

OPTICAL ON MAIN STREET

A Consumer Shift in Shopping Small

You've Got It, They Want It: Consumers Are Taking a Second Look at 'Local'

BY JAMIE WILSON / ASSISTANT EDITOR

NEW YORK—The optical landscape has been a tumultuous one especially for independent optical retailers and ECPs. Despite the challenges facing independents, like competition from online retailers, big box and chain businesses as well as managed care issues, business conducted by independent ECPs still accounts for nearly two-thirds of the industry, representing 61.0 percent of all U.S. optical revenues, according to GeoMetrics by Jobson Optical Research.

Over the past few years, the rise of ECP alliances and business and practice management groups have helped many independents find ways to learn and compete in the new market atmosphere.

In addition, many independent opticians, opto-

metric practices and boutiques are recommitting to building relationships with customers and patients in their markets, and bolster visibility and relationships within their local communities.

Some of them are, in fact, part of a burgeoning "movement" that is embracing and redefining small and local business. That's because a growing number of consumers across the country are exhibiting a renewed interest in "shopping local," and building their own ties to the merchants, services and organizations that are in their own backyard.

In this first installment of a 2016 series, *Optical on Main Street*, *Vision Monday* is exploring what it takes to succeed on Main Street today. We're talking to business experts and fiercely independent ECPs to explore the nitty gritty of what is bringing consumers

back to Main Street, whether it's a connection to the history of their towns and neighborhoods, to unparalleled customer service and unique products.

We spoke to sources as diverse as American Express, the National Federation for Independent Business and retail experts like Unity Marketing. We've also talked about "local" with a diverse range of optical retailers and ECPs. We found that from Millennials to Boomers, consumers want value in their purchases as well as a personalized touch from business owners in both the fashion and medical realms of optical.

This shift in consumer attitudes can be highlighted by growing events such as American Express' Small Business Saturday, an event which was launched on Nov. 27, 2010 to encourage people

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across the country to support small, local businesses. Now in its sixth year, the event has continued to gain momentum among consumers.

Amex Small Business Saturday spokesperson, Nicole Leinbach-Reyhles, believes the value that consumers are getting from purchasing goods from independent establishments and a shift in their attitudes to embrace their regional communities plays a big role in influencing where individuals shop.

“In 2015, we also learned that 80 percent of customers are willing to pay slightly more for an item if it is purchased from a small, independently-owned retailer as opposed to online or at a large retailer. This is a true testament to the value that customers see in supporting their local businesses.”

According to the Consumer Insight Survey released jointly by Amex and the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) on Nov. 30, 2015, two days after the Small Business Saturday event, revealed that more shoppers reported visiting their local businesses on Small Business Saturday than ever before.

The survey showed that more than 95 million consumers shopped at small businesses on Small Business Saturday, an 8 percent increase from 2014. Total spending among U.S. consumers who were aware of Small Business Saturday reached \$16.2 billion at independent retailers, up 14 percent. Among those who took part that day, 31 percent attended a community event and 81 percent encouraged family and friends to support local small business.

Holly Wade, director of the Nation Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) research foundation added, “Every year it grows, and more people are participating and advertising with Small Business Saturday. It’s turned into a great day for retail and restaurant services and their ability to get the word out about who they are, where they are and how they affect their communities.”

Daniel Brunson, store manager at Hicks Brunson Eyewear in Tulsa, Okla. participated in this year’s Small Business Saturday and felt an increase in consumers wanting to shop “locally.”

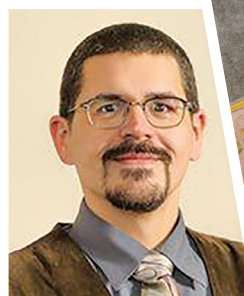
“This year, a fellow boutique owner and I coordinated a Small Business Saturday event among several



Maggie Sayers Eye Clinic of Vero



Ron Swengel College Place Optical



Charlie Blankenship Spectacle Shoppe



other stores in our shopping center at Utica Square,” he said. “I reached out to the local media and received massive coverage. Our little event was featured in the newspaper, local magazine and even a spot on local news. The local TV journalist reported that even though Small Business Saturday was wet and rainy, shoppers were out in droves supporting the ‘shop local’ movement.”

Despite the pressures that come with running an independent business, there is a growing group of consumers who are rediscovering local optical retailers and ECPs. They are passionate about being

socially conscious and want to be active members in their communities, and the businesses who are passionate about being independent are tapping into that market.

Pamela N. Danziger of Unity Marketing who explored the market for small business in her study, “Small is the Big Story in Retail for 2016” found that demographic shifts will favor small specialty retailers in the coming decade.

“The maturing of the huge Baby Boom generation...presents a customer who is looking for a more

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Consumers Are Taking a Second Look at 'Local'

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personal retailing experience," she said. "They have advanced to a life stage that has liberated them from childrearing and all related expenses. But their kids want the same thing. Millennials want the only-about-me shopping experience for another reason. Because they can."

Danziger said that "Main Street specialty retail offers new things to see, new things to do and new things to experience and explore." In a word, Main Streets are exciting.

Maggie Sayers, master optician at Eye Clinic of Vero and Optical Boutique, in Vero Beach, Fla. acknowledges that the business climate has changed and she has seen a shift in consumer attitudes. "It takes a creative, smart business leader to be successful in an environment where big box stores, chain optical and internet eyewear compete for the consumer's attention.

"Today's consumers are educated. They research online and have very specific questions and concerns. They look for the local optician to be their go-to person for all things optical. They want to build a relationship within their community. They like to shop where someone knows their name," she said.

Robbie Johnson Weinberg of Eclectic Eye, with two locations in Tennessee, observed that many shoppers are willing to pay extra for a higher quality item, another sign of Main Street's resurgence.

"Over the last 15 years, I definitely see a revitalization by the consumer that any dollar they spend, whether small or large, has an impact," she said. "Every day people come to us who have insurance benefits but they choose us instead of the place their insurance tells them to go."

Independents have been tapping into the needs of the consumer by utilizing the customer experience along with community, which Danziger points to as a step to success in her report.

"The secret of success is the ability for them to really know their customers and deliver the valuable, unique shopping experiences these demanding,



Amie and Bryan Finley Island Opticians



Robbie Johnson Weinberg Eclectic Eye



Johnna Dukes Optique Iowa

savvy, eager-to-be-pleased consumers crave," she said. "It's not just about the stuff. It's the personal experience that is the gift that keeps giving."

Ron Swengel, owner of College Place Optical in Edmonds, Wash. said one of the issues he's facing as an independent business owner is access to clients.

"Some vision plans don't recognize opticians as eyewear providers even in licensed states, therefore, independently owned optical businesses are being

left out of preferred provider networks," he said. However by "providing outstanding service and educating the client on proper fitting eyewear and by using the best technology to fit their needs" Swengel is tackling some of those issues.

Charlie Blankenship, owner of The Spectacle Shoppe, Inc., with four locations in Minnesota, knows that there's been a disconnect with customers.

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Independent Locations in Groups of 3 or Less

Location Count Stats

% of all U.S. locations **64.3%**

Dispensing Eyeglasses **27,148**

Optical Revenue Stats

% of all U.S. Optical Revenues **61.0%**

Estimated Optical Revenues **\$19,892,896,712**

West

Dispensing Eyeglasses **6,336**

Estimated Optical Revenues **\$4,478,493,240**

% of All Locations within Region **69.8%**

% of All Revenues within Region **65.2%**

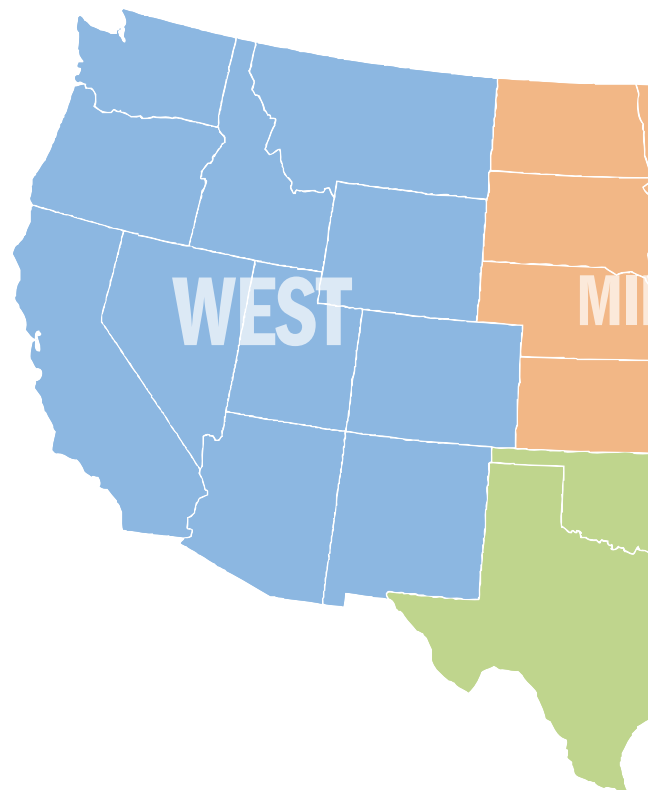
Midwest

Dispensing Eyeglasses **5,463**

Estimated Optical Revenues **\$4,177,434,612**

% of All Locations within Region **58.4%**

% of All Revenues within Region **56.2%**



Source: GeoMetrics by Jobson Optical Research Group

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“Today’s generation has grown up with the internet, frequently buying things online,” he said. “The connection seems to be lost. It’s different than it has been. You have to approach the interactions with this group much differently.”

For him that has meant focusing on the details of the customer experience when they visit his location. He said, “We have always been focused on providing amazing customer service and support patients with any concerns or issues. We try to add our own special touch, with fine detail to make it an experience for the patients. We pride ourselves in doing the little things: providing coffee and hot chocolate, giving out complimentary roses, warm cookies and fine chocolates. The little things go a long way.”

Johnna Dukes from Optique Iowa in Spirit Lake, Iowa added, “The patient feels we truly care about their experience when they come into my business, and I believe that feeling is what keeps them coming back.”

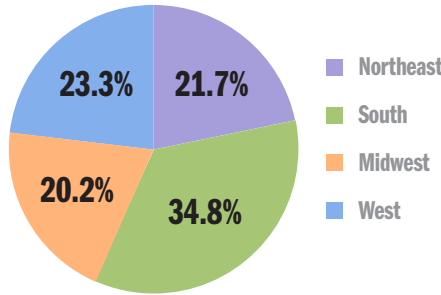
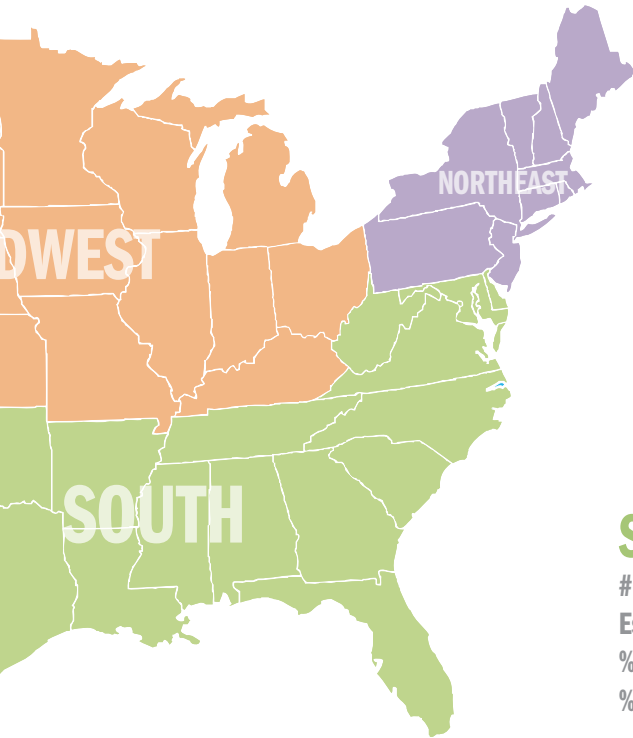
For Bryan Finley, owner of Island Opticians in Palm Beach, Fla. it has been the customer service that keeps people coming back to their location even when other independent businesses around them are closing up.

“Initially, we try to appeal to them by differentiation. Our main appeal though lies in our friendliness, customer service and willingness to help no matter what—offering friendly, unpretentious service, even home delivery when necessary.”

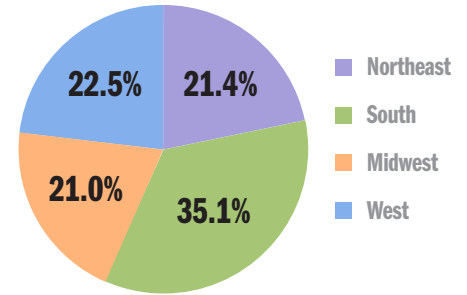
Along with excellent customer service, being a

face in the community is also an asset for the independent. Tracy Mast, an optician at Smoke Vision Care, a small private practice with three locations in Southwest Michigan, understands the importance of getting to know your community.

“We have a strong sense of community, and we are all actively participating in it,” she said. “We encourage our staff to have passions outside of work. I have found that whether it be our fellow community members seeing us volunteering or eating at a local restaurant or even out together wine tasting, they get a firsthand interaction with us that reminds them we live here too. By encouraging all members of our business to do this makes the community feel comfortable with us and it always leads to ‘eyeball chatter’ which in turn leads to booked



% of Locations by Region



% of Revenues by Region

South

Dispensing Eyeglasses **9,453**
 Estimated Optical Revenues **\$6,984,039,920**
 % of All Locations within Region **61.3%**
 % of All Revenues within Region **58.5%**

Northeast

Dispensing Eyeglasses **5,897**
 Estimated Optical Revenues **\$4,252,928,940**
 % of All Locations within Region **70.5%**
 % of All Revenues within Region **66.9%**

appointments or walk-in optical sales.”

It may be woven into the fabric of the American narrative, but consumers love a product or establishment with a story and a meaning. Especially if that story aligns with the American school of thought that hard work and perseverance generates success.

Tim and Peter Slapnicher, co-founders of Daily Optician, (a website featuring contributions from opticians), are utilizing digital to navigate the obstacles that small businesses face through uniting communities in a hyper local space. They have created an app, HastingsNow, which is currently only being utilized in the Hastings, Minn. community, to bring small businesses together in the area.

“This app is meant to put Hastings in the palm

of your hand,” Peter said. “It’s designed for both rural and urban populations in Hastings to unify small businesses in small towns, allowing them to build connections with one another. Last year, the idea of starting an app was an abstract idea to many who own small businesses. Now, it’s used to compete with big box retailers.”

Peter said, in the past there wasn’t enough of an excuse for people to support local, but they want to now. “All of a sudden, it’s about supporting the families and communities that you live in,” he said.

“Independents make the decision to be successful,” Peter said. “They find ways to persevere. It’s the grit and the grind. The vision is different for everyone, but they don’t have the button that says ‘give up.’”

As the mentality of the shopper changes to find more value and uniqueness in a purchase, the independent stands out among larger retailers—being able to fulfill that need.

Dave Schultz, OD, owner of Urban Optics in San Luis Obispo, Calif. understands the power of having a unique product and supporting independents. “When we started 26 years ago, we had a business plan to go all independent. We started out with Alain Mikli, I.a. Eyeworks and Oliver Peoples,” he said. “Although we’ve now incorporated a couple of larger brands, we’re still 90 percent independent.”

So, put on a pair of comfortable walking shoes because we’re about to take you on a stroll down Optical on Main Street to find out what keeps consumers coming back. ■



OPTICAL ON MAIN STREET

Meet Main Street: Why Consumers Are Loving the Independent

To get into the mind of today's consumers we spoke to some of the people who know them best, retailers across the U.S., to find out what qualities they possess that consumers love. There are many factors that come into play to create the perfect blend of ingredients that draws different groups of shoppers to Main Street. We zoned in on the following five traits that consumers seek in independents that set them apart from traditional big box retail stores.

Staying Plugged-In to Connect With Customers

Hicks Brunson Eyewear: Tulsa, Okla.

When marketing Hicks Brunson Eyewear, Daniel Brunson goes back to the beginning when his grandfather opened up shop in 1949 after purchasing the American Optical dispensary that he was managing at the time. Since then, Hicks Brunson's mission has been to "give our clients enhanced confidence through the craft of opticianry," he said.

Brunson described the atmosphere of the store as "warm and inviting" where frames come from

brands such as Zero G, Face a Face, Tom Davies, Sama, Swiss Flex, Tom Ford, Maui Jim and Rudy Project. All are grouped by collection and each customer is welcomed to the shop with a tour. Sipping on water or coffee, each customer will learn about the independent eyewear lines that he carries and the designers behind them.

Along with this in-store customer experience, Hicks Brunson Eyewear utilizes the digital tools of the 21st Century to grow and maintain their independent business. Located in the Utica Square shopping center of Tulsa, Okla. in a relatively upscale location where the median age is early 40s, Hicks Brunson utilizes platforms such as Google Reviews, social media, email, a blog and YouTube along with its web store. Staying plugged in virtually has allowed Hicks Brunson to reach customers and maintain a voice in the area.

"I read recently that 90 percent of retail purchases still happen inside a brick-and-mortar store, but what consumers are doing is researching online before entering a store to make a purchase," Brunson said. "I have found that having a well-designed and easy to navigate web store helps drive store sales."

Additionally, they maintain a strong voice on social media. "We take full advantage of Instagram and Facebook to publish our original content. In our industry, we have a huge advantage on Instagram. Our product is small. It photographs well and can easily be transported. Our store is located in a beautiful shopping center with many picturesque locations for photographing frames."

What really makes a difference is the melding together of all of these digital aspects to create a cohesive marketing tool that customers appreciate.

"On our blog, we write posts on a variety of topics including: company culture, lenses, style, celebrities in eyewear, frame reviews and holiday shopping guides. We then use email and social media to send out summaries of special blog posts that link back to our blog, which is connected to our web store," Brunson said.

"The key is to add value by providing helpful information for free to build an audience. Once you have an audience who comes to you for guidance and insight, you will have a pool of potential clients."

Community Involvement Means Feet on the Streets

Globe Design & Vision: Holland, Mich.

Be Curious...Have Vision is emblazoned above the black awning of Globe Design & Vision in Holland, Mich. The area, close to Grand Rapids and boasting 40,000 people, has been pretty reliant on small business, according to co-owner, Bob Schulze. "There was a vision of promoting a downtown," Schulze said. "Business owners in the area wanted a city center and sought to cultivate a sense of community. What that did was promote owner operated business."

Schulze is involved in Local First, an organization which is a subset of the Business Alliance for

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(Clockwise top left) Daniel Brunson, store manager of Hicks Brunson Eyewear along with an interior shot of their location in Tulsa, Okla. and an exterior shot.



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Globe Design & Vision: Holland, Mich.

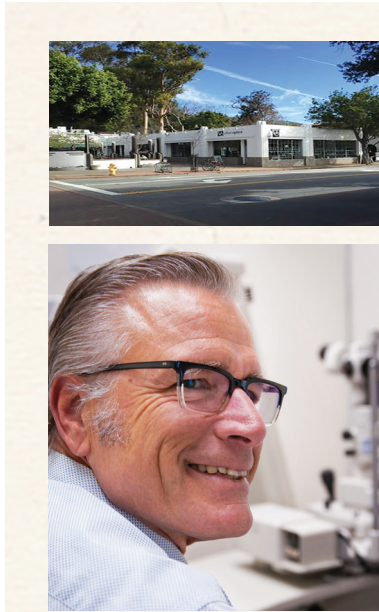
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Local Living Economics (BALLE). Local First (see page 42) provides support and sustainability to local, independent businesses through tools and resources. Local First emphasizes and supports the integral part independent businesses play in growing and sustaining the community.

"I look for different ways of advertising and community involvement. I've gotten involved in many things. I've been a board member of Park Theatre, a local theatre for 12 years and president for 10. A lot of people know me for my involvement," Schulze said.

Along with this, Globe Design & Vision spearheaded the "I See a Hero" campaign which recognizes select members of the community through nomination who have demonstrated extraordinary kindness, patience, understanding, assistance and care in their daily life, setting a high standard of behavior. In addition, Globe Design & Vision hosted a "Casual Concert" series for the community during the summer of 2013 where a band a month was showcased over four months in collaboration with one of Schulze's clients and his video company.

"If they're in my store and if they're on the street where my store is, they're having a good



(Clockwise top left) The exterior of Urban Optics in San Luis Obispo, Calif. followed by the interior and Dave Schultz, OD, the owner.

experience. They just like to see the stores right next to each other. The people on the street seeing these non-chain stores linked together are surprised and intrigued by them. Here you only see one or two chain stores within three blocks. Instead, you see a high concentration of individual stores that are very unique. It's a full, well-rounded community."

It's All About the Product and Creating an Atmosphere

Urban Optics: San Luis Obispo, Calif.

When entering Urban Optics located in San Luis Obispo, Calif. customers feel a relaxed and sophisticated but cool atmosphere. "All of the lighting is different than what you'd see in any kind of store. As you walk in, you look at our display and reception area and all of our office exam rooms are behind a curved wall made to replicate the outside of an eyeball," Dave Schultz, OD, said. "We try to be different. We have a non-medical looking office, and we're always up to date with equipment. Everything is electronic. We're also more laid back and carry more unique products."

There is a variety of eyewear at Urban Optics, including frames from I.a. Eyeworks, Face a Face, Vinylize, Blake Kuwahara, Jeremy Tarain, Garrett Leight (who used to work for them while he was in college), SALT, Bevel, Francis Klein, Barton Perreria, Dutz, Zero G, Toms Eyewear, Leisure Society, Shuron, Todd Rodgers, Paul Frank, SwissFlex, Maui Jim and Oakley.



(Clockwise top left) The exterior of Globe Design & Vision in Holland, Mich. along with two interior shots of the store.



“When you stay with independent lines, it’s like they’re your friends,” Schultz said. “It’s very different than working with the big names. It’s hard to form any relationships. We have relationships with all of the frame lines that we carry.

“Everyone is online and tuned in here. Students like the way it is and how it looks.” Urban Optics is nestled downtown on the main intersection of a predominantly college area. Schultz has been in town for 26 years and that specific location for 21 years, opening in the beginning of 1990. He credits his history in the area with how people know the Urban Optics name. “It’s really the length of time we’ve been here,” he said.

Location, Location, Location

Art of Optiks: Lake Minnetonka, Minn.

Art of Optiks is located 11.5 miles outside of downtown Minneapolis, in Wayzata along the waterfront of Lake Minnetonka in what is considered “the last suburb” of Minneapolis. With a population of about 4,500 people and the average age being early 40s with children, the biggest key to success that Stephanie Haenes, co-owner of Art of Optiks is utilizing the practice’s location.

Some 15 years ago, Haenes, an optician and her husband Timothy Haupert, OD, opened their first practice and are now on their way to opening their second location. The most important thing for the both of them was being a community-based practice and finding the right location. “The community is getting younger,” she said. “Fifteen years ago, this was a pretty aged community. Now, the average age is early 40s with families.”

She said, “In smaller towns, people are walking around. It’s a meeting place. We always make sure signage is visible, and we change the displays in our huge front windows at least quarterly. The number one thing that people say when they come into the store is that they saw us when they were ‘just driving by.’”

Along with this, they make sure that there is a syn-



(Clockwise top left) Stephanie Haenes and her husband, Tim Haupert, OD, an interior view and exterior view of Art of Optiks located near Minneapolis, Minn.

ergy between the medical side and the optical side. “We have a great general manager who brings everything together,” Haenes said. “On the tech/medical side we’ve got all the bells and whistles, and when customers come out front, they have a luxury eyewear experience. We really know where our products come from down to each part, meeting with designers and companies. So, we are able to give a detailed experience to our customers. However, we don’t aim to please everyone. Our target market appreciates quality, beautiful eyewear and is tech savvy.”

At Art of Optiks, you’ll find frames from Blake Kuwahara, Bevel Specs, Barton Perriera, Lindberg, Orgreen, Kaenon, Chrome Hearts, Rolf Spectacles, Maybach, Cartier, Etnia Barcelona, JF Rey as well as boutique collections “carefully curated, just 15 to 30 pieces per line” from Lindberg Precious, Lindberg Horn, Francis Klein, Piero Massaro, Res/Rei-Boutique collection, Jean Phillippe Joly, Rigards and Bruno Chausignand.

“What we do and what we provide goes well with what we’re about,” Haenes said. “You have to consider the community that you’re in especially where you are located. If you build your business around that you will be a lot more successful.”

Banking on the Lure of a Family Owned Business

Wink Optical: Jenkintown, Penn.

Although Wink Optical is a new name, Norma Messigner Meshkov’s optical boutique is part of a 90-year old family optical business.

The store, located in the Baederwood Shopping Center in Jenkintown, Penn., officially opened on Oct. 28, 2015. However, the opening of this boutique marks the continuation of five generations in optical. Meshkov’s great grandfather, grandfather and father were all optometrists and wholesale lab managers. The family business was first established on the Lower East Side of Manhattan until the family relocated to Center City, Philadelphia to form Philadelphia Eyeglass Labs.

“Wink Optical is a new name, and the boutique is a new concept for us, but it is still a part of a 90-year-old family optical business,” Meshkov said. “Philadelphia Eyeglass Labs has five other locations in the Philadelphia area and has earned a reputation for excellence and experience in the optical world for five generations.”

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Wink Optical: Jenkintown, Penn.

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The store carries brands such as Ray-Ban, Silhouette, Gucci, Seraphin, Sama Eyewear, I-Green, Tura, Eyecroxx, Revo and OGI, staying in a middle to upper price range frame line.

This transition came with the realization that “bigger and better wasn’t always working,” so Meshkov decided to evolve the family business to better fit the needs of today’s customers and society. This meant channeling a smaller, local feel with this new boutique.

“We felt that people were looking for a smaller more intimate experience,” Meshkov said. “We’ve seen large corporate stores lack quality, and we decided that what was required was to go in a different direction to see if we could go back to the personal experience. We’re continuing to change to meet the needs of society today.” ■



(Clockwise top left) Norma Messigner Meshkov standing by an eyewear display in Wink Optical, a group shot of the opening of the store and an exterior view of the location.

Local First Supports Small Business With Tools and Resources

Local First, a subset of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), is an organization that provides support and sustainability to local, independent businesses through tools and resources, such as workshops and opportunities for business owners to share best practices, ideas and network with each other.

Local First has been in the West Michigan area since 2006 and is a regional chapter. It is the second largest chapter in the country with the largest Local First chapter located in Arizona which is a statewide chapter. Of the 800+ members of West Michigan’s Local First, about 10 to 15 of those members are in optical.

Hanna Schulze, the educational program coordinator at Local First West Michigan, has been involved in the organization for three



years. “We have two major facets to the organization. The first is consumer education, teaching people who are buying products and that supporting local creates growth within a community. The second facet is that we set up community facing programs that bring light to local shops and teach business sustainability to independents.”

The benefit for smaller retailers is the added aid that not everyone might have in their budget. “Opticians have a lifestyle product,” Schulze said. “Not everyone has the budget for that. Local First helps get the message out about local businesses such as optical by providing branding and a stamp of recognition for locally owned businesses.”

Although Local First is an independent organization, there are over 150 similar “buy local” organizations around the country, and there are many ways for independents outside of Michigan to get involved. “Most of these organizations are part of the BALLE network,” Elissa Hillary, executive director at Local First said. “You can find out if there’s one near you by checking out the website belocalist.org/localist-community.” ■