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LOOKING AT LABS

Optimum performance

Simon Jones looks at the rise of Optimum Coatings in the ophthalmic lens lab market

Independent ophthalmic labs have had a rough time of it over the past decade. Many have been enveloped by corporations, while others have simply fallen by the wayside, unable to cope with evolving market conditions.

Success stories in the sector are few and far between, but it would be hard to describe the journey of Lancashire-based Optimum of Coatings as anything but that. Indeed, the company has expanded and now operates under the banner Optimum RX Group.

The business, founded in 2001, was acquired by current owners, managing director Paul Bailey and sales director Mark Marland in 2011. Not in the rude health of today, the business was perilously close to receivership until Bailey and Marland stepped in. To turn things around, a strategy was devised to transform the business from a contract coating services provider into a profitable full-service lens manufacturer, with the potential to be scaled up when the time was right.

THE RIGHT BLEND

Owners Bailey and Marland had the perfect mix of experience to achieve their goals. A qualified accountant and graduate of the Manchester Business School MBA programme, Bailey has a track record as a hands-on turnaround specialist and has built a portfolio of businesses in which he has invested in and successfully developed.

Marland's 35-year career has been focused on the optical industry and includes roles in sales, marketing, laboratory operations and production. He has had practical involvement within manufacturing coating and glazing lenses through to dealing with end-customers in retail stores.

The first major milestone in the company's transformation came in 2016 with the installation of a freeform surfacing production line. The ability to produce freeform lenses in house meant the company could leverage its own product line, Optiform, which has several model variations tailored to specific patient needs. 'The installation



Mark Marland

went pretty smoothly,' says Marland, 'but nothing is "plug and play" in lens manufacturing, so we added our own tweaks along the way.'



Paul Bailey

horn, for more than 40 years, so it was a great fit for Optimum and a perfect addition to our business, adding another revenue stream to the group while ena-

"We have built a structure around a centre of excellence concept whereby work is channelled through the area's best suited to provide excellent quality and service levels."

A second freeform production line was added in January 2019 and the business achieved ISO9001 certification a few months later in June, outlining the group's dedication to service and quality management.

GROWTH BY ACQUISITION

Optimum's transition from single lab business to optical group came in 2018 with the acquisition of fellow independent lab, Blackpool-based Vanalstynes. Marland, one of its former directors, knew the business well and saw a potential acquisition as a major opportunity for growth. 'Vanalstynes has had a fantastic reputation for glazing high value frames, including luxury materials such as natural buffalo

bling us to market both businesses as a one stop shop to the UK and throughout Europe and the Middle East,' he says.

Integrating the two companies successfully was critical, but it was a process helped by the complimentary nature of each business. 'Optimum had developed a reputation for surfacing and coating high quality complex lenses, whereas Vanalstynes has built its name on providing a market leading glazing service,' says Marland.

'We have built a structure around a centre of excellence concept whereby work is channelled through the areas best suited to provide excellent quality and service levels.'

The greatest challenge was to redesign our infrastructure and systems to meet our



Orders from the generator are auto auto fed into the auto polisher

requirements, this has led to improvements in our lead times and on time delivery levels,' adds Bailey.

The resulting group employs 64 members of staff – 52 at the Morecambe facility and a further 12 at Vanalstyne in Blackpool.

PRODUCTS

As the company has grown, diversified and added new production technology, it has developed a reputation for producing high prescription and speciality lenses, including franklin splits, slab off, freeform prism-controlled progressives and blended lenticulars.

The recent addition of an Essilor Mr Blue Sun and Sports edger has allowed the company to broaden its portfolio of sports lens offering, while the polarised, photochromic and speciality coating ranges have grown as new technology has been added. Marland says there has been particular interest in ophthalmic driving lenses recently, which prompted the company to develop its own coating, Optidrive.

Such a diverse product range and two specialty labs would be worth nothing if the services on offer were not marketed effectively. Successful marketing strategies is perhaps one area where the group differs from the competition. Easy access to product information has been a key area of focus for the company and detailed literature resides in a download area on the group's sites.

Social media has also been a successful marketing channel for the company. 'When developing our social media strategy, we wanted to ensure we used the

various platforms to promote the vast variety of work we receive into our business,' says Marland.

'It's something we put significant resource into and is a great way of showing our products and services while interacting with customers all over the world, via imagery and video. We use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.'

When it comes to servicing its customers, the company naturally looks to delivery times and product quality as the key aims, but Marland says it is a different aspect of the business that often receives the most plaudits. 'Our partners complement our customer service team in a way I've never experienced before, he says. 'It's so rewarding to feedback these comments to our committed teams.'

'We always try our best to give the

customer what they want, when they want it,' adds Bailey. 'Sometimes this is not possible for various reasons beyond our control. It could be dependent on frame data, prescription along with PDs or heights, but we will always go back with an alternative solution, taking the headache away from the customer and providing them with the opportunity to offer the best option for their patients.'

COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the business. 'At the beginning of the year we experienced some supply issues, with a reduction in the availability of certain lens types,' says Marland. This was compounded by restrictions on movement enforced in the UK and other countries, resulting in a large reduction in demand.

'As a business, we decided from the outset of lockdown that, although not economically viable, we would continue to offer a full production service to support the hospitals, opticians and laboratories choosing to offer emergency eye care to their patients during the pandemic,' says Marland.

Bailey remains positive about the future of the optical industry in the UK and the group's position within the sector: 'It's unclear how we will work after Covid-19 restrictions are lifted but I'm sure we will all adapt, and people will still need glasses. I anticipate fewer people being allowed in practice at any one time, but the work will be there, it may just come through slower than normal. One thing is clear; we will get through this together and support each other where needed.'

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Stringent quality testing and management has led to ISO9001 certification

DRIVING LENSES

Driving lenses roundup

Optician takes a look at the various lenses in the market designed specifically to assist drivers

ESSILOR

Crizal Drive

Originally only available as a coating for Essilor RoadPilot driving lenses, the Crizal Drive lens range has recently been expanded to include varifocal lenses Varilux X and E series, Varilux Physio 3.0 and single vision lenses.

Essilor's Road Pilot lens features the company's Wavefront management system for optical maximisation across the whole lens, while the Varilux versions include a wide distance and intermediate vision zones.

A survey conducted by the EyeCare Trust showed that 31% of people avoided night-time driving because of safety concerns, prompting Essilor to develop a coating that it said reduces reflections by up to 90% when driving at night.

Crizal Drive minimises reflection at the exact point where the eye is most sensitive to light at night and eliminates back surface reflections.

The coating comes with a two-year scratch-free guarantee and features scratch and smudge resistance alongside hydrophobic qualities.



RODENSTOCK

Rodenstock Road

Rodenstock's driving spectacles have been developed to address changing lighting conditions, headlight dazzle, reflecting lanes and other challenges the drivers' eyes face when travelling.

The Rodenstock Road lenses are suitable for non-driving situations too, ensuring that wearers do not have to change their spectacles when entering and exiting a vehicle. Fatigue-free and optimised spatial vision in changing lighting conditions are capabilities the lenses provide both for driving and standard wear.

Solitaire Protect Road 2 coating is used on the driving lenses and reduces dazzling effects from modern xenon or LED headlights. Agitating reflections, such as those from wet road, are reduced significantly with enhanced contrast during the day also a benefit for driving.

Rodenstock's driving lenses have been rated as 'very good' by the Technical Inspection Association in Rheinland, Germany.



HOYA

EnRoute

Available in both single vision and progressive variants, Hoya's EnRoute driving lenses are designed to maximise efficiency in looking quickly between mirrors, the road, navigation devices and the dashboard while driving.

Hoya explained that 90% of a driver's reaction time depends on vision, creating the need for clear vision in situations where glare and dazzle are common. The EnRoute driving lens filters out blue light, which contributes to glare, and has been designed to provide the maximal clear field of vision.

Hoya also produces a Pro version of the EnRoute lens in single vision and multifocal that includes improved colour contrast. The Pro variation of the lens is recommended for anyone who drives professionally, including delivery and taxi drivers.

DRIVING LENSES



ZEISS

DriveSafe

DriveSafe lenses from Zeiss have been optimised for driving with Luminance Design Technology and DuraVision DriveSafe coating. These features provide better vision in low light conditions, reduced glare and clear visibility.

Luminance Design Technology takes different pupil sizes in differing light conditions into account, accounting for driving in mesopic conditions and making space perception and distance assessment more comfortable for drivers.

Zeiss' DuraVision coating reduces perceived glare by up to 64% according to the company, reflecting the wavelengths of light that cause perceived glare.

Optimised distance and intermediate viewing zones reduce the need for horizontal head movement with the lens design calibrated for the percentage of time that the average driver spends looking at the road, dashboard and mirrors.

DriveSafe lenses are available in a variety of materials, including polycarbonate and trivex.

JAI KUDO LENSES

DriveSense

Jai Kudo's scratch-resistant, super-hydrophobic, anti-reflective driving lens, DriveSense, is available in single vision and progressive variations. It has been designed as a day-night driving lens to reduce eye fatigue while on long drives or on low-light conditions.

DriveSense lenses incorporate a night vision zone specifically for driving at night, with improved visual fields for widening vision and reducing astigmatism.

If requested, DriveSense lenses can incorporate Jai Kudo's Honeycomb lenses which reduce glare for night time driving by distributing light from all areas of the lens. The Honeycomb lenses appear completely clear but the honeycomb pattern is visible under close inspection or when the lens becomes misted.



CALEDONIAN OPTICAL

Zone Drive and HD:SV Drive

In response to customer demand Scottish lens manufacturer Caledonian Optical released its driving lens available either in progressive as HD:SV Drive or in single vision as Zone Drive.

A Caledonian Optical spokesperson explained that the lenses incorporate a power distribution specifically adapted for driving that helps to provide superior focus while driving in a variety of conditions.

Developed at the company's Aberdeen laboratory, the lenses provide a near-180 degrees of distance vision while also reducing the effects of night myopia.

The driving lenses also include a blue light filter that helps with headlight glare and a night vision zone at the top of the lens.

DRIVING LENSES

OPTIMUM COATINGS

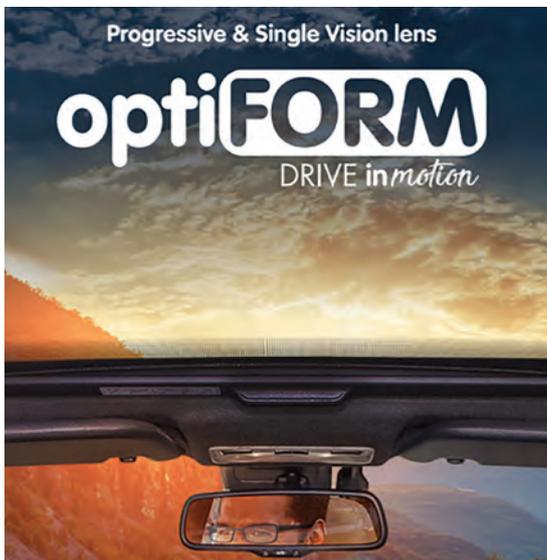
OptiForm

Optimum Coatings' OptiForm Drive InMotion lens can be customised for each patient and has been adapted to night driving and specialised to maximise intermediate-distance vision, the distance most needed for driving.

OptiForm lenses also address night myopia, accounting for the refractive error difference between night and day by up to 0.25D. This provides superior visual acuity and reduces visual fatigue from driving at night.

The lenses have been developed with Digital Ray-Path technology, a calculation method that optimises the lens by using a binocular simulation of the real eye-lens optical system so that each lens is customised exactly for the wearer.

OptiForm lenses are also available in wrap lenses and with variable insets.



BBGR OPTICAL

Night Drive Boost

BBGR's driving lens has been developed with night driving in mind, and features Reflect Control technology.

Night Drive Boost lenses reduce the sensation of night glare, they remain clear and transparent while still being suited to daylight conditions.

Reflect Control technology removes irritating halo effects with light sources and reflective objects sharply outlined. Glare, which can reduce reaction times by 4.5 seconds or more than 100 metres, is reduced to a much safer level.

NIKON

SeeCoat Drive

Nikon's clear anti-reflective coating is optimised for driving in the dark, eschewing a green-hued reflective coating for colours we are less sensitive to when it is dark. With green reflections in lenses perceived as glare, the lenses reduce the appearance of glare for drivers.

SeeCoat Drive is part of Nikon's wider family of SeeCoat Coatings and benefits from the range's easy clean and dust and smudge resistant technologies.

SeeCoat Drive lenses are designed to be worn all day and do not impede optimal vision during the day or outside of vehicles.

SEECOAT DRIVE KEY FEATURES:

- ✓ Reduces the glare caused by oncoming headlights, street lights and other light sources
- ✓ Clear, aesthetic and transparent with the benefits of SeeCoat coatings
- ✓ To wear both day and night

Conventional lens



SeeCoat Drive lens



Image © BBGR Optical Limited



NORVILLE

Afar

Produced in its Gloucester lab, Norville's latest generation of driving lens has been developed to address night myopia, with no reduction in daytime performance, by incorporating a power adjustment in the distance zone of the lens.

Emerald or blue reflect MAR coatings are also included with the lenses to improve clarity and reducing distracting reflections. Available in both single vision and progressive variations, Afar enables wider distance and intermediate vision while minimising lateral distortions.

Afar can also be combined with the Vista-Mesh lens material for improved night-time driving performance, which further reduces glare and visual fatigue.