

**The online eyewear phenomenon:
How Opticianry can play a leading role in the public eye**

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Any attempts to address the online prescription eyewear issue - first - must come to terms with the fact the “problem” is real. It is not threatening to be an overwhelming problem of epidemic proportions just yet. However, it is reasonable to conclude the potential market at stake is in the incubatory stage and poised for potentially sudden growth. It has been reliably reported by the VCA (Vision Council of America) the current market for online prescription eyewear has remained steady at approximately 3% over the last couple of years. Online Contact lenses sales are a bit more robust at approx. 16%. What is of significance is that 75% of the sales were to the under 30 age group. This is a demographic group that is literally inbred with the computer age. While that consideration is accurate, what is more interesting is the demographic diversity data which is projected to shape the sales trajectory of this issue. This data reveals some 66% of all adults have had an internet purchasing experience. That data is integrated with more recent data that women, seniors over 55, and - quite significantly - lower income consumers are increasingly making online purchases. Whether that experience was good or bad is not the issue, the point is internet sales are becoming more and more mainstream acceptable, and in some regards less intimidating. Therefore the first consideration of any coping strategy must understand who we are dealing with, and why.

Generally speaking, consumer psychology revolves around the basic premises of price, perceived value, and convenience. There exists more detailed assessments, but for the purpose of the matter at hand, fundamental simplicity serves the purpose for establishing an entry point of a threat assessment. Using the basic proposition of price, convenience, and value as the root motivation for buying behavior, the challenges are clearer for counter strategies. Once it is understood precisely what is occurring, how to address it is less daunting.

According to the VCA an interesting factor is at play as it relates to perceived value in the mind of online consumers. There appears to be a distinct and

perceptible reluctance with consumers to fully commit to online Rx eyeglasses. Psychologists refer to this mental conundrum as cognitive dissonance. This reluctance is because of quality control concerns as it relates to proper prescription, fit and comfort issues, and the attendant issue of customer service if there are problems. It is in this area that Opticianry has an opening and a golden opportunity to “frame the debate” on the referenced concerns. Accepting this premise of the conflicting concerns present in the consumer consciousness as a cause for action, the prevailing approach to work with, is to take the high road of concern for the patient welfare.

The effectiveness of such an initiative will require a shrewd and subliminal type approach in the form of well positioned and functional PSA (Public service announcements) type marketing. The marketing/imaging concept is the coalescing force. Since it is established consumers are reluctant to fully pursue online eyewear at this point in time, it is the ECP’s patient welfare duty to subtly, tactfully, and visually remind the public *why it is in the best interests of a patient to seek proper care, guidance, and service from a qualified ECP*. By engaging in a well-tuned “caveat emptor” (let the buyer beware) posture the consumer is nudged toward making the decision their subconscious is telling them to do. This soft sell type approach is often known as variable investment marketing. In such a scenario the reason(s) why - for or against - an issue are purposely laid out in a simple friendly, non-aggressive and passive medium with the idea [that] the logical end-result conclusion was reached autonomously. In other words the strategy is to absolutely imply online eyewear purchases can be bad for your visual health, and the ECP is just looking out for the consumer/patient’s best interests. The other online guy/gal is not subject to a brutal frontal attack, but rather to the repetitious subtle razor cuts of an inefficiency, questionable quality, and imprecise service narrative. To work effectively such a positional marketing campaign needs to be as universally identical and deployed as possible. The foundational concept and strategy should be developed at the national level, and state level buy-in and support comes secondarily. All players – minor variations as necessary – have to play from the same book.

At this point, it would be appropriate to first determine if the ideas presented have traction before proceeding and identifying further steps. The attachment of John Ruskin’s “Common Law of Business Balance” may provide additional substantive context of thought to the considerations at issue.

Common Law of Business Balance

“There is hardly anything in this world that someone cannot make a little worse and sell a little cheaper, and the people who consider price alone are that person’s lawful prey. It’s unwise to pay too much, but it’s worse to pay too little. When you pay too much you lose a little money – that’s all. When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything, because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing it was bought to do. The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot – it can’t be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, it is well to add something for the risk you run, and if you do that you will have enough to pay for something better”.

- John Ruskin -
19th century English author