

ECPs Rethink E-Commerce



BY MARGE AXELRAD / EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

A few years ago, to mention online sales of eyewear would likely light a fire in an optician's eye or rouse the ire of an independent optometrist or dampen the mood of a regional or national optical retailer of some size. All would decry the devaluation of eyewear and the absence of eye-care via disruptive online eyewear retailers.

There is still much concern throughout the market about the implications of the rise of dispensing prescription eyewear online and the challenge to traditional brick-and-mortar locations.

But this year, the mood has decidedly changed.

Vision Monday has learned, as ECPs become aware of new tools facilitating participation in the e-commerce realm, and as they see other independent health care professionals and boutique retailers start to employ more modernized websites, social/digital media campaigns and the like, what started as a smaller movement last year (See VM's Add to Cart? under Cover Topics on VisionMonday.com) is now more of a groundswell.

More independent ECPs are open to and are

actively getting involved in offering an e-commerce solution for customers and patients. And some of the optical industry's largest retail vision care players are also amping up their participation in Brick and Click.

Thomas Zeller, is an ABO-certified optical team lead, Medical Management Insurance Group/Barnet Dulaney Perkins, in Phoenix, Ariz. He said, "Currently, we do not participate in e-commerce for any aspect of our operation. We are in the process of creating our own "Optical Shop" online that will provide most of our optical services to our patients. It is within our mission to offer the latest and greatest in technology, and that includes keeping up with the abilities of our competition, even our online competition. Our project is set to go live by the end of 2015."

Said Zeller, "We do not believe that there is any obstacle in e-commerce. Everything can be purchased through an app on your phone, a website on your tablet or computer, or in a store. We do not want to be any different. If anything, e-commerce should help improve our business and keep us up-to-date."

According to David H. Hettler, OD, Drs. May & Hettler, Alexandria, Va., "We used Essilor's MyOnline optical to expand the product assortment available to

our patients with minimal cost to us. When patients do not find a frame that they like on our boards, we can point them to a much larger assortment."

He acknowledged, "There is always the fear that sending a patient to the web will cause them to start searching sites other than ours. On the other hand, if this provides incremental sales, then this is occurring with much lower expense. We have admittedly done poorly in this area due to our fear of losing sales. On the other hand, we already lost those sales, so we plan to return online. We had the link deep in our website, while we need to put it on the home page to improve success."

Robert Levy, OD, owner of Drs. Eyecare Center in Burlington, N.J. has seen the most success in his online shop with contact lenses, since this 22-year-old practice activated it over a year ago (see sidebar, page 52). For Levy, like many ODs experimenting with e-commerce, convenience and competition validate moving forward with an e-commerce platform. "It's important, moving forward, for eyecare professionals to keep up with the times. Everything is changing, everything is online and you need to make a pres-

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ence, be out there. Eyeglasses are next.”

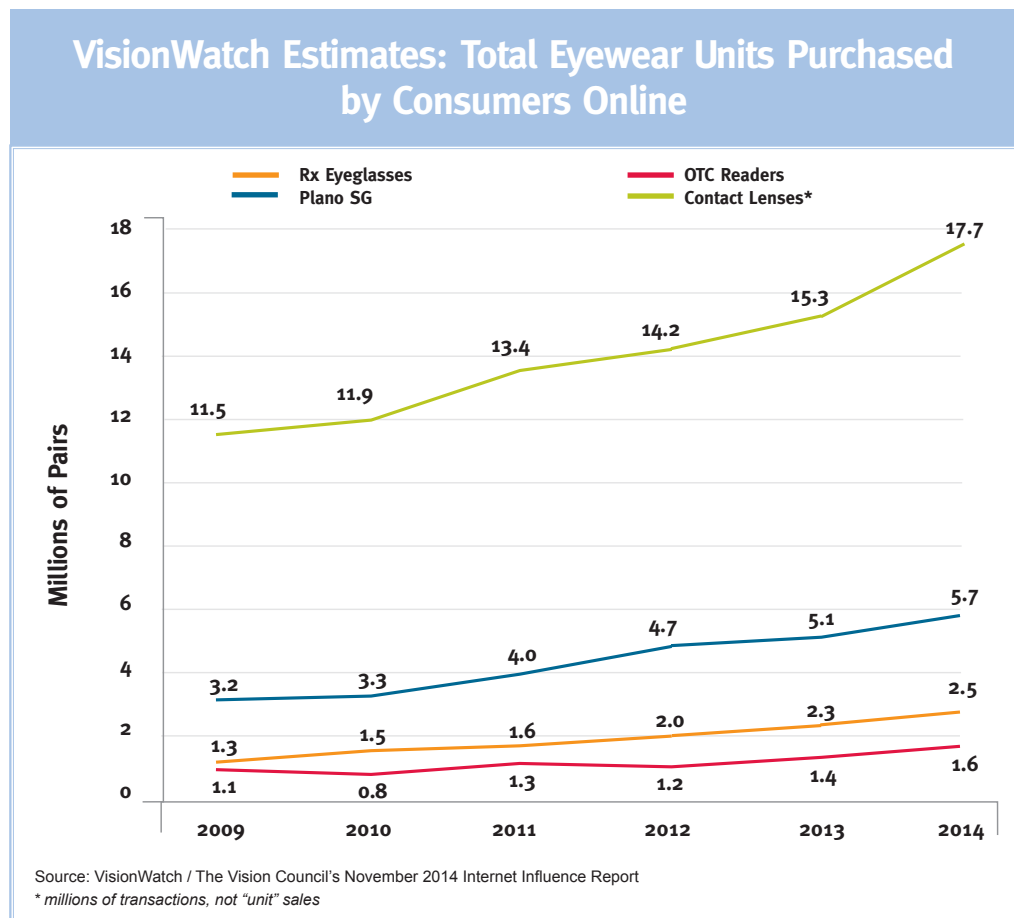
The means for facilitating an online e-commerce store for a brick-and-mortar practice or retailer are many. A number of “build your own” e-commerce-enabled stores are available from general e-commerce companies like Shopkick (www.shopkick.com) and SquareSpace (www.squarespace.com) among others.

But most people that VM talked to acknowledged that optical/visioncare/Rx requirements is a complex process, and they have found success either contracting with specialists to “build their own” or engage with eyewear-familiar and friendly firms to help them choose the type of presence they want to have. That can mean choosing the product categories they want to feature and controlling the retail pricing to the consumer that works best for their business.

Donny Reeves, MD, of Reeves Eye Institute in Johnson City, Tenn. (see sidebar, page 54) has worked with Minnesota-based MyEyeStore to customize a shop to “extend the choice of the dispensary” in his primarily lasik/medically-oriented practice. “This provides the opportunity for us to offer more trendy pieces, along with other products like contact lenses, low vision services and vitamins, online.”

Visionworks, the national chain which is a division of HVHC, Inc., currently is exploring new ideas for the right approach to revisit its online e-commerce presence in the category, too, company president, Jim Eisen, told VM. “We definitely see that there are untapped opportunities and modern solutions that we could offer to patients. And having online options are an important way of reinforcing our fundamental market proposition—and offering increased value and connections to our patients who are looking to us for quality eyecare and great choices in eyewear.

Alberta, Canada-based FYidoctors, has been in the midst of a major process to overhaul its online e-commerce presence, in a way that’s in synch with its doctor-first, patient care philosophy, explained Alan Ulsifer, OD, CEO and president.



Stated Ulsifer, “At FYidoctors, we are currently selling both contact lenses and eyeglasses online. We have incorporated active prescription verification, imposed age and Rx restrictions, and have an active follow-up mechanism with patients for any questionable Rx choices. We have implemented our own virtual-try-on as well as a PD and seg height platform administered by an optician. We do not actively market our site but use it as an option for patients who, regardless of the advantages of custom service, want this choice.”

FYidoctors is currently one of Canada’s largest providers of ophthalmic products and services with over 450 optometrists servicing over 280 locations between

its corporately owned locations and Vision Source Canada locations.

He said, “There are many barriers to entry. Most people simply see e-comm as ‘software,’ but it is much more than that. To do it properly and seamlessly requires supply chain management and integration into multiple systems including lab, warehouse and accounting platforms. Ongoing investment is required, and volume needs to justify the expense.”

Some online eyewear retail players are examining how they might also translate their online eyewear sales expertise and fulfillment, search engine optimization and creative merchandising ideas to other optical retailers.

New Program Will Certify and Monitor Internet Rx Eyeglass Sellers

PORTLAND, Ore.— As *Vision Monday* reported last year, members of several U.S. professional vision-related associations and leading optical retailers and suppliers have been spearheading a project to develop standardized voluntary certification of online optical retailers in conjunction with international certification organization, LegitScript (www.legitscript.com) based here and in Dublin, Ireland.

Modeled after the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites program conducted by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy that provides for voluntary certification of online pharmacies, the online eyewear certification program is intended to provide certification for eyeglasses prescription verification, transparency regarding the identity of the owner/operator of internet websites, and customer/patient privacy protection, according to John Horton, president and founder of LegitScript, and Wally Lovejoy of Lovejoy Eyecare Consulting LLC in Cincinnati, an

independent consultant for the NAOO who is working on this initiative.

Since the group started its work and following an extended “comment period” among interested parties, Horton told *Vision Monday* that, on March 2, LegitScript will launch a certification and monitoring program for internet sellers of prescription eyeglasses.



The genesis of the program was the concern by non-profits and legitimate industry participants about the existence of illicit prescription eyeglass sellers, and that internet users should have a good way to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate merchants in this space, he pointed out.

LegitScript online pharmacy and dietary supplement monitoring programs are used by Google, Microsoft, Visa and other major platforms.

The program will initially be targeted at the U.S. market, and any entity offering to sell prescription eyeglasses to U.S. residents will be eligible for the program. However, LegitScript will proactively monitor and identify all prescription eyeglasses sellers active in the U.S. market, and internet users will be able to search on legitscript.com to determine whether an eyeglasses website is classified as “legitimate,” “unverified” (which is a neutral descriptor) or “unapproved.”

Program pricing for certification: \$395 base fee for first URL, each additional URL (for the same merchant) is \$39.50. If approved, annual certification fee is \$995, with lower prices for any additional URL ranging from \$99.50 to \$695.

The application itself, and other information about the program, is expected to be available at legitscript.com this week. ■

Natasha Vora, founder and CEO of Iristocracy.com has long taken an approach that involves ECPs as partners for customers who come to the eyewear fashion and accessories site, but are looking for optical fitting and Rx/vision care expertise. Said Vora, “We’ve been steadfast in the principle that while we can generate a lot of excitement about eyewear fashion via our site and eyewear’s connection to other fashion accessory and style trends, we support the notion of the ECP as the lens and vision expert. We have long incentivized our customers to get their Rx filled by ECPs and offer an ECP locator on our site. And we have many interested doctors and independents now asking us how they can sign up.”

Most recently, however, Iristocracy has gone further and is now in beta with a limited number of opti-

cal locations in the U.S. for them to utilize Iristocracy’s unique Retail Try-On Kit program. The new program lets them access Iristocracy’s technology via a touchscreen computer in their stores and they can leverage their own staff’s optical expertise, make fit suggestions and encourage customers’ intense interest in sharing their frame choices with friends.

The Retail Try-On Kit allows customers to choose up to four frames from Iristocracy, have them shipped free of charge to a retail eyecare practice upon approval. Said Vora, “We share profits with the practice for their involvement in dispensing or servicing the frames that are purchased via the kiosk and they also can then take part in 100 percent of the lens fulfillment part of the equation.” (see sidebar, page 50).

Another online specialist, DITTO.com, has

announced a partnership with America’s Best, one of the country’s largest optical retailers, to bring its proprietary try on technology and the concepts of its site to the physical location of America’s Best stores, in a test to begin this spring. Founder Kate Doerksen also explains that DITTO’s unique merchandising concepts, like its popular Quiz for helping consumers learn more about their eyewear style preferences and its new Endless Eyewear “rental” concept for eyewear (see sidebar, page 51) are proving out via customer reactions and sales since they were implemented recently.

The rise of interest in e-commerce among traditional optical retailers and ECPs is no doubt becoming more pronounced as digital and mobile technology becomes more ubiquitous.

Stay tuned. ■

Iristocracy Engages ECPs to Be Part of the Online Eyewear Experience

The role of the ECP has always been part of the original vision for Iristocracy, an online fashion and accessories style retailer.

The site showcases curated eyewear brands and collections as well as trend-related fashion accessories including handbags, scarves and jewelry. Iristocracy features 3-D virtual try-on (VTO) technology, using face-tracking from French firm, Total Immersion.

To build that “bridge with ECPs,” founder Natasha Vora explained that Iristocracy encourages customers to take the eyeglasses they buy from the site to their eyecare provider. In fact, the site bills itself as “prescription-free,” which means the company encourages online eyewear shoppers to have their prescription filled with their regular eyecare professional. Those who do so within 30 days of their order ship date can receive a \$50 Visa prepaid gift card from Iristocracy. There are now a growing number of Iristocracy Ambassadors



sadors around the country who are actively partnering with the website in such a way.

Launched just last month, Iristocracy is now advancing a Retail Try-On Kit program. The program allows customers to choose up to four frames from



Iristocracy, and have them shipped free of charge to a retail eyecare practice upon approval.

Seek Eyecare, in Fayetteville, N.C. is one of the first locations in the country to feature the Retail Try-On Kit.

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DITTO Does It: Eyewear Quizzes, Eyewear-For-Rent and Licensing Options

From the get-go, DITTO has been a unique presence in the online eyewear space. Founder Kate Doerksen had set out to create and redefine the experience of buying eyewear and since the site's inception a lot of new ideas have come to the fore.

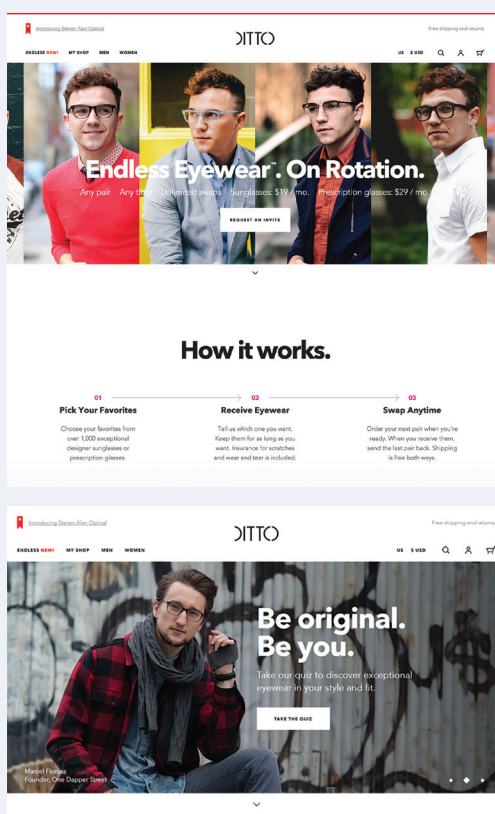
Employing a unique, 3D Try-On technology, which enables customers to create a unique "Ditto" of themselves, which they can view, share and save for current and future purchases, DITTO has been evolving via the number and scope of the brands on the site but even more for the "experience" the site is bringing to visitors.

"We've always been about making the experience of buying glasses online easier," Doerksen said, "but as I talk to customers—and I do that regularly to hear what they have to say and how they view that experience, with us and elsewhere, we've learned that there are ways to rethink some of the barriers which have traditionally been part of that experience."

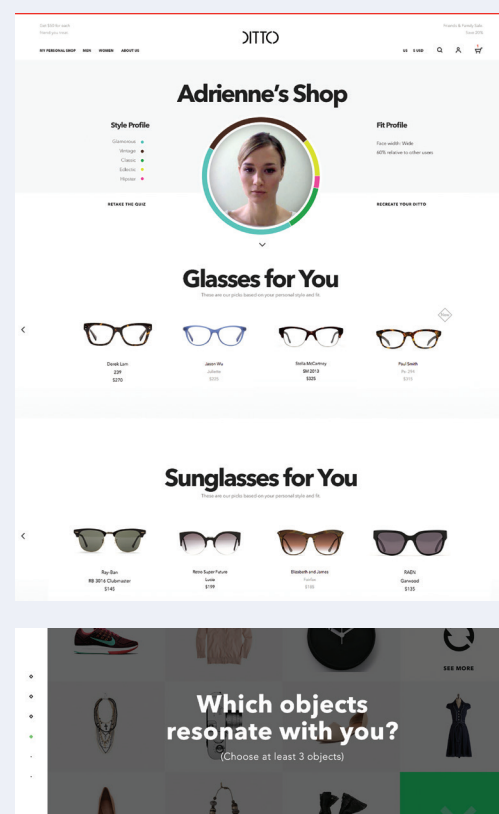
DITTO devised a solution to the "discovery" process with the advent of its Quiz last year. Visitors to the site follow a series of visual image prompts which ask them their preferences toward a range of style or activity choices and the end results provides them with a personalized guide to those looks and collections that reflect their choices. The results can be stored in what becomes "Sally's Shop" and can be used for reference later.

Just last month, DITTO also launched a totally new concept: Endless Eyewear. Modelled after ideas like "RentTheRunway" and, taking a page from the emerging "share economy," as Doerksen described it, Endless Eyewear offers people the chance to commit to a monthly fee and they can swap/return/exchange their eyewear for a new pair.

For a fee of \$19 per month for sunglasses or \$29 per month for Rx eyeglasses (single vision only, at this point), Endless Eyewear tackles the economics of buying eyeglasses in a whole new way.



At top, left: DITTO's new Endless Eyewear lets customers sign up for a monthly fee so they can swap eyewear anytime. At bottom and top right: DITTO's Quiz lets customers answer quick questions to create a Personal Shop.



Said Doerksen, "Many customers I speak with are trying to solve the problem of budget. They would buy one and were done. But from our conversations and via their interactions with us on our site and via our social media, we felt our interactions with them could be more. We can deliver value to customers if we enable them to swap a pair at any time. They have control. It's exciting for them and for us."

The concept is already so popular that DITTO has created a Waiting List for Endless Eyewear aspirants, fielding requests from 15,000 customers in the space of a week.

Finally, DITTO wants to further explore retail partnerships, kiosk ideas and ways to share its

capabilities with other retail partners, via licensing agreements. A four-store, in-store test with America's Best, one of the country's largest value optical retailers, will begin this spring. This month, DITTO is creating its own pop-up shop near its HQ in San Francisco, to showcase kiosk concepts. And it will start a new partnership with GlassesDirect.com, a UK-based online eyewear retailer.

Said Doerksen, whose fast-growing company received an additional \$7 million in funding last year, "We envision co-creating custom solutions for retailers. But overall, we want to be a meaningful player in the mid to high end online space, and see ourselves as part of a big ecosystem in eyewear." ■

- Marge Axelrad

Drs. Eyecare Offers Online Ordering Convenience and Modern Ways to Reach Patients

BURLINGTON, N.J.—Working with MyEyeStore to develop an online store, Robert Levy, OD, owner of Drs. Eyecare Center in Burlington, N.J. has seen the most success in his online shop with contact lenses, since this 22-year-old practice activated it over a year ago.

“A ton of my patients are utilizing it,” Levy told *VM*. “They’d say they wanted to get their contact lenses online from someone like 1-800 CONTACTS, and I’d say, ‘Why don’t you get them from us? Now, if you have a problem with anything, you can deal with us directly.’”

The convenience of online ordering benefits both doctor and patient; according to Levy, his e-comm customers have been almost 100 percent existing clients, and further, his staff are not tied up filling and maintaining contact lens orders.

“When you’re ordering contact lenses into your



office, there’s a lot more work involved,” Levy said. “[When we’re offering contact lenses online], the patient can take it into their own hands. We just have to register them online, where they have access to their prescription.”

Drs. Eyecare Center does, however, continue to fill a majority of contact lens orders in the brick-

and-mortar dispensary. “The majority of contact lens orders are still in house, but they’re being pushed to MyEyeStore,” Levy said. As these patients are migrated over to the online store, Levy intends to expand upon other categories MyEyeStore offers, such as vitamins. “The next big thing we want to push is the nutraceutical side. [The e-commerce store] is a good way to start marketing within to get people to start purchasing these things,” Levy said.

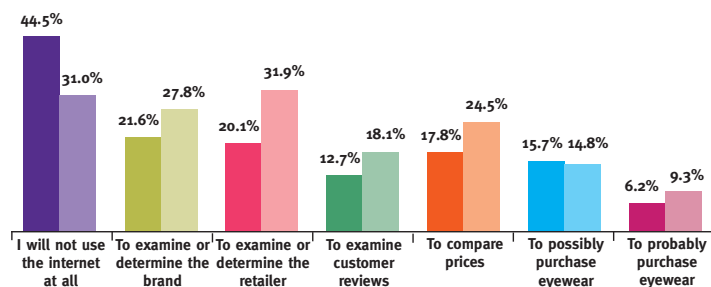
For Levy, like many ODs experimenting with e-commerce, convenience and competition validate moving forward with an e-comm platform. “It’s important, moving forward, for eyecare professionals to keep up with the times. Everything is changing, everything is online and you need to make a presence, be out there. Eyeglasses are next.” ■

- Catherine Wolinski

Consumers Use the Internet to Examine Brands and Retailers

How you will probably use the internet for future eyewear purchases?

Dark Bars = Purchased Eyewear from an Independent Within the Past 6 months
Light Bars = Purchased Eyewear from a Conventional Chain Within the Past 6 months

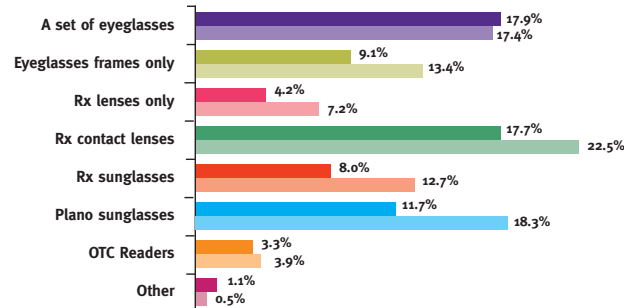


Source: VisionWatch / The Vision Council's November 2014 Internet Influence Report

Contact Lens and Plano Suns Dominate Online Purchasing Now

Which eyewear products may your purchase with the assistance of the internet in the future?

Dark Bars = Purchased Eyewear from an Independent Within the Past 6 months
Light Bars = Purchased Eyewear from a Conventional Chain Within the Past 6 months

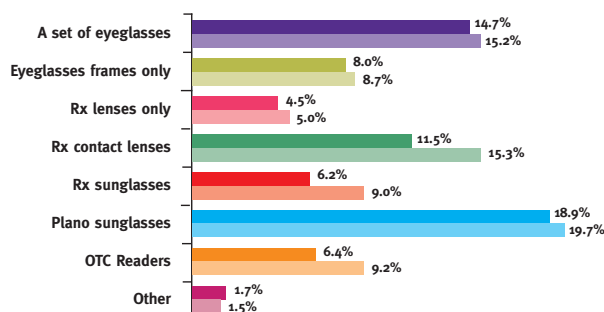


Source: VisionWatch / The Vision Council's November 2014 Internet Influence Report

Household Income Does Not Impact Online Usage Much

Which eyewear products may you purchase with the assistance of the internet in the future? (Among Those Who Have Purchased Eyewear Within the Past 6 Months)

Dark Bars = Annual Household Income Under \$40K
Light Bars = Annual Household Income Over \$75K

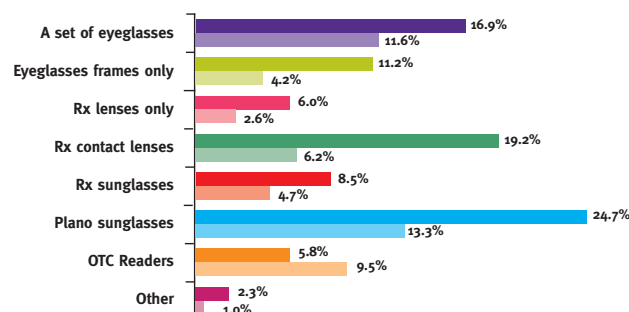


Source: VisionWatch / The Vision Council's November 2014 Internet Influence Report

Millennials vs Boomers: Sharp Differences in Online Purchases

Which eyewear products may you purchase with the assistance of the internet in the future?

Dark Bars = 18 to 34 Years Old Who Have Purchased Eyewear Within the Past 6 Months
Light Bars = Age 55+ Who Have Purchased Eyewear Within the Past 6 Months



Source: VisionWatch / The Vision Council's November 2014 Internet Influence Report

Iristocracy Retail Try-On

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Marcus McNeill, founder and optician, a long-term optical industry veteran, founded Seek to create a unique environment to sell high-end, upscale collections.

McNeill said, "From the moment I heard about the Retail Try-On Kit from Natasha, I was in. And, this has

been a 'win' in the very short time we've had it in the store. Eyewear's big opportunity is to increase multiple sales, and with a strong female customer base, we are stoked to see them so excited to use the on-site touch screen, see themselves in the frames and share their looks with us and with their friends and family."

McNeill has developed and posted several videos

about the Iristocracy concept, has showcased it to patients on Seek's Facebook page and is reaching out to local media about the new idea. Said McNeill, "The 'wow factor' is through the roof. We had a customer just the other day exclaim, 'My ophthalmology clinic doesn't have anywhere near this type of technology.' We love it." ■



An Online Web Store Expands an MD's Dispensary Presentation to Patients

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.—After practicing ophthalmology for 10 years, Donny Reeves, MD, owner of Reeves Eye Institute in Johnson City, Tenn., decided it was time to add an optical dispensary to his business. At the same time, while working with a web developer to redesign his website, Reeves was led to the decision to launch an online store simultaneously.

“My web developer said I needed to change my website to be ‘responsive,’ or more tailored to new devices, at the same time that we were building our new office,” Reeves told VM. His developer at Glacial Multimedia, a medical website design company that represents ophthalmologists throughout the country, introduced Reeves to MyEyeStore and he was convinced the service could provide a leg up for his new dispensary and draw more patients to his medical practice.



“Our primary business is doing health care, medical and surgical services, and the online store is an ancillary part of our practice,” Reeves said. “We just want to be a step ahead of all the businesses in the area, and to offer this to the community in a cost effective way.”

According to Reeves, having an e-comm store does not compete with his dispensary, but gives him the opportunity to extend and expand upon his services with products he doesn't necessarily have inventory for in-store. While the brick-and-mortar dispensary will typically carry practical, conservative frames, for example, MyEyeStore provides the opportunity to offer more trendy pieces, along with other products like contact lenses, low vision services and vitamins, online.

“I’m an ophthalmologist, so from that standpoint, my primary interest is not in glasses and contacts but in my medical and surgical services. What I’m trying to do is make the web presence for our practice as big as possible and to really push patients [there] that would not necessarily come to us,” Reeves said. ■

- Catherine Wolinski