEFF HOPKINS / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

In the first days of the coronavirus pandemic, as states and municipalities began issuing shutdown orders, optical retailers and optometric practices across the country went into shock. With many offices closed and eyeglass shipments disrupted, the situation was chaotic.

“When everyone literally had the rug pulled out from under them, no previous systems you had in place were going to be helpful when you’re winging it,” recalled optician Ruth Domber, who co-owns 10/10 Optics, a popular optical boutique and optometric practice in New York City.

“I called up Scott Pearl [managing director] at ABB Optical Labs and he set up our accounts so we could get deliveries at home, because the Post Office was not delivering on a regular basis. We were able to get things overnight. He waived certain fees for us so we would not get penalized, because he saw that we were doing a certain amount of volume. The communication was almost daily, and any time there was the slightest problem, one phone call resolved everything. The service was extraordinary. It was the best customer service I’ve ever seen from a lab.”

This story illustrates the vital link that exists between optical retailers and eyecare profession-

als and the wholesale laboratories that serve them. That link is characterized by a symbiotic relationship based upon the interdependence of buyers and sellers.

Yet that relationship is often much more than just transactional, as Domber attests. In fact, labs often go to extraordinary lengths to make sure their accounts get what they need, as well as when and how they need it. A good lab can be indispensable to an optical shop or eyecare practice, and can contribute greatly to its success.

The most essential service that labs provide is fabricating and fulfilling prescriptions for patients. But labs typically provide their customers with technical support, sales and marketing programs and staff education as well. In return, the lab’s customers, or accounts, support and sustain the lab with a steady stream of work that ultimately translates into loyalty, provided the lab’s work is satisfactory.

This symbiosis is most evident when it occurs between independent wholesale labs and independent eyecare professionals, as well as at labs that are owned and operated by lens suppliers. However, versions of it also exist within optical retail chains, eyecare practices with multiple loca-

tions and managed vision care companies that represent “closed loop” systems that operate their own labs to service company stores, dispensaries and clinics.

Independent labs as well as those owned by suppliers differentiate themselves from competitors based upon the quality of service they can provide. They are typically judged by their quality of workmanship, ability to deliver it consistently and on-time, and their expert knowledge.

What constitutes good service for optical labs in today’s ultra-competitive business environment? What do eyecare professionals and optical retailers need from their labs in order to fulfill the service expectations of their customers and patients, many of whom are accustomed to the consumer-centric approach to service epitomized by Amazon that emphasizes speed, choice and personalization? And how is the added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the relationship between labs and ECPs?

Vision Monday explores these timely questions in our special feature, “At Your Service: How Successful Optical Labs Meet Customer Needs and Expectations.” Through interviews and proprietary research we present the voices of lab own-

ers, managers, company executives, equipment vendors and eyecare professionals who explain how modern labs are using technology, training and market knowledge to meet the new service requirements of their customers.

Hiring and Training Customer Service Staff

The customer service staff is on the front lines of the lab-practice relationship, and often their interactions with customers call for quick problem resolution. Finding the right people for this sensitive task is key, but labs take different approaches to finding those people.

Borys Goldrajch, president of Pasch Optical a lab in Sheridan, Colo. that is partly owned by Nikon, believes strongly in the value of optical knowledge as a prerequisite for his customer service organization. "It's very important that when somebody calls they can actually answer right on



Borys Goldrajch
President
Pasch Optical



Scott Pearl
Managing Director
ABB Labs



Javan Diaz
Managing Director
Simplify Optics

the phone without putting somebody on hold. Most of the questions we get are about lenses, and a lot about dispensing also." He noted that some of the lab's customer service personnel have been with the lab as long as 16 years, providing both a depth of optical experience and a long-term relationship with customers.

Scott Pearl, managing director of ABB Labs, headquartered in Coral Springs, Fla., said that the lab's customer service people are almost always

hired from within the ABB organization. "About 40 percent to 50 percent of our customer service people actually started in operations. They come with a really valuable perspective for customer service in an optical laboratory, which is an understanding of processing lenses."

For others, different factors take priority. Yvonne Wolbeck, head of customer service for Zeiss Vision Care's laboratory network, said, "I'm looking for personalities. You definitely have to be a people person, and you also have to be one that isn't afraid to think outside the box and see what's best for the customer."

Wolbeck said new hires go through an eight-week training course, which "goes through anything from basic optics, all the way through what the 'Zeiss experience' is, and what we want to deliver on," after which "they also sit for two to four weeks with another agent" before answering calls on their own.

Javan Diaz, managing director of Simplify Optics in Santa Clarita, Calif., values optical experience, but said, "We don't just hire based on that. The people we have on the phone generally come from service-oriented businesses." He noted that he hired one staffer who worked at one of his favorite sandwich shops, because "he bent over backwards for us, and would do the same for one of our customers." New hires "go through a process of learning the different departments that we have, even if they have experience it's important that they understand our culture and believe in it before getting on the phones with our customers."

For Bill Heffner, IV, director of IT, marketing, and sales at FEA Industries in Morton, Pa., people with

Continued on page 22

Survey Findings Reveal Service Preferences and Priorities

Surveys for the Modern Labs 2020 Report were conducted by Jobson Research from July 14 to July 27, 2020. Email invitations were sent to in-house databases of eyecare professionals (ECPs) and optical laboratories. A total of 452 ECPs responded, as did 37 labs. An incentive was offered to each survey respondent.

Some survey questions were only asked of ECPs, some were asked only of labs, and some were asked of both groups. Here are some topline findings:

- ECPs' loyalty to their labs is strong. Nearly half of the respondents said they have not switched labs in the past five years; almost a third said they have switched only once during that time.
- The majority of ECPs listed their top reasons for switching labs was quality of work was below expectations; and the turnaround time for Rx jobs was too long. Notably, 16.6 percent of ECPs said their reason for changing labs

was the lab's affiliation with a managed vision care company. ECPs said their top reason for switching labs is that the quality of work was below expectations, while labs listed price as the top reason for customers' switching.

- The survey also explored how labs are helping ECPs reopen their practices that were closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most respondents reported "no change," others cited special promotions, and providing PPE, helping staff implement new safety protocols, and providing marketing materials explaining new safety protocols.
- ECPs and labs agreed that the most important factors in the ECPs' choice of a lab are Rx lens quality/accuracy, AR coating/mirror coating quality and ease of ordering.

Highlights from the survey data are included in the Modern Lab 2020 Report. The complete survey results are posted, together with the Report, on VisionMonday.com.



Continued from page 21

dispensing experience don't necessarily make the best customer service personnel. "In that setting, you are used to spending time with a single patient face-to-face, where in lab customer service you can get bombarded with calls from many different customers in a short period of time. It's better to find someone with a skill set geared toward call center-focused service, and then train them in the optical knowledge that they will need." This includes basic optics and product knowledge: "They not only need to know what types of lenses we sell, but the benefits of different materials, how frame choice affects a lens, and a number of other, similar topics."

Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles lab, which services its Vision Essentials clinics, makes sure customer-facing personnel have ophthalmic training. To accomplish that, Kaiser has created a new job classification: optical lab clerk.

"We have training and have converted all of our general clerks to this new classification," said lab manager, Michael Hassel. "In the new classification, ophthalmic knowledge is required, thus creating a better problem-solving team for our Vision Essentials clinical staff."

Some labs have customer service personnel work in lab operations, not just as part of their training, but on an ongoing basis. Ken Lin, president of X-tra Lite Optical in Huntington Beach, Calif., is an advocate of this approach. "The whole goal was to have people be able to do multiple functions, to keep them fresh, to keep them up-to-date on what we have in our lab."

This also gives customer service people the ability to help out with urgent jobs. "Sometimes if there's a rush job, we want customer service people to handle it themselves. That way, there's more of a personal touch to the job."

This approach is also used at Simplify Optics, according to Diaz. "We've overstaffed our customer service to allow them to be on phones and spending the time with the customer, but also being in production as well. They're touching the jobs. It means something more [to our customers]. It's not just a typical person that's behind a screen."

Continued on page 24

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN SELECTING A LAB?

(Rank 5 – Very Important, Rank 1 – Not Important)

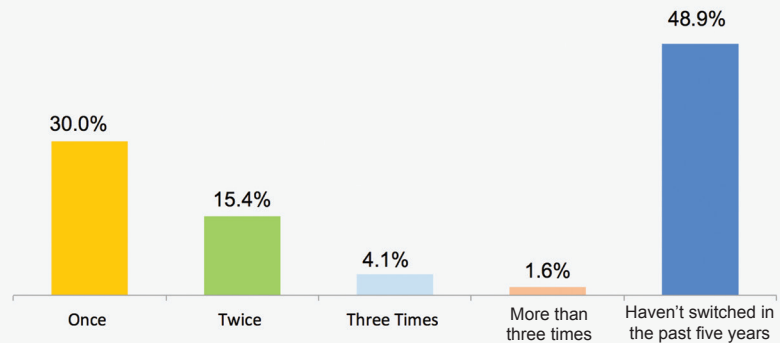
*Asked only to ECPs

Averages Charted



NUMBER OF TIMES PRACTICE HAS SWITCHED OPTICAL LABS

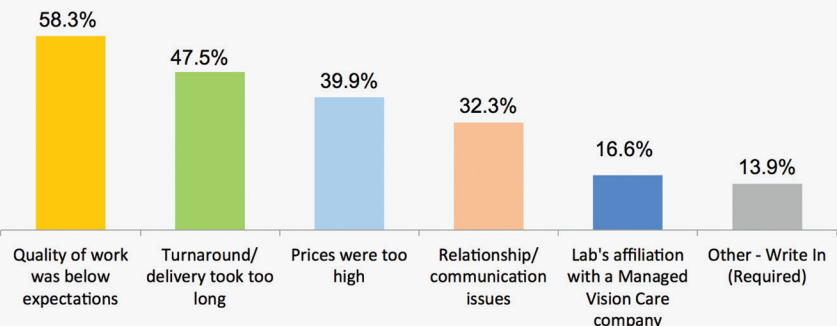
*Asked only to ECPs



IF SWITCHED, WHAT WAS THE REASON

(CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

*Asked only to ECPs



July 2020

Source for all 3 charts above: 2020 Modern Lab Survey for ECPs and Labs, by Jobson Optical Research

Continued from page 22

Creating a Customer Service Mindset

Each lab has a dedicated customer service department, but the reality is that everyone in the lab is in the business of serving customers. Keeping lab operations people focused on that fact is a priority for many lab execs. As Heffner explained, “When you’re running production in a lab, it can be hard to see that you’re making any kind of difference. When they are so far removed from the end customer, it becomes very easy to get tunnel vision; you aren’t making a medical device that is going to change someone’s life, you are cutting hundreds of thousands of pieces of plastic a day.”

In order to combat that, he said, “We try to instill in them the fact that what they are doing matters to our customers.” This is partly done through the lab’s efforts to provide eyewear to charitable organizations. “We receive postcards back from those individuals that have had their lives changed” by the eyewear they have been given. “This helps reinforce the idea that what our staff is doing matters to people, and that they are making a difference in the lives of others on a daily basis.”

Similarly, Diaz described the need to “humanize” what the production people are doing. He likes to share videos with the staff of people who have been given the gift of sight through the glasses made in the lab. He also encourages the staff to see things from the ECP’s point of view. “We will ask our customers to come by and give us a little bit of their experience on the front lines: ‘How it is to be in front of a patient? How do you talk to them?’ They give us real-life scenarios.”

Barry Lannon, head of lab operations and supply chain for Zeiss, said, “One of the things we’re trying to instill is what we call a ‘medical mindset.’ We’re making medical devices—it’s not just a piece of plastic going into a frame.” A central theme in onboarding training is, “What we’re making and for whom. Every single lens we make is for a named person.”

According to Scott Pearl, “Great operations create great customer service. It’s a harmony. It is



Barry Lannon
Head of Lab Operations and Supply Chain
Zeiss



Ken Lin
President
X-tra Lite Optical



Scott MacLeod
President
McLeod Optical

a complete team. To make it so takes a lot of thread between the customer service group and the lab group.” Some of this thread is provided by operations people known as expeditors. “They communicate by phone and email over 350 times a day with our customer service team so we can convey good information to our customers. Customer service cannot work on an island.”

Pearl also noted that providing a career path for staff members increases their commitment to serving the customer. “If we continue to develop, invest in, and be attentive to our staff, then we provide our best chance to support the customer. An ABB employee that has been trained, promoted through a deliberately structured HR and management process is a satisfied employee who will do a better job of handling our relationships with customers. Operations enable great customer service.”

Lab leaders recognize their key role and maintaining this mindset. Goldrajch said, “I’m on the floor every day, and so is my general manager. We answer the phones a lot, if there’s two rings, somebody has to pick up the phone. It’s important to set an example.”

Ken Lin recognizes that the buck stops with him. “As the owner of the lab, I’m here to answer the phone.” He feels that being a small, family business, like many of his customers, makes it easier to meet special needs. “There’s less hierarchy,” he noted, adding “We’ll do whatever it takes to keep our accounts happy.” Diaz said that he often gives out his cellphone number to customers, and “Our customer service manager and our team have followed suit.”

Establishing and Maintaining the Customer Relationship

The relationship between practices and labs goes well beyond the transactional. It can be close and personal, based on the fact that the organizations depend on each other for success. Of course, the trust a practice has for a lab depends largely on their ability to deliver quality work in a timely manner.

As Scott MacLeod, president of McLeod Optical in Warwick, R.I. noted, “It’s that first job that often determines if they’ll become a regular customer.” But the relationship goes far beyond that.

The right attitude is key, according to Diaz. “We’ve always had in mind that this is a long-term relationship.” Even with practices that aren’t current customers, he said, “the biggest thing I want to be is a resource, because as a resource, that’s how I can begin to build trust with the person on the other line, and I think it’s important to know that I’m not just seeing green with them.”

Relationships are maintained through all customer-facing personnel, including customer service and sales. Pearl described a three-tier structure at ABB labs. “Closest to the customer, we have our lab sales organization. That organization is supported by a group of positions that we call Lab Advisors, and the third is a larger group of lab customer service people.” While the customer service team takes orders, and provides ETA updates and “light technical guidance,” the Lab Advisor role is “concierge-level customer support. It’s a blending of customer service and sales.”

Heffner noted that “We really try and customize the lab experience for each customer, so that

Continued on page 26

Kaiser Permanente: Creating Synergy in a Closed Loop System

Kaaiser Permanente does not do business with independent eyecare professionals. The California-based, non-profit health care giant operates a closed network for its members, and its optical lab works only with Kaiser Permanente's Vision Essentials clinics. Despite these dissimilarities with the wholesale lab business model, there are aspects of Kaiser's lab business that are somewhat the same.

Michael Hassel manages the optical laboratory for Vision Essentials by Kaiser Permanente, which is part of the Southern California Permanente Medical Group based in Los Angeles. He said, "Even though we are a closed network, service time is definitely a big motivator for someone to buy. Our clinics are all that we service. But our members, in order to purchase from our clinics, they don't have to buy. After our members have their eye exam in our clinics, they can, out of their own pockets, purchase their eyewear at any optical store they choose. As a laboratory, we are definitely competing with service time and quality that's out there in the open market," he said.

Like most other labs, the Kaiser lab works hard to keep its yields high. "We're very proud of our lab remake rate," said Hassel. "It's extremely low. Our optical clinics are very demanding of us. Our overall yields probably aren't as high as most labs, but our remakes are very low. Only very high-quality work leaves the lab." Hassel added that the lab can process any type of Rx job, from simple to complex. No matter what the job may require, it's all part of Kaiser's mission to serve its members to the best of its ability.

Speaking about the synergy between the Kaiser lab and the clinics it serves, Hassel pointed out that "The Vision Essentials clinics are simply an extension of our lab and vice versa. We are one organization and thus we are one team with one mission. We have business workshops and frequent projects and collaboration initiatives, all of which create



Michael Hassel manages the optical laboratory for Vision Essentials by Kaiser Permanente, which is part of the Southern California Permanente Medical Group based in Los Angeles.



Stephanie Valencia

*Business Line Manager of Optical Dispensing
Kaiser Permanente's Riverside Medical Center*

great interpersonal and team relationships."

When the lab ships a completed job to the clinic, the clinic's staff personally calls the patient to ensure they are aware their order has arrived. All status updates are checked daily by optical staff to eliminate wait time. "Keeping a positive conversation during these times is key," emphasized

Stephanie Valencia, business line manager of optical dispensing in Kaiser's Riverside Medical Center. "It's important to us that our patients know their needs are a priority and that we have solid processes in place to ensure timely delivery."

As a clinic manager, Valencia makes sure the staff are kept up to date on all new communication delivered regarding lab operations. "A great way we have kept communication alive in our clinics are daily and weekly huddles, this gives you a chance to discuss updates and new processes as a team," she said. "This also allows staff a chance to ask questions for understanding or share new ideas. We also utilize an online rounding tool with staff to keep the group well-informed and maintain a great relationship with ECPs. This has helped support trust and follow-through to ensure they have what they need daily to do their best." ■



Continued from page 24

way we offer them the exact level of support they need.” For some practices, “we will have direct sales representative involvement—following up, seeing what we can do, and things like that. Others just want us to take an order and leave them alone otherwise. It’s a lot like dating—we have to figure out each other to see what is going to work for both of us.”

Zeiss Vision Care operates a centralized customer service organization that serves practices around the country, which creates special challenges for maintaining customer relationships. According to Wolbeck, Zeiss has addressed this challenge by dividing the customer service team into nine regional groups. “I want the accounts to call in and be able to talk to the same agents day in and day out. Each ECP office has their own needs, and I want my customer service team to understand what those needs are and be able to accommodate them.”

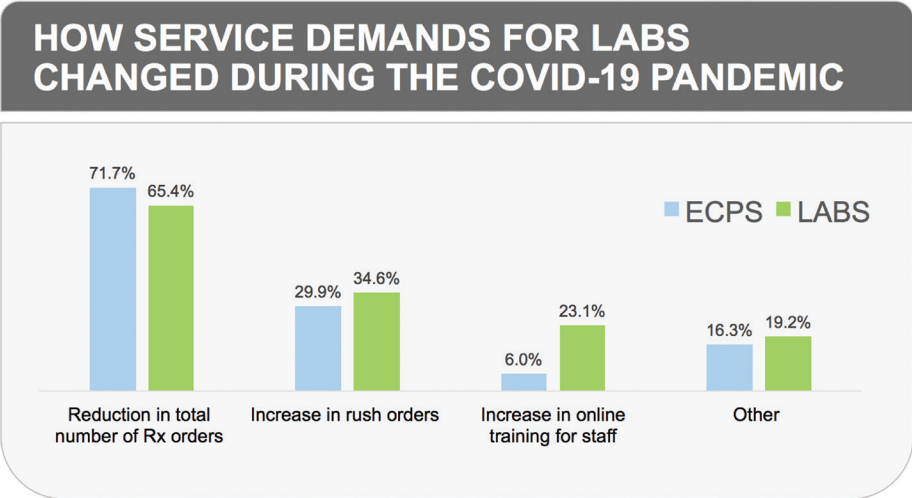
For Goldrajch, the key to the relationship is “trust; that people trust that you can do what they need you to do.” He believes that the longevity of Pasch’s customer service staff helps create a sense of familiarity that is important in maintaining a close relationship. “We’ve always tried to act like we are a smaller laboratory, just to prove that we know [our customers]. Basically, we know people when they call in, without even asking them for their account number. In most cases, my customer service people that have been with me for a long time, they recognize the voices of the people, so I think that makes people feel good.”

Providing Exceptional Service

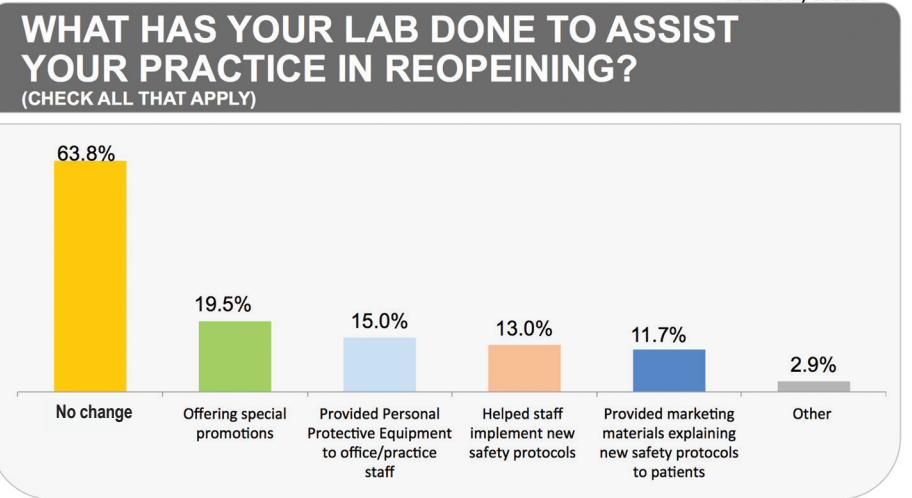
Good customer service means providing quality, on-time work under normal circumstances. But truly exceptional customer service occurs when circumstances aren’t normal. As Barry Leonard, OD, of Dr. Barry Leonard and Associates of Panorama City, Calif. said, “Real customer service is when things happen—glitches or complex cases, or you need

Continued on page 28

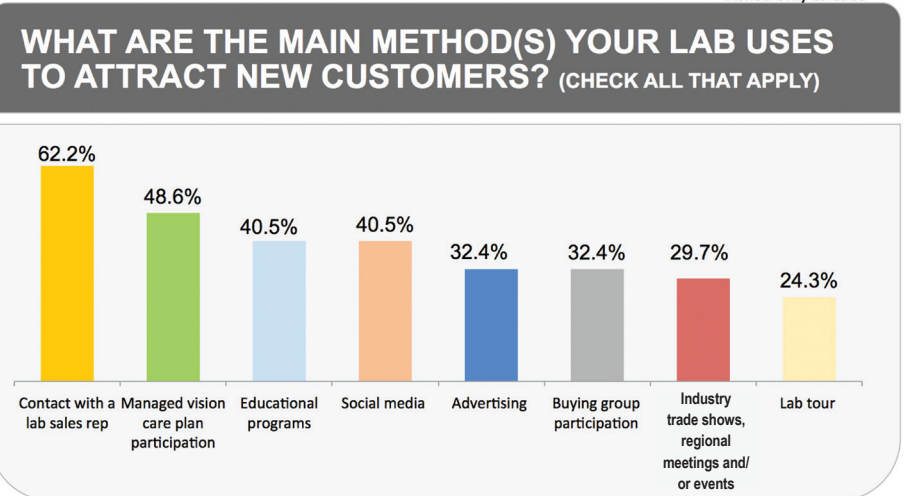
*Asked to Both ECPs & Labs



*Asked only to ECPs



*Asked only to Labs



July 2020

Source for all 3 charts above: 2020 Modern Lab Survey for ECPs and Labs, by Jobson Optical Research

Continued from page 26

something quick—that’s what separates the really good from the average.” Or, as Dr. Jennifer Khem-Castillo, owner of Eyepeople in Montibello, Calif. puts it, “Number one is ensuring that all of our problems are met. They are solved in a timely manner, they follow up with you.”

Urgent or emergency jobs are one area where labs are often asked to go above and beyond. According to MacLeod, “Even if a customer calls on a weekend or off-hours, we’ll find a way to get the job to them. We’ll arrange for special deliveries.” Another unusual circumstance occurs when “we’re asked to find a discontinued frame. That takes work. We might call 10 customers before we find it.”

Diaz said that “we don’t work on the weekends, but we’ve had doctors call on Saturday saying, ‘I really need this job.’ We’ll open the lab up, even if it’s just one job, and we’ll drive it out wherever they are to help the customer out.”

Similarly, Lannon said that, “If something is needed on a Saturday morning, we’ll find somebody in the lab who’ll be willing to drive—it could be two hours—to deliver something to somebody.”

Problem jobs, often involving very strong prescriptions, are also a challenge for practices, and give labs the opportunity to excel. Dr. Moes Nasser, owner of three Vision Source practices in the greater Houston area, described one such circumstance. “There was a patient recently with an outside prescription from an ophthalmologist with 15 prism diopters. It took Zeiss two or three days to research, and finally they agreed that they would be able to do it...obviously that’s not their bread and butter lens—it’s not a lens that will make them money either.”

Jennifer Ebner, owner of Aspen Eyewear in Boulder, Colo., says that Pasch Optical helps her out with patients in need. “We try to do jobs for the needy whenever we can, and Pasch is always willing to work with me on lens prices, and deals when I’m just trying to get someone who needs glasses, who can’t maybe afford what they really need.”

External events can also challenge a lab to go above and beyond in serving customers. Mike McNally, vice president of operations and engineering for Hoya Vision Care, described Hoya’s actions in anticipation of Hurricane Laura. “In our New Orleans



Dr. Moes Nasser
Owner
Three Vision Source practices



Jennifer Ebner
Owner
Aspen Eyewear



Mike McNally
Vice President of Operations and Engineering
Hoya Vision Care

lab, which is right near where the hurricane came through, they talked to every single one of their customers before the hurricane hit, and coordinated with them and asked them, ‘which jobs do you want us to do now, which ones do you want us to hold, what do you need so we can help you out?’”

The biggest recent external event to impact the industry is, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has posed many challenges for ECPs, along with opportunities for labs to respond with exceptional service. During the shutdown, when lab business was down by 90 percent or more, many labs maintained extra capacity just to make sure customers were served.

Lannon said, “We didn’t shut any facilities at all... we needed to stay open, because there were some customers who had to be serviced. We could have done it with one lab, but we said we need to keep all labs open to serve customers locally and across the country.”

Pearl described a similar approach. “Operationally, we made decisions in the middle of this to hold key staff, to keep buildings at a low [level of] productivity as opposed to shutting them. Our lab group, our manufacturing teams, our customer service teams and all of our support teams operated straight through this.”

Diaz said, “We never closed these doors even in the depths of the pandemic. My partners and I said even if all our people are out, if all three of us are healthy, we’ll stay here every day and make sure those jobs go out.”

A particular challenge arose when many practices were shut down, but patients needed glasses that had already been ordered. As a result, many labs had to become more flexible in their shipping approach. Dr. Nasser faced the problem of fitting and dispensing completed eyewear to his patients

when his offices were essentially closed.

The solution: “We had the [Zeiss] lab ship us all of our glasses to the practice administrator’s home, so every day he would make appointments with patients at the three offices... without any hitch, no problem at all.” The Zeiss lab also shipped glasses directly to patients, according to Lannon.

Roberta Thompson, manager of Bloom Family Eye Surgeons in Dayton, Ohio, also credited a lab with helping the practice through a COVID-related crisis. “When COVID-19 hit our world, Bloom Family Eye Surgeons was completely turned upside down,” she recalled. “For safety concerns, we went from a staff of 28 to a staff of five. We had no way to fabricate lenses during this time, however, the need was still there. Patients still needed to see.”

Thompson called R&D Optical in Cincinnati, Ohio and asked if they would be willing to help. “I explained our position and without hesitation they offered to help us in any way they could. They edged and fabricated any orders I sent them, they communicated if there were any issues—and I can honestly say there were none—they made all our jobs usually the day they received them, and they got them sent back out to me the next day.

“Because of their customer service, their willingness to help us without hesitation, their overall communication and the feeling they give off as a small, honest business, they have forever earned our business,” Thompson said.

In the unique circumstances of the pandemic, labs found new ways to serve their customers that sometimes went beyond the labs’ normal role. Diaz said that Simplify Optics helped some of their customers with the often difficult process of obtaining a Paycheck Protection Plan (PPP) loan. “We helped a couple of them even get connected with the bank

Continued on page 30

Essilor's Sherianne James Talks About Bespoke Products and the Need for 'Customer Intimacy'

Essilor of America operates the largest wholesale laboratory network in the U.S. The network, which consists of about 100 labs, was built through the acquisition of independent labs and through organic growth.

To preserve the type of personalized customer service that characterizes the best independent labs, Essilor uses a systematic approach to training customer service representatives and organizes them into small work units called "pods." This approach, when combined with modernized manufacturing and distribution methods, results in what Sherianne James, chief marketing officer and senior vice president of customer experience, calls "customer intimacy."

VM's Andrew Karp spoke to James about the training and protocols Essilor has developed that allows the company to achieve and maintain a balance of personal service and efficiency. Their conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

VM: Do you see customer service expectations changing for Essilor labs. If so, what's changing and how is Essilor responding?

Sherianne James: The first thing a doctor will say is they want their job on time and they want it right the first time. That seems pretty basic and fundamental but it's not always the case. One of the challenges, industrywide, is the unpredictability of supply and demand in the context of COVID, and the complexity of shopping and safety—it's been harder.

One of the things that is a dynamic of our industry is that the service is not just dependent on the lab, it's dependent on the doctor. The majority of orders in the independent industry are 'frame-to-come.' The doctor places an order, but it's still dependent on when they send in that frame. Some do it right away, and others don't. So a lot of times an order delay is actually because of a frame delay. For example, an order might be delayed because maybe you put in a prescription that technically is incongruent with the frame. Those things cause delays.

One of the things we have come back to in terms of the fundamental way we support our doctors is what we refer to as 'customer intimacy.' And to be

frank, it actually came out of a pendulum swing the wrong way. We were trying to be efficient and more from a manufacturing sensibility. When you think about the most efficient customer service models, the Amazon-types of things, they're very centralized, very automated.

But because of the bespoke nature of our product, you need a bespoke type of service. That means we know you well enough to know that you have a lot of specialized prescriptions, and that you're going to have specialized needs, and we need to make sure that I call you to talk through the prescriptions. That's where the intimacy comes in.

In an attempt to balance that need for delivering intimate customer service while maintaining the efficiency of a large lab network, we went to this 'pod' approach. The way I like to simplistically put it, is the routing of the job and the movement between labs is our business. But the service we try to provide to our doctors is that they are likely to talk to the same customer service person every time. We're trying to provide the intimacy of a single, private independent lab but with the infrastructure and diversity and ability to do the jobs that the Essilor lab network is capable of.

VM: What kinds of training and protocols did Essilor put in place to achieve customer intimacy?

SJ: We're using technology so that we can minimize the number of specialists that are assigned to a lab. That was one of the first changes we made going to this pod model. We have a consistent and rigorous training process for all our customer service reps, many of whom are ABO-certified. Because of the dynamic nature of the demand due to the pandemic, we had people out for a decent period of time. To make sure that we didn't just bring them back onto the phones right away, we made them go through the training again and helped them to remember all



Sherianne James
Chief Marketing Officer
and Senior Vice President
of Customer Experience
Essilor of America

the basic protocols for how to deal with customers. We've always had this in place, but we've had to really lean into it recently.

One of the things that we pride ourselves on is that many of our customer service reps are ABO-certified. Some of them are opticians with rich experience. That really helps. If you have a wrap frame, you have certain prescriptions that can fit in it. Or if you have a certain frame and have a high index, it really helps to have an optical expert on the phone to help you figure it out.

VM: How does the pod concept work, and how many Essilor labs are operating under this customer service model?

SJ: You have pods that service a group of labs. If I go to the extreme of intimacy... which is problematic with our extensive lab network, every single lab would have its own set of customer service reps. The other extreme, you have an Amazon-like system in which, one centralized customer service, you route to a foreign country and you don't know who you're getting.

The pod is in the middle, but it is more skewed toward intimacy. You have a group of people who service multiple labs. If you happen to have a lot of call volume, instead of going to an unknown rep, you might get Sally instead of Mary. She'll still be familiar with your practice.

We've also added a role of 'lab liaison.' They're runners who move around the lab to figure out where the jobs are. The lab liaison will give the customer service rep a good idea of just where the job is. That way, they can ensure that the customer service is seamless. There are about 70 Essilor labs operating under this customer service model.

Another thing is that we use a service that allows us to constantly monitor the customer calls. We're always listening and recording the calls. The customer service rep has to rate the call and then calibrate themselves against how they're being rated by the customer. If for some reason you don't have good rating, you listen and get trained so you can improve. ■



Continued from page 28

that we were using when it was really difficult to get that PPP loan from the bigger banks.” He also recalled a customer who approached him and said, “I’m helping out with frontline workers with exam fees and even with frames. Would you be willing to help with lenses?” So we said ‘absolutely.’”

Pearl said that the shutdown put financial stress on both practices and their patients. “We found opportunities to provide cost relief in partnership with many of our customers. ABB labs now offers the ability for a customer to choose a stock lens instead of a manufactured lens. Because ABB has a significant stock optical business we’re able to pass through stock lens pricing with minimal handling and edging charges to be able to provide single vision prescriptions for a fraction of the surfaced price.”

Training and Educating the Customer’s Staff

As important as it is for a lab to educate and train its customer service team, many wholesalers believe it is equally important for the lab’s customer service and sales force to educate and train the ECP’s office staff.

“This is one of the things that help develop the business relationship and take it to the next level,” said FEA Industries Heffner. “Without this kind of interaction, you end up with a much more transactional relationship, which tends to be fairly basic in terms of how ‘needed’ a lab is. If the relationship is solely transactional, it makes it a lot easier for someone else to come in and convince the ECP to use them instead. If all you offer is a good price on product X, then someone with a better price can compete pretty easily. If, however, the lab has become an integral part of the ECP’s training and knowledge base, and the way they dispense and recommend products, it suddenly becomes much more difficult for them to switch to another lab.”

X-Tra Lite Optical’s Lin said that in-office training is often directly tied to a practice’s performance. “Our sales team would do in-office training and give the office staff their numbers for the month. They’d see how the practice is doing, and make suggestions on how they can maximize their sales.”

Pasch Optical’s Goldrajch also stressed the importance of training the doctor’s office staff. “In most of the cases, whenever there is a new hire in a particular account, we set up an appointment for training,” he said. “Whenever there is a new product, even our general manager will do training.”

Customer training is also priority at Carl Zeiss Vision. “We make sure that both sales and customer service representatives are trained in new products and services so they can personally educate our customers,” explained Matt Woelbern, who heads U.S. ECP marketing for Zeiss. “We have a vast library of training materials that reps can send immediately to their customers. We also have an online program that has product training that customers can take.”

Diaz of Simplify Optics also credits online learning from business partner VSP Optics as helping to strengthen relationships with customers. “VSP has done a really great job with U University,” he said. “Not only do we direct our customers to that portal, we send any new hire to U University for their first week of orientation.”

At McLeod Optical, Vision Source customers have access to product-specific training online through Essilor University and through the lab’s website. “We also have the monthly email blast, ‘The McLeod Messenger,’ which is a good source for current products and promotion,” said Scott MacLeod. “So the ECP gets trained by labs, our sales force, the internet and friends. Going forward we will see more zoom meetings/internet, and sales calls will become more valuable.”

To supplement its online and in-person educational efforts, Zeiss sponsors ABO-approved courses in trade publications such as *20/20 Magazine*. “In the past year we have done far more ABOs in the trade publications,” said Woelbern. “We’ve found that that’s where people go, so we’ve gone to where they’ve gone.”

COVID-19 has also put restrictions on lab tours, which are a popular way for labs to educate ECPs and office staff about lenses and lens treatments. “Customers learn something that they have never learned in the past, such as how AR works,” said Diaz.

“I love doing lab tours,” said Goldrajch, who has conducted as many as three tours a month of his Sheridan, Colorado facility. Both Pasch Optical and Simplify Optics have suspended their lab tours because of concerns about possible exposure to the coronavirus.

COVID-19 has also impacted the live educational events for ECPs that many labs sponsor. “We used to sponsor optician and optometric meetings and supply the speakers with tools and locations, but COVID is changing things,” said MacLeod.

Sometimes customers get to know their lab counterparts so well that they end up going to work alongside them. “We have a lot of people in customer service and sales that were dispensing opticians,” said Diaz. “Somebody who has that practical perspective and experience and was wonderful at dispensing eyewear sometimes makes an extraordinary lab rep. We have multiple opticians on our technical resolutions teams, many of our sales organization, many of our lab advisors that have experience in fitting, making lens choices, and dispensing eyewear. The VP of manufacturing for our lab is an accredited optician. A lot of our staff started out as our customers.”

How Production Efficiencies Improve Service

Although a lab’s customers may not always realize it, the reason they get their orders returned correctly and on time is the result of a collaborative effort between the lab’s production managers and technicians, often in consultation with equipment suppliers. Working together closely, they continually monitor and adjust the lab’s production processes to ensure all systems are operating at maximum efficiency.

The advent of automated “smart systems” within a framework known as Industry 4.0 facilitates the monitoring of the workflow and yields and can even predict when problems are likely to occur in the production line.

“Many technologies we use fall under the heading of ‘Industry 4.0,’ explained Lannon of Zeiss. “We’re manufacturing lenses using ‘big data,’ and using automation and robotics where possible. It’s

Continued on page 32



Continued from page 30

all to deliver premium products at a very high quality as fast as possible.” Zeiss’ main lab, in Hebron, Ky., represents the company’s most advanced use of technology.

Lannon said that going paperless has allowed Zeiss labs to take a crucial step forward in terms of service. “Every lens we make, we can make without the use of a piece of paper (through) the use of RFID technology, and the use of, for want of a better term, ‘bar codes.’ We engrave a bar code on the lens, which has all the information about that lens, all through the process, and then onward to the customer, so if, in a year’s time, they wanted to send it back to us we can read the bar code on the lens and tell you everything about that lens. So it gives us full traceability of the product.”

A major advantage of being paperless is not having to touch the lens as often, Lannon said. “A typical lab would touch a lens 40, 45, 50 times throughout the whole process. We have that considerably reduced, which means less touch points, less likelihood that you’re going to do something wrong with the lens. You produce it at a higher quality and at a faster time frame, so you get it to the customer when they were promised it. It’s one of the many facets that have given us the opportunity to serve the customer better. We believe it’s not just unique at Zeiss, but it’s unique in the industry.”

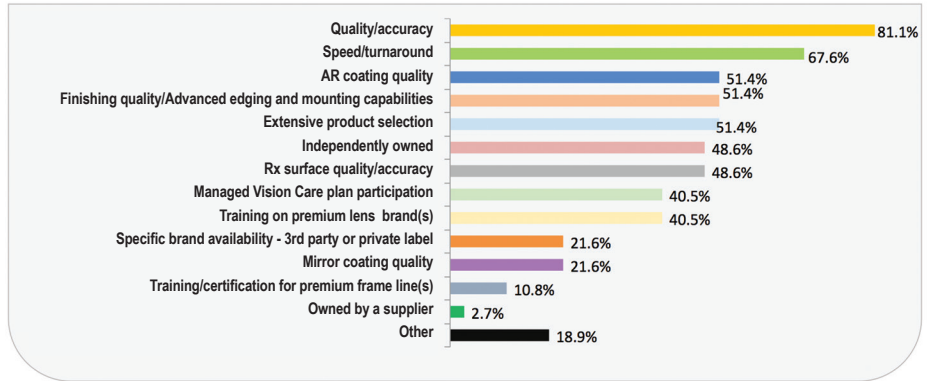
The organization of the workflow also plays a key role in enabling the smooth operation of the lab and ensuring on-time delivery of Rx jobs. For example, Hoya’s IMC (Intercompany Manufacturing Center) in Dallas has an express line in addition to its main production line. “If something happens to a job and it comes in late, we know we can always move it to the express line (so) that we can move it to the front of the line to get it out faster to help maintain that service level,” explained Michael McNally, vice president of operations and engineering for Hoya.

Iggy Fernandez, Hoya’s central region vice president, who runs the IMC, said the lab has set up specific “buckets,” according to the job’s priority. A “specials” line has also been set up for jobs that

Continued on page 34

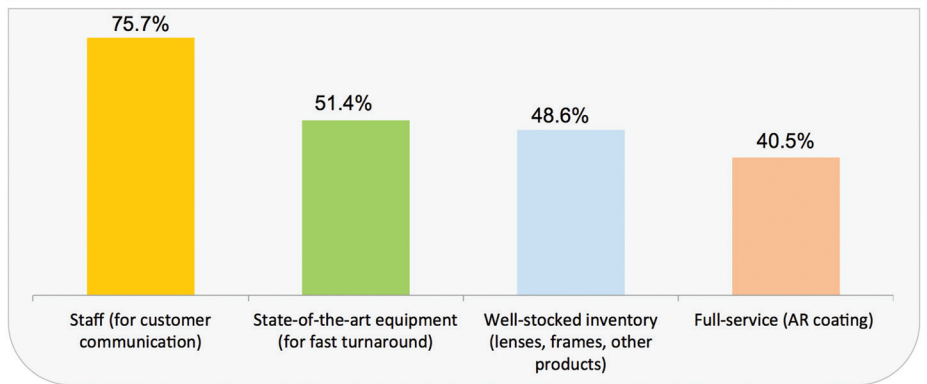
*Asked only to Labs

WHEN PROMOTING YOUR LAB TO A POTENTIAL NEW CUSTOMER, WHICH QUALITIES DO YOU TOUT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)



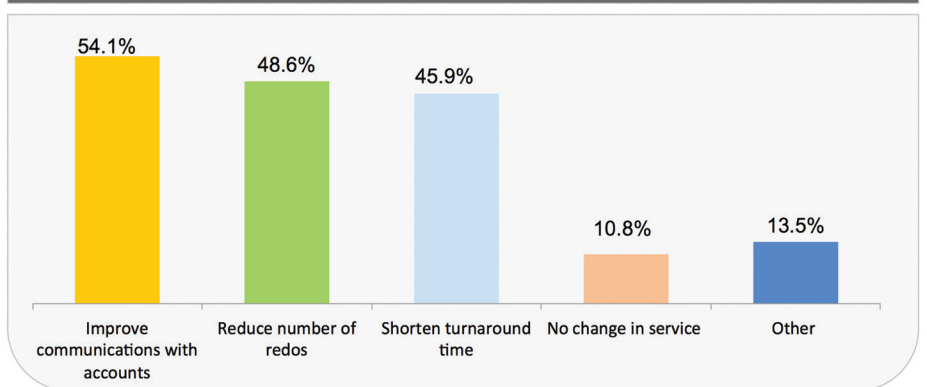
*Asked only to Labs

WHATS ASPECT(S) OF YOUR LAB ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO PROVIDING OUTSTANDING CUSTOMER SERVICE? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)



*Asked only to Labs

WHAT HAS YOUR LAB DONE IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS TO IMPROVE SERVICE? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)



July 2020

Source for all 3 charts above: 2020 Modern Lab Survey for ECPs and Labs, by Jobson Optical Research

Technology Partnerships Drive Lab Service

As lens processing, the main function of prescription labs, grows more sophisticated, labs rely increasingly on their technology partners for support, guidance and the new machinery, systems and software that lets them provide the top-notch service to remain competitive.

We asked suppliers of lens processing equipment and lab management systems how their company's technology improves the ability of optical labs to service their retail and ECP accounts. Their responses provided a window into how these companies play a pivotal role in enabling labs to perform at the peak of their abilities when meeting the demands of their customers.

Alex Incera, President, Coburn Technologies



"Coburn Technologies was on the forefront of one-hour service. It was our products and technology that enabled that industry trend many years ago. That focus continues today with many of our products, including our new Velocity 2D Coating platform which fully automates the hard coating process, automatically selects one of two on-board coatings to apply, and completes the entire hard coating process in a matter of minutes, at a continuous rate of 125 lenses per hour."

Gordon Keane, Founder and President, Digital Vision, Inc (DVI)



"In April, job intake among our lab customers declined by more than 80 percent as the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown took effect. Beginning in late May, orders began to increase steadily until some of our customers reported they were 'busier than ever.' As they deal with the recent surge in volume, lab production and customer service are confronting additional challenges COVID-19 has brought on. On top of this, labs are experiencing increased job subcontracting—sending and receiving work from other labs—which can disrupt customer service, especially if these are new 'electronic' relationships. DVI remains focused on supporting our customers in processing larger-than-expected volumes while they continue to cope with personnel changes, problems within supply chains, and rapid rises in subcontracting. These are key areas of the DVI software palette, and we are committed to assisting customers in managing the pressures brought on by the coronavirus."

John Vulich, Optical Application Specialist, Luneau Technology USA

"Our customers are always looking for ways to reduce the turnaround time while increasing the volume output. In a marketplace where timeliness and quality are essential, we offer a range of finishing solutions



enabling labs to reduce the rate of return and increase revenue while improving overall customer satisfaction. Our Briot Attitude GTS is ideal for a high-volume setup because it provides superior accuracy and reliability compared to conventional tracing systems. The same technology is available in remote tracing systems such as the Briot Scan 8 and Briot Evolution GT Remote Tracer—providing consistent results regardless of where the frame or demonstration lens is traced."

Stefano Sonzogni, President, Mei Systems



"Our customers tell us that anything that impedes the regular flow of edging is a huge problem for them. Thus, our continuous effort is aimed at improving the performance and reliability of our machines in order to avoid interruption of the operation of our edgers."

Jeff Grumbling, President, OptoTech



"With more than 30 years in the precision optics industry, OptoTech is keenly focused on producing the best possible quality lens. Our machines always provide a superior quality lens surface and markings. Our surfacing capabilities allow for extreme flexibility in power range and material. Our Lab IQ system allows for total lab efficiency by giving you full visibility to each machine, its current status, its productivity level and any needs for maintenance. This same system allows you to monitor each and every job as it travels through the lab and provides the opportunity to quickly locate and expedite a job tray when needed."

Jonathan Martin, Director of Technical Services, Santinelli International



"Our equipment has always been seen as a perfect fit in the lab specialty cells, as well as regular production. As many labs move to a cell layout on their production floor, the specialty cells provide the high-end results for difficult jobs. Many labs use our ME-1200 edger to produce these difficult jobs at the highest of quality. With the recent addition of our LEXCE Trend8 edger, labs are also now producing these same high-quality lenses on jobs with extreme prescriptions and high prism. These are some of the most difficult jobs for a lab to produce, but the LEXCE Trend8 does them with ease and consistently."

Pete Lothes, President, Satisloh North America

"One week for delivery" is a phrase most of us have forgotten. In 2020, we expect quality products delivered in days, often the same day. For

Continued on page 34



How Successful Rx Labs Exceed Customer Needs and Expectations

Continued from page 32

require high cylinder or other special processing, he added.

“Normally we might have to outsource those jobs, but that negatively impacts service levels, so we actually moved one of those specials lines in-house to improve service,” explained McNally, who said it’s made a huge difference.

McNally also noted that while its Dallas lab processes jobs for high-volume customers as well as for individual ECPs, the company is building up its Ramsay, Minnesota lab specifically to handle the growing volume of work for ECPs.

A lab management system (LMS) typically integrates all the functions of the lab. Serving as the “brains” of the lab, the LMS and the software that runs it keeps lab personnel informed of every step in the production process.

Some labs, like ABB, design their own custom software. “Having our own software provides our operations team with easy access to data, when

it’s needed, where it’s needed,” said Pearl. He observed, “Labs are assembly lines, but because of the unique nature of manufacturing eyeglass lenses and installing them into frames, they are assembly lines that do not benefit from doing the same thing over and over again. In fact, it’s the inverse. The intelligent software, coupled with the training and staff intelligence to make the tens of thousands of calibrations that occur almost unconsciously, enable us to achieve the desired result.”

Another essential function of the LMS is allowing customers to track the status of their orders. “If you’ve made a promise to the customer, you have to stick behind it,” said Wolbeck of Zeiss. “We know things happen occasionally, and jobs don’t go according to plan, but part of it is how you deal with it as well, keeping the account updated, offering something else in return for it when there is a problem. If you made the promise you need to deliver on that promise. I don’t care if it takes five phone calls back to the customer.” To keep customers in-

formed about the status of their jobs, Zeiss sends out a nightly job status report and has also set up a dashboard customers can check periodically.

Heffner uses a few different methods to keep customers up to date on their job status. “First and foremost is our website, which will give customers a current listing of what jobs we have, where in the lab they are, and their tracking information once the jobs are completed and shipped. In instances where products that they order are put on back order, we will typically either email or call the customers (based on their account preferences) in order to notify them when things need immediate attention.”

Mobile technology also plays a role in connecting labs with customers. A good example is the Spectangle Pro software from Hoya. “The dispensers use an iPad and Hoya Spectangle Pro to take the patient’s picture and personalized measurements. Then we bring the picture into our system,” said Hoya’s Fernandez. “Our non-adapt rate is next to nothing. It’s really helped our customers sell a freeform product.” ■

Technology Partnerships Drive Lab Service

Continued from page 33



fortunately, modern ophthalmic lens production technology makes it easier than ever to meet these expectations and that’s where we see labs, large and small, investing. It all starts with quality equipment, consumables, and processes. These not only produce top quality lenses, but also do it right the first time. High first-time yields or passes are critical for fast and consistent service levels and nothing slows a job down more than breaking a lens and having to redo it... Our Modern ART (alloy-free) blocking technology eliminates taping and de-taping process steps as well as cool-down time for even faster service.”

Kurt Atchison, President, Schneider Optical Machines North America



“Today’s modern lab thinks not only in terms of automated machines as single elements, but on the new focus—truly integrated, modern manufacturing. Not just machines but complete systems that are completely optimized by the technology provider for maximum output per square foot with lowest labor cost, fast response, and consistently high yields. There

simply aren’t enough experienced human resources to put it all together, so systems like Modulo from Schneider does it all for the customer, guaranteed.”

Patrick Broe, Vice President, Sales, Lab Division, Ocuco



“The climate in today’s market has mandated an even greater set of customer service benefits. We have seen an increase in our shipping services as labs have been requested by eyecare professionals to directly send finished product to the consumer rather than returning to the clinic or practice for fitting. This was previously unheard of, and we see it growing as patients and our customers adapt to the ‘new normal.’ We have also seen labs proactively helping their customers by utilizing educational webinars designed to ensure eyecare businesses shift from brick-and-mortar to a clicks-and-bricks retail model. Among the features recently launched by Innovations was the Job Staging Module, an intuitive method to track multipart jobs effectively. Another Innovations module that improves lab service is Easy Post. This module integrates Innovations directly with the shipping carrier service.” ■