



Ratchford Eye Center in Berlin, CT features a robust in-house optical center.

Creating a Win-win with Vision Associates

How optical outsourcing can help unlock your dispensary's potential

Whether it's declining reimbursement rates, a lack of time, or perhaps a desire to boost profitability, there are many reasons why today's eyecare practices are considering optical management and consulting — the key services offered by New Jersey-based Vision Associates. Established in 1993, Vision Associates offers turnkey, customizable optical dispensary management and consulting services that allow eyecare practices to maintain ownership and control of their dispensaries, while relieving them of the time and effort involved in their everyday operations and working to increase the dispensary's overall profitability. Considering the explosive growth seen in 2014 and 2015 — 36 new dispensaries were added in 2015 alone — it's obvious that these services are needed in today's marketplace.

When Joe Casorio co-founded Vision Associates with business partner Kurt Behrle more than two decades ago,

he recognized a need for these services on a local level. At that time, he was assisting with the creation of dispensaries for practices that didn't already have them. Although the company still manages many optical start-ups, they also work with existing dispensaries that, simply put, need some help.

Casorio says that although the business was quite successful from the start, he never could have imagined the kind of growth it would see. Today, Vision Associates has become a national leader in dispensary management and consulting, and Casorio says the company continues to reinvent itself and its offerings as the market changes. In fact, the ability to adapt to the industry's ever-evolving needs is a key reason for the company's success.

NO LOSS OF CONTROL

Another reason Vision Associates has been so successful is rather simple — they're really good at what they do. That said, eyecare practices haven't always eagerly jumped on board without question. Although there are many reasons why optical outsourcing may be a wise move, some practice owners hold back for "fear of losing control." After spending years building a practice, some owners feel threatened by the thought of third party management. But, for the many practices that have taken the leap, owners report that the loss of control they feared so much was a myth — and only wish they'd made the switch sooner.

"The fact is that you're not losing control," says Casorio, adding that this is one of the most common concerns he observes. "Practice owners remain part of any major decision or development that comes up with the optical dispensary, including staffing and patient issues. We understand that it's their reputations on the line, and we would never do anything to compromise that. After all, it's mutually beneficial when they succeed."

Although practice owners still make all major decisions, Vision Associates doesn't involve them in the daily mundane tasks. And truthfully, if they did, there wouldn't be much

point in outsourcing. The main objective is to free up time and responsibility, allowing eyecare practices to focus on what they do best — care for patients.

“What these practices are outsourcing are the things they didn’t enjoy or have time to do in the first place,” Casorio says. “We tend to fit well in busy practices that aren’t running as efficiently as they would like.”

And that’s the case for many eyecare practices today. There is a strong focus on the medical side of the business — as there should be — and, often, the dispensary becomes an afterthought. As a result, it’s much less profitable than it could be. To counteract this, Vision Associates provides such practices with turnkey management services that are far from a “cookie-cutter approach.” The company takes pride in its ability to customize its programs to meet the unique needs of each practice — and that includes practices with multiple locations. There can be dramatic differences in demographics, and, as such, inventory, marketing, patient flow, and other customizations are made based on a particular location.

A HIGHER LEVEL OF SERVICE

Another way that Vision Associates has differentiated itself is its view of dispensaries as “eyewear education centers.” Patients who see an ophthalmologist aren’t likely to bring their eyewear needs to the mall or to a chain retailer. Because of this, they expect a certain level of service. Casorio believes it’s important that the dispensary reflect that as much as the practice itself.

“Our education program ensures that our opticians are educated in taking care of their patients,” Casorio says. “Our opticians are well prepared. We know that we represent ophthalmologic practices and that their high-caliber reputation is on the line.”

Vision Associates’ extensive education program for opticians includes one-on-one mentoring, group training sessions, use of outside consultants, required online courses, and ABO Certification Prep classes taught by the company’s master optician Ken Johnson, ABO, NCLE, who previously taught ophthalmic science classes at Middlesex Community College in Middletown, Conn.

The services Vision Associates provides to its ophthalmic clients are also quite extensive. The entire process begins with a feasibility study, in which the company meets with a prospective practice to discuss whether it’s the right fit. Assuming it is, Vision Associates will assist with everything from dispensary design to staff evaluation and recruiting, and inventory control. Vision Associates provides new inventory targeted to specific patient demographics with well-known brand names, such as Gucci, Prada, Versace, and Vera Wang. Frame inventory is furnished and managed by Vision Associates.

Another benefit of partnership, Vision Associates shares its facilities with Essilor Labs of America, the lens manufacturing division of Varilux. The lab’s recent expansion and upgrade to a state-of-the-art facility means it now has the ability to provide patients with quality eyewear, the latest

technology, and prompt turnaround times. An on-site lens laboratory, coupled with the fact that the corporate office maintains a fully stocked frame inventory department, equates to eyewear delivery without delay, which leads to higher efficiency and greater patient satisfaction.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

In addition to the premium level of customer service and education that practices can expect from Vision Associates, there are also some very tangible benefits. For one, the implementation of a comprehensive point-of-sales software system includes hardware and software. Vision Associates also handles internal marketing with strategies that are customized to your demographic, and manages all insurance and billing matters — a dreaded and time-consuming task for most busy practices. As part of the management program, Vision Associates processes all optical claims handling submissions, re-submissions, and follow-up.



(Left to right) Vision Associates Principal Kurt Behrle, Executive Director Mary Walker, and Principal Joseph Casorio.

EVERYONE WINS

“When you bring Vision Associates on board, we are in the trenches, overseeing your optical and all of its day-to-day tasks,” Casorio says. “But more importantly, we have a team of experts in every area of dispensary management that is working on your account. To be successful, they have to understand the dynamics of your practice.”

Casorio says this is where the feasibility study comes into play. “We aren’t going to engage with a client if we don’t feel we can have a positive impact,” he continues. “After all, if we can’t make a positive impact on a dispensary practice, then we don’t bring the value they expect.”

In cases where a practice feels it isn’t quite ready to take the leap, Vision Associates may be brought on board in a consulting capacity. But more often than not, Casorio says those consulting jobs turn into full-blown management.

“Once they dip their toes in the water, they see the value, and often want to bring us on board full time,” Casorio says. “When we find practices that we’re a good fit with, it’s a win for both sides.”

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