



Optics in a changing world

Many of the pressures for change that we are experiencing were accelerated during the period of the pandemic when we all learned to live our lives and work in different ways. While much has returned to as it was before, many changes will remain or continue. Optics as well as optometry are not immune from these changes, and indeed like many other parts of society, may well benefit from them. To do that we need to identify and understand those trends, thinking about what is going to happen in five years' time, whether we are training people for the right things, and what support eye care professionals might need to prepare for and adapt to this changing world.

The first point to make is that technology is here to stay. So, opticians and optometrists must embrace it. Technology will be an aid in providing services in future; if used well it will free up time for eye care professionals (ECP) to spend with the patient. We are already seeing new expectations from patients, which require new and different ways of engaging with them. Patients increasingly like technology and expect it to be used, especially younger generations - the patients of the future. They have direct access to more information and often arrive at a practice with a pre-determined idea of what they require. The ECP will want to respond to their requests, but it may also be necessary to gently guide patients to more appropriate tests and products. But to do that, ECPs need to have sufficient knowledge and expertise to make proper use of the technology available to them, and to inform and educate their patients about the technology on offer.

So how might an optical store need to change? If they don't already have one, an optical store is likely to need an interactive website where clients can access reliable information on what products and services they offer. It is important that optical stores are not just seen as the place to go to buy spectacles. They are also places that provide eye care. Increasingly stores/practices need to differentiate themselves from others in the market, specialising in particular products and services. Demographics and geography will help determine what should be on offer.

When it comes to building and maintaining a customer base, product brand is likely to be less important to patients than the service they receive. Services will need to be ever more personalised. The whole team of each individual store must be involved, sharing the goals and aspirations of the practice. Clients who are treated well and are happy, are loyal.

While understanding technology and having good business skills will be increasingly important, in fact the most important skills ECPs will need in future are those they have always needed: communications and empathy. Technology can aid in determining an eye condition, but it is the ECP who helps the patient understand what that means for them and what their options are. Technology can help manage communications, but it cannot replace the human interaction or replicate empathy.

So, in summary, technology should be embraced and used as an aid. Indeed, Big Data could help provide an insight into what we do well and help us do better. Specialisation and differentiation are likely to be key to success in the future, along with interprofessional working. But at the end of the day, it is the individual practice and the people there who are the brand patients buy into. That is why the human element will always be essential.

About ECOO

The European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO) represents the interests of optometrists and opticians across Europe. Our members are national professional associations from 22 countries who together represent more than 150,000 opticians and optometrists. ECOO aims to promote eye health to the public across borders and to harmonise clinical and educational standards of optometric and optical practice throughout Europe.