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Many happy returns: How to retain optical dispensing patients

Answering 'yes' to five key questions may retain loyal patient base in the optical dispensary

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By Joseph Casorio

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Optical dispensaries are often treated as the “stepchildren” of eyecare practices. This need not—and should not—be the case.

Studies show that close to 65% of the adult U.S. population wears prescription glasses. The optical shop can be an important part of the revenue stream and—if maintained and managed well—can help retain the current patient base and even drive new patient referrals.

More than ever, practices need to step up their game. The ease of buying glasses and frames online is cutting into the profits of many optical dispensaries, as “spectacle e-tailing” has become a force with which to be reckoned. There also is increasing competition from big-box retailers.

Following are tips toward making the optical dispensary stand out from the competition and compelling patients to stay in-house. Like a lot of improvement projects, this involves honest answers to tough questions.

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1. Is my optical dispensary visible and attractive? Have I gone the extra mile in encouraging patients to visit my shop?

It may sound obvious, but I've seen too many situations where the look and placement of a practice's optical dispensary appears to be an afterthought. I can't stress strongly enough the importance of visual appeal when it comes to increasing optical sales.

The dispensary should be eye-catching, attractive, clean, and well organized.

Seating and other furniture should be comfortable, warm, and inviting. Photos of people wearing your glasses should be visible. Attractive ads and videos can be effectively included as part of the display, and any mirrors used need to be flattering. Think about providing a coffee/tea/refreshment station to encourage patients to spend some extra time.

The goal is to make the shop a natural, connected arm of the practice—an attractive, alluring solution center for patients' needs.

I also suggest developing a handoff method from physician to optician, as experience has shown some patients respond well to being "invited" to visit the optical dispensary.

The ideal transfer protocol will vary from practice to practice—in some, a "walk-and-talk" approach, where physicians physically walk patients to dispensaries for a discussion of their needs, works well. Others use a buzzer system that summons the optician to the exam room, where the physician introduces the two parties and explains eyecare recommendations in front of both parties.

2. Is my eyeglass inventory diverse, right for my demographics, and price-competitive?

An affirmative response to this question is critical. Time and again, I've heard patients complain that their physicians' dispensaries don't carry the right frames for them.

The inventory needs to contain enough variety to ensure the needs of each and every patient can be met. This means carrying a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and price points. It's important to stay abreast of current trends, as many patients like their eyewear fashion to stay as up-to-date as the rest of their look.

When it comes to price point, many practices today choose to offer a price-protection guarantee stating they will beat the price of any competitor for same or similar items—whether that seller be another brick-and-mortar retailer, or a spectacle e-tailer.

Admittedly, this can be dangerous, as some cost-cutting online outlets seem to exist solely to disrupt from a pricing standpoint rather than provide comprehensive service. At the very least, eye practices need to be cognizant of the discount landscape and price certain frames accordingly.

It's also important to note that many customers want to own second and third pairs of glasses—ones they can keep in their cars or offices, for instance. This is yet another reason for maintaining inventory that varies considerably in style and price, as customers tend not to overindulge on so-called "spare pairs."

3. Do my opticians realize they are customer service representatives? Are they well-educated, well-trained, and skilled at working with a variety of patients?

In addition to properly guiding patients on frame selection, the staff needs to have a firm command of optical theory to confidently and accurately interpret the needs of patients based upon the prescription written. There are many educational options available for optical teams, including continuing education classes, many of which are offered by state organizations or at national conferences, such as Vision Expo.

In states where continuing education is not offered, opticians can participate in various online courses to further enhance their knowledge. It's important to motivate and require the staff to work toward ABO certification, and implement incentive programs to help them do so.

Opticians also need to think about how they, in turn, provide eyeglass education to patients. Empowering patients with knowledge will give them confidence in their purchases and, equally important, the dispensary's expertise in meeting their needs.

Here's where the client-servicing prowess of the optical staff is critical, as the opticians must provide the same level of service and expertise patients have come to expect in your practice. Only when this consistent, personalized service is achieved does your dispensary truly become a worthy extension of the practice—one that sets it apart from big-box retailers.

4. Does my optical shop have an engaging web presence, including a professional website and effective use of social media?

Although most practices are not about to venture into selling glasses online, it is important to use the online arena to your benefit. This means creating an inviting and compelling online presence. Your website needs to present you in your best light, and will likely require hiring professional assistance. It's an investment worth making, as practically everyone now starts their purchase searches online.

The website should include a captivating online showroom—one that will entice patients to want to come into the office to see the beautiful frames on display. Make sure to display the wide variety of brands you sell, and make clear there is ample selection regarding style and price points.

If possible, have the website host a blog featuring thoughtful, informal eyecare and eyewear information. Blogs have a way of personalizing a website, which helps visitors feel like insiders. The more compelling information and education offered to customers, the less likely they are to go elsewhere. Having a presence on Facebook and Instagram is also recommended, as social media can serve as viral, visually compelling vehicles for showcasing your services and frames.

5. Do these ideas sound great, but overwhelming?

Optical dispensary consulting firms are expert in operations solutions that save time and grow profits. Knowledgeable and skilled in the areas of inventory management, third-party reimbursement, training and supervision, marketing, and point-of-sale software, you may want to consider hiring a firm to help turn more of your patients into lifelong eyewear customers.

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