



Change for the better

Ridgway Optical has quietly been going about its business for over 35 years, but managing director David Ridgway and his 15 staff now want to make a bit more noise about what they can offer practices. A strategic growth plan that has seen the addition of exciting new product lines and a new eco-friendly premises with gargantuan stock-holding capability has already been put into action and now the company wants to let its products and services do more of the talking.

Formed in 1976, Ridgway Optical originally supplied manufacturers in Britain with raw materials for production. 'We supplied the two most important optical products at the time – Mazzucchelli acetate sheets and Comotec hinges and temples,' says David Ridgway. As competition from Far Eastern manufacturing became fiercer, the company decided to change direction and focus on distribution of a finished product.

At the beginning of last year, the company moved to new premises just outside Banbury, Oxfordshire. The new building not only allowed the company to improve its green credentials through the business park's wooden biomass boiler, which provides the rest of the park with heating and hot water, but more importantly the move allows the company to focus on one of its core business principles of delivering high levels of service.

'Independent opticians are 100 per cent of our business and they require a high level of service, which means being able to get product to them quickly,' says Ridgway. 'One of our

Long-standing optical supplier Ridgway Optical is looking to a new approach in an age-old market but without compromising its core values and service to independents. **Simon Jones** reports



David Ridgway: providing independent practices with a fast cost-friendly service is the priority

biggest strengths is the ability hold lots of stock. I'd like to say we have 100 per cent at any one time, but that isn't always the case. Sometimes, we operate at 99 or 98 per cent,' he adds.

Timely delivery of product is facilitated by a new warehouse which can easily hold anything up to 100,000 frames at any one time. 'We had the unit fitted out exactly to our needs – which are the ability to offer next day delivery and holding the required products in stock,' says Ridgway.

Holding stock is only part of the picture. A team of four invoicing and despatch personnel make sure frames leave in a timely fashion and have been trained to possess great product awareness, so dealing with queries from practices isn't an issue.

In late 2011, the ordering process was sped up even further with the addition of portfolio-wide online ordering. 'I'm amazed at how successful it has been. I don't think it would have done anything at all five years ago,' says a proud Ridgway. All pricing information is available to customers before items are added to a

shopping cart – which raises an invoice at a later date.

Frames

The company offers six of its own product lines, each with different considerations in terms of product and prices. 'We believe in a one-stop shopping experience, where customers can buy a wide range of frames at logical price points,' says Ridgway. He adds that the company is still one of few that stock a range of voucher frames – described as something of a service product. 'Customers aren't necessarily buying on looks, they're buying the frames because they need them in practice,' states Ridgway. Next in line are the O-O and MX collections, designed to offer a range of sizes and styles, but a low price point. Allegro is a general collection, followed by the Northshore and Reaction lines where the styles begin to pay more lip service to fashion trends.

When it comes to design and frame style, Ridgway Optical has a clear philosophy. 'Frames must have easy to wear, simple lens shapes. However,



The new warehouse can hold up to 100,000 frames



things become really interesting on the outside of the temples,' says Ridgway. This philosophy allows the company to use the temples as a blank canvas for their ideas. Although styles are worked on in conjunction with its manufacturing partners in the Far East, Ridgway Optical's knowledge of what works in its market forms the basis of the designs.

This knowledge extends into production too, as the company mixes and matches its production partners to best suit its needs. 'We manufacture in China, but our advanced colour plating is carried out in Korea because it's far more advanced over there.' This allows Ridgway to offer a better specified frame for the same price. The company also uses its wealth of experience in areas such as a frame hinges – over-specifying the quality of components to circumnavigate problems further down the line.

New offerings

At last year's Mido trade fair, the company was awarded the UK distribution rights for the Kliik Denmark and Fysh UK collections from Canadian manufacturer, Wescan Optical.

Fysh UK and Kliik Denmark had been distributed in the UK before by another company prior to the deal with Ridgway Optical, but this didn't affect how the company went about its business. 'We got around any problems by consciously only offering new frames from the Wescan lines we had just taken on,' explains Ridgway. 'It was like starting fresh. Wescan support the optician in terms of old product and getting hold of parts – we just don't stock them,' he adds.

'Wescan's Kliik Denmark range was created in response to demand for smaller women's frames in smaller eye sizes. It was highly successful, but the



Ridgway design philosophy: Simple lens shapes combined with detail on the temples



Ridgway supports practices with a wide range of point-of-sale materials

company was inundated with requests for frames with a similar style in larger eye sizes, so Fysh UK was created,' says Ridgway on the inception of the two lines.

Both product lines sit well with Ridgway's aforementioned philosophy of frame design. Front shapes are very wearable with detailed temples – often with intricate patterns and bold

colours. 'Wescan focuses very much on colour,' says Ridgway enthusiastically. 'It always looks for catwalk trends and then introduces the season's popular colours into its ranges.'

The latest Wescan line to be taken on by Ridgway Optical is Evatik, a men's range with high fashion sensibilities. Styles across the range are rectangular, on-trend and tend to focus on larger eye sizes. Temples are once again where the action takes place, with models such as the E9047 frame receiving wooden detailing.

Last year Wescan introduced the Evatik line of sunglasses, which are also being distributed by Ridgway Optical. The collection is the company's first foray into sunglasses, so Ridgway is understandably excited about the addition. 'The sunglasses models are completely on-trend and are all fully glazeable,' says Ridgway.

Practice support

Ridgway Optical supports practices stocking its latest lines with a wide range of point-of-sale materials. 'It's not something we have always offered, but the addition of new lines from Wescan has encouraged us to broaden the scope of what we offer,' says Ridgway. Everything from banners to minimalistic frame display units is available free of charge. Cases from the manufacturer are also design led, with space-saving foldable units being the highlight.

Although in the past the company may not have made much of a song and dance about what it does, the recent fresh and funky additions to its portfolio have called for a different approach. Despite some minor changes, the company is adamant that it won't lose sight of its values – providing quality frames at a cost friendly price in a timely fashion will always be Ridgway Optical's primary aim. ●

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