



# CAPTURE LIKE IT'S 2021

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**D**uring COVID, optical dispensaries adopted practices that can improve conversion rates in a reopened world.

The good news: it doesn't look like COVID-19's high casualty rates and widespread business shutdowns are returning anytime soon.

The bad news: neither are your optical dispensary conversion rates.

## THE ONE-AND-DONE MINDSET

While the phrases “coronavirus pandemic” and “good old days” should be kept a minimum of three sentences apart, it's inarguable that the lockdowns and limitations the COVID-19 crisis caused led to drastically improved optical dispensary conversion rates—that is, turning eyecare patients into eyewear customers. As an industry professional who helps eye practices streamline dispensary operations, I am constantly analyzing the numbers. I've never seen anything close to the capture rates experienced in 2020 and 2021.

That's COVID-19, not coincidence. And unfortunately, those capture rates are never coming back. The confluence of factors that made eyecare patients such eager eyewear purchasers were as perfect for dispensary sales as they were terrible for society at large. Lockdowns led to major eyewear retailers shutting down while eyecare practices, as essential healthcare providers, remained open. And even if they *could* have gone elsewhere, most patients wouldn't have, as frighteningly liberal viral transmissibility left consumers in a “one-and-done” mindset that discouraged unnecessary excursions. During the pre-vaccine era of the pandemic, if you went to the eye doctor and needed new prescriptions, you were getting that order filled right then and there.

## PRE-PANDEMIC BENCHMARKS NO LONGER APPLY

Looking back, those increased capture rates are about all anyone misses from COVID-19's peak. However, it's worth noting that

even though dispensary conversion rates have declined, they are still slightly above pre-pandemic levels. And therein may lie glimpses of what maintaining above-average conversion rates may entail.

Of course, “above-average” assumes there's an average left to gauge against. A convincing argument can be made that, so far as capture rates are concerned, the eyecare industry is in the midst of establishing a new “average.” This thinking contends that COVID-19 changed so much about the ways consumers behave, as well as the ways businesses operate, that pre-pandemic benchmarks no longer apply.

I ascribe to this line of thinking—and not because it's necessarily provable. Rather, I embrace the “new normal” narrative because it leads to novel ways of thinking in a world forever changed by a once-in-a-century health crisis. After all, not all the adaptations we were forced to make during the pandemic's peak should be abandoned.

## WHAT TO KEEP, WHAT TO LET GO

Indeed, there are practices put in place during COVID-19 that can significantly help in its aftermath. For starters, people really dig the masks. Please stop laughing before continuing.

By this, I don't mean that people enjoy *wearing* masks. But they certainly prefer it when staff do. And as a business within a health-care provider's office, in-practice optical dispensaries tend to have mask-up policies for all personnel. Consumers really like this; if they didn't, the Retail Industry Leaders Association wouldn't have a "Simple Ask, Wear a Mask" campaign encouraging workers to wear face coverings.

In society at large, masks have become divisive and political; in a doctor's office, they remain a sign of clinical professionalism. And while employees at the local eyewear outlet *might* mask up, patients-turned-customers *know* the staff at their eye doctor's office—including the dispensary personnel—will extend them this simple, reassuring courtesy.

Another pandemic-prompted procedure was personal appointments. While originally initiated for social distancing purposes, there's definitely something appealing about having a confirmed date and time to see the optician. It elevates the dispensary into something more on par with the clinical practice and assures customers they won't have to wait for two or three others to be serviced before being seen. Optical dispensaries are like barber shops: If the line is more than two deep, people are far more likely to leave. Appointments can all but eliminate the "I'll just come back"

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mindset that sees revenue literally walk out the door. While not every patient will opt for appointments, having them available will meet the broadest range of preferences and lifestyles.

Making appointments a permanent part of your practice also opens the door for a new wrinkle: callback reminders not just for eyecare, but for *eyewear*.

Part of this strategy involves preempting a lurking adverse trend. Historically (and again, pre-pandemic figures should be taken with a grain of salt), consumers update their eyewear once every 1.85 years—call it 20 months. As inflation has tightened belts and dissuaded purchases deemed less than necessary, that figure has started creeping past the two-year mark.

Notably, this isn't optical dispensaries losing market share; it's market share merely disappearing right now. Those customers aren't going to the mall, or online. They're just not buying new eyewear as frequently because everyday necessities—food, gasoline, rent—have depleted disposable incomes.

### PLAY TO STRENGTHS

That said, eyecare practices should play to their strengths. For starters, most potential eyewear customers are eyecare patients. This means that eyewear callbacks and reminders carry additional

weight with customers. Whereas other postcards, emails, or SMS text messages would be perceived as strictly commercial ventures, receiving such a prompt from your eye doctor's optical dispensary carries the implicit endorsement of a trusted healthcare professional. "Oh, it's time to think about new glasses" is a distinct message from "Oh no, it's another spam message from a retail store."

COVID-19 left a lot of us sick, and *all* of us sick of its frightening, alienating rules. And since it's 2022 and we're still dealing with a disease named for 2019, we're also just a little tired of talking about it in general. Pandemic fatigue has tempted us to leave that part of our past fully behind us.

But sometimes, inventions truly are driven by necessities. Several of the protocols adopted by eyecare practices and their optical dispensaries during COVID-19 are worth carrying over into a more business-as-usual landscape. Let's lose the "COVID," and try to keep most of the capture rates. **AE**



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