

Reviewed by:

Doctor
 Optician
 Technician
 Other



On-line Eyewear?

Electronics, school supplies, cars, and yes, even haunted rubber duckies. Today just about every industry is represented on the internet and optical is no different. Until recently, the subject of internet eyewear sales was not often brought up but this is quickly changing. Just about every optical magazine or optical blog is addressing this issue and discussions are lively as how to approach it.

Due to the overwhelming popularity of the internet, some dispensaries have developed their own online e-commerce sites in the hopes of retaining any patients that may be considering purchasing online. On the surface, this seems like a reasonable approach to stop potential loss of revenue. According to a recent survey of 1000 people by Nielsen Online, a service of the Nielsen Company, sixty-one percent said they like to comparison shop—**sixty-one percent**. There are no clear numbers that represent if this high number translates to the optical category, but you can be fairly confident that even if you have an online ordering option, many of your patients will potentially still look elsewhere so they can comparison shop at the other 67,300,000 sites that show up when you goggle glasses.

The concerns of patients purchasing eyewear on the internet go beyond potential lost sales, there is the additional damage caused by the possible impression that an eyecare professional is not necessary to properly fit and measure a patient's glasses. Many websites do not ask for seg heights on their order forms. They either guess or have a "magical" formula that automatically provides the optimum fitting height..... without ever seeing the patient face to face. When it comes to PD measurements, more sites encourage patients to obtain it from a professional, but there is at least one that instructs the patient how to take their own PD in a mirror.

Once a patient discovers that their new eyewear isn't comfortable, they cannot see well, or something is just not right, where will they turn? Most likely to you. This is also true for minor repairs down the road. The question is how to handle the customers who turn to you for help when the original purchase was not made at your location. Historically small optical repairs and adjustments have been granted free of charge with the hope the patient will return in the future to purchase their eyewear. But your competition is no longer local, it has gone global. Will you be able to afford to continue these concessions in these times of ever increasing overhead costs?

Being prepared for patients intending to purchase online will make handling these situations easier. An obvious indication someone is planning on purchasing online is a request for their PD. When approached, simply ask the customer why they are requesting their PD as this is a measurement

taken by the optician who fills their prescription. Most will not press harder, but if they do simply repeat the optician filling their prescription is responsible for taking that measurement. An incorrect PD measurement can cause headaches, eye strain and incorrect vision and is only taken at the time of order. It is not part of their prescription and does not have to be provided. This of course can be an area that requires some tact and sensitivity to be handled correctly.

The second most common situation is the patient that has already purchased online coming to your dispensary for service. How will you know if they purchased online? Simply ask them. Offhandedly comment you are not familiar with this frame, what a neat frame, etc., and then ask where they got them. You will have to decide if you will continue to service eyewear from other local shops, but when it comes to eyewear purchases online let them know that service is included in the purchase price. This is also your opportunity to mention any additional services you offer to patients who purchase their eyewear at your location. If they become upset that you are not able to service them, let them know you could not be responsible for a product not purchased from you and are not comfortable working with it.

Will this be a big market? Currently, only 8% of clothing purchases are made online. Consumers like the ease of purchasing online, but want the security and reduced hassle of returning the item if it does not work for them. As eyewear is a custom made item returning it in most cases is not possible. So if a returnable item such as clothing only represents 8% of purchases, online eyewear sales may be lower, but we also have to keep in mind what happened to contact lens sales once the on-line suppliers really took hold; the future will only tell...

The most important aspect of this is the need to keep the optical profession *professional*. All of us spend many hours attending continuing education and working with manufacturers. Together we can make a difference, do not allow online ordering sites to reduce the optical professional as being unnecessary. Eyewear is a medical device that should be measured and fitted by you— a professional.

As this new market continues to evolve, Midwest Labs will be there to work with you on marketing and in-office strategies to help keep your patients in your dispensary. If you have any comments or practices you utilize in your office in handling this new on-line optical consumer, please share them with us. We are all responsible in maintaining the integrity of our industry and any successful business approach you use can help others. We look forward to hearing from you! Comments can be emailed to jtupper@mwlabinc.com.