



LIVING LA VIDA LOCAL

How Indie ECPs Are Thriving on Main Street

BY JAMIE WILSON / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

NEW YORK—They're innovative, creative, savvy and willing to take risks, and they make up nearly two-thirds of the industry. They are the independent opticians, ODs and retailers who are carving out their space within optical despite the industry's tumultuous landscape.

They face many challenges such as competition from online retailers, big box and chain businesses as well as the issues that present themselves when navigating managed care. Yet, independent optical businesses (three locations or less) remain a vital presence in the market representing 61 percent of all U.S. optical revenues, comprising \$18.2 billion, according to GeoMetrics by Jobson Optical Research.

Earlier this year *Vision Monday* presented Optical

on Main Street in which we identified a trend showing a consumer shift in "shopping small." In this first segment, we not only introduced this trend, we gave an overall view of what's bringing consumers back to Main Street, and touched upon the qualities that it takes for the independent optical to succeed on Main Street today.

We spoke to sources such as American Express, the National Federation for Independent Business and retail experts like Unity Marketing. We also talked about "local" with a range of optical retailers and ECPs and found that consumers are seeking not only value in their purchases, but a personalized touch from business owners in both the fashion and medical realms of optical.

Tackling this topic again, we're going to take you inside the independent to detail their strategies,

tips and advice about "Living La Vida Local." We've highlighted this business trend and spoke with a diverse group of optical retailers and ECPs who are capitalizing on "shop small" as it helps them renew their passions and keep them swimming in the changing tides of the industry.

In talking about what it takes to thrive as a "local" business, we found that while one of the disadvantages for small business is not having the "big box budget," these business owners are finding workarounds—by connecting with their communities, providing unparalleled customer service, taking risks and showcasing unique products to set themselves apart from the pack. And consumers are taking notice of the unique quality presented only in the indie experience.

In addition to the rise of ECP alliances and prac-

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tice management groups to help many independents find ways to adapt and compete in the market, there are a variety of community-centric organizations being utilized to also allow the independent to compete in this new market atmosphere.

From events urging consumers to shop locally that continue to grow, such as American Express' Small Business Saturday (www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/shop-small/), to the formation of Independent Retailer Month (www.indieretailermonth.com/) and organizations such as Local First (www.localfirst.com/), there are a wide variety of tools that work in favor of and are sure to strengthen the independent's foothold in optical.

It Takes A Village

It would seem that the lure of the independent lies within the community itself. When rising above the chatter of online retailer players as well as the retail "Goliaths," the "shop local" movement that small businesses gravitate toward is being given new momentum through community support.

According to American Express Small Business Saturday spokesperson, Nicole Leinbach-Reyhles, "Shopping small is a force that has been steadily growing in recent years. While customers enjoy the discounts they get at big box retailers, many are appreciating the value that shopping local brings to the community," she said. "Since we started pre- and post-Small Business Saturday polling in 2012, we have seen a steady growth in customers who are planning to go to one or more small businesses as part of their holiday shopping (68 percent in 2012, 77 percent in 2015)."

Tom Shay, co-founder of July's Independent Retailer Month, (see sidebar on page 56) which was officially founded in 2011 from a "desire to salute independent retailers around the globe," understands the importance of a collective community voice when it comes to supporting the independent. It ultimately boils down to the connection and joint realization between both retailers and the consumers of the benefits that "shop small" possess.

"Independent Retailer Month only grows by our



Andrew Bruce
Watters Vision Care, Inc.



individual and collective efforts," Shay said. "We don't want people to consider an independent from a perspective of it being their responsibility of keeping the independent in business. Instead it is because of the advantages the independent retailer has for the community."

He continued, "We know it is important for people in a community to know how they can affect their community in a positive manner. Just shopping with an independent, as compared to a chain, box store or mass merchant, puts more people to work and more tax dollars to work when you compare the sizes of the stores."

For Elle Tatum, owner of Elle's Island Spectacle located in Bainbridge Island, Wash., her community offers many networking opportunities where she can utilize connections to help further her business.

"I believe there is an American tendency to want to support their community and its small businesses," Tatum said. "I think that with the chaos of the nation and world-at-large, people are finding comfort and meaning in developing the richness of their own small communities, it is something we feel we can have an impact on and also reap the rewards of strong community ties."

She continued, "Lucky for me, this Island community offers many networking opportunities, including Bainbridge Business Women and our local Chamber of Commerce," Tatum said. "I try to utilize these connections with cross-marketing, social media and I attend as many networking gatherings as possible. Also word of mouth is big for Island Spectacle. The eyewear we offer is so distinctive that every client wearing one of our frames is a walking advertisement, and they report that 'the conversation' always comes up."

Susan Halstead, owner and optician at Family Vision Care Center in Saratoga Springs, New York also gets involved within her community to better strengthen her small business.

"I have long subscribed to the theory that people like to go to who they know," she said. "I have served as chamber chair, treasurer of our local nursing homes and assisted living community along with the Hospital Fundraising arm of The Flower and Fruit Association."

"I volunteer at our local library and speak to many parent groups about the importance of annual eye examinations. I am chair of the Health and Wellness Council for our county. I write articles

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twice a month for our local weekly newspaper. We participate in InfantSee, and our office is very family friendly,” Halstead said.

Quality Over Quantity

A quality product is one of the ways in which these small businesses are appealing to the resurgence of the “shop local” movement, and optical is no different.

Barry Santini, co-owner and optician at Long Island Opticians in Seaford, N.Y. understands that independents can feel that the “current, mass market branded and licensed products will increasingly be distributed direct and online.” Therefore he believes that the advantage independents can take control of lies in quality.

“The silver lining for ‘indies’ will be moving toward featuring more specialty and artisanal products with deeper, product-centric stories and superior quality,” Santini said.

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Elle Tatum Elle's Island Spectacle

Independent Retailer Month Helps Support ‘Shop Local’

For independent businesses there are many tools to create awareness and events that support the “shop small” movement and like Small Business Saturday, Independent Retailer Month (IRM) is one of those events.

The event, which designates July as the month to celebrate independent retailers across the country, does this through a range of online and in-store community events and promotions. Through these events, consumers are encouraged to support the “shop local” trend and the positive social and economic impact is often highlighted.

The objectives of IRM are to engage independent retailer associations, connect consumers with the local businesses and impact community growth.

The event was co-founded by Tom Shay (the retailer) and Kerry Bannigan (the marketer) after



www.indieretailermonth.com

both created events celebrating the independent and decided to combine them in July 2011 to form Independent Retailer Month USA.

Shay said, “After signing up your business on the website, talk to your Chamber of Commerce, merchants association, main street program and any group you belong to that promotes retailing. Tell them you want your group to get involved. IRM grows only by our individual and collective efforts.”

When businesses join IRM, their stores will be included on the organizations “shop local map” encouraging consumers in the area to shop with them. Resources such as logos, promotional postcards, in-store signage and marketing tools are also available.

To get involved, small business owners can visit their website at indieretailermonth.com. ■

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Andrew Bruce of Watters Vision Care, Inc. in Battle Ground, Wash. also understands the shift in importance of quality over quantity when it comes to the consumer. “I believe that there will always be those patients who choose to go to the low-priced mass merchant. However, there is a large percentage of the population that appreciates and recognizes the difference they receive from a private practice, in terms of product quality and patient care. This demographic, even if they have tried a mass merchant once, are returning to the independent private practice.

Halstead can attest to this when it comes to her office. “We like to carry unique frame lines that are not available in the big box or retail chain stores,” she said. “We are also huge advocates of ortho-k for myopia control, especially for our young myopes.”

Specs Appeal Is a Big Deal

When it comes to the independent, appearance and ability to be visually appealing and intriguing makes a difference to the returning and potential consumer. The willingness to sometimes reinvent or take risks is an integral part of navigating the

constantly changing landscape.

Bill Gerber, co-founder of Optical Marketing Group (OMG) is in the business of doing just that, providing practice redesigns, makeovers, personalized signage, window and wall graphics as well as eyewear displays and shelving to help boost customers appeal.

“The cookie cutter, frameboard-centric approach to practice design is quickly becoming a relic,” Gerber said. “I am hopeful that we are turning a corner in elevating the optical retail experience to its rightful place.”

He continued, “I believe the main reason ECPs and opticians are engaging our design services is because they are seeking to differentiate themselves by providing a highly personalized and engaging customer experience. The only way to do that is through amazing service combined with a personalized, modern space.”

Jeffrey Luther, OD, at 20 Twenty Optical and Eye Care in Loveland, Colo. enlisted the help of Gerber for his office location remodel. Luther’s practice is located in a business condo building which holds multiple businesses, most of which are medical, and was seeking a modern and clean look to appeal to his patient base.



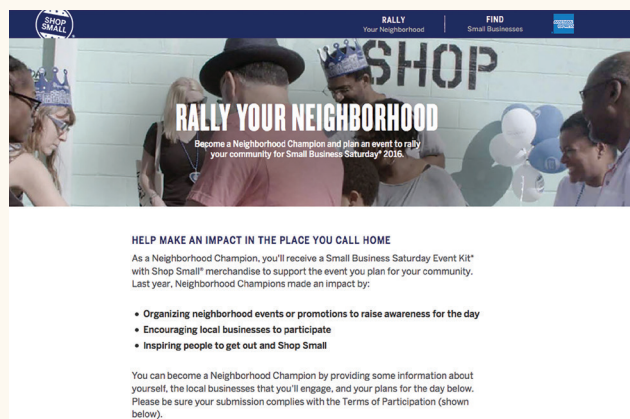
Jeffrey Luther, OD
20 Twenty Optical and Eye Care

“I was looking to have an optical that was reminiscent of shopping in an Apple store. It also feels like an art studio with the large high quality acrylic photos on the walls. Patients always make positive comments to us about the remodel.” ■

Championing the Independent

American Express’ Small Business Saturday was launched on Nov. 27, 2010 to encourage consumers across the country to support small, local businesses. In its sixth year, the event has continued to gain momentum.

A big part of the Small Business Saturday is gaining participation from what they call “Neighborhood Champions.” These “Neighborhood Champions” are local businesses and small business organizations that host events to rally the community together



and promote shopping small to celebrate the Small Business Saturday event.

A part of this includes the “Neighborhood Champions” submitting ideas to American Express regarding what they would like to do for an event in their community. In return, Amex sends them “Shop Small” marketing materials and other advertising tools to help get the message out.

Registration is now open on www.AmericanExpress.com for this year’s fall event. ■

Independents Appeal to the Millennial's Individuality

The Independent It Factor

The Eyeglass Lass

New London, Connecticut

For Siobhán Burns, running an independent optical business wasn't about testing the waters—she just jumped in, and that's the advice she would give to anyone looking to do the same. "If you want to do something, there is only one way to find out if it is going to work; throw yourself into it. It's scary, don't get me wrong, but it's so worth it to accomplish something and have it be how you want it to be."

So, when it comes to the changing optical landscape, Burns believes that independent businesses are now an "it" thing especially playing a huge factor among Millennials. She explained that as trends lean toward the individual and self-expression, people are finding new ways to get the look they want with clothing, hair and accessories. They're now able to justify the expense of things that are better made and better looking, she said.

"Where I have my store and home (I live within walking distance), there is such a great 'support local' movement," Burns said. "On my walk home, I can go to a local theater, get a bite to eat and a drink, get groceries, a haircut, you name it! It is so refreshing, and along the way you are making connections with other locals who are equally invested in the community. While there are still big box stores, I think that retail will see an increase in support of independent business."

Some of the frames that are carried in The Eyeglass Lass include Andy Wolf, Etnia Barcelona, I-Green, I.a. Eyeworks, Lafont, Converse-Jack Purcell, Lucky Brand, Outspoken, Ray-Ban, RVS, SLR and Theo.

The boutique, located in New London, Conn., opened in June 2014 and carries a fun, comfortable and disarming vibe where customers don't feel like they're going into a typical store when they walk in.

"I am always shocked by how many people I



An exterior view of The Eyeglass Lass which opened its doors in June 2014 and is located in New London, Connecticut. Siobhan Burns, owner of the Eyeglass Lass believes that to run an indie business means being willing to take risks.



meet that have or had major anxiety about eyewear shopping," she said. "I want someone to come in and relax, chat, check out the decor, and then all of a sudden realize we found them the perfect frame along the way. The shop has everything from vintage luggage and kewpie dolls to a pinball machine and an 'eyeball wall' mural, so it really seems to appeal to anyone coming in."

For Burns, the "it" factor that the independent has over larger retailers is that they don't have to do things one way and can therefore cater to their specific environment and demographic.

"This is essential and an absolute must in order to compete with companies that can shell out money for major advertising and branding," she said. "By highlighting that we are unique, fantastic, and independent companies in our clients backyards, we are inviting people to get the quality and individual services that they deserve, as well as products they won't find elsewhere. It's our time to shine."

An Expertly Curated Customer Experience Is Key

Ethics, Service and Expertise

10/10 Optics

New York, New York

When you think of Madison Avenue, Main Street might not be the first thing that comes to mind. However, you can still be in the big city and “think small” especially when it comes to a specialized customer experience and expertise.

When you step inside 10/10 Optics on 50 Madison Avenue in New York City, you feel like you’ve walked into a living room environment, a home that is cozy and welcoming. The boutique design features wood, carpets and beautiful lighting. “A customer walks in and feels invited to relax and hang out,” Ruth Domber, 10/10 Optics’ eyewear fashion expert said.

Aside from a welcoming atmosphere, 10/10 Optics operates on the philosophy of “Ethics, Service and Expertise.”

“I think control is really what defines a top notch retail location whether it’s small or large,” Domber said. “Some of the larger companies have more money for marketing and promotion, so it’s a really beautiful face that they put on but when the face doesn’t match the expected experience, that’s when customers start looking elsewhere.”

So, while Domber believes marketing power is the only disadvantage to smaller businesses, independents have to appeal in a different way by delivering an excellent experience that is going to be repeated.

Always thinking of ways to generate a superior experience, 10/10 Optics pioneered the concept of “counter eyewear” back in 1979 which included more of a restaurant bar set-up of the eyewear in front of the individual by the experts who are trained in aesthetics.

“The experience is meant to be enjoyed. Like come and sit down and have us serve you with



Ruth Domber, 10/10 Optics’ fashion eyewear expert is all about creating an impeccably curated eyewear experience based on service and expertise for each customer. The interior of 10/10 Optics on Madison Avenue in New York City exudes a high-quality cozy, relaxing atmosphere.



an excellent eyewear experience,” Domber said.

10/10 Optics goes above what is expected when it comes to what one usually thinks of when choosing frames. On their website, individuals have the option of booking their own eyewear makeover appointment. Face proportions, features, angles, skin tone, prescription and smile are all things that are taken into consideration when sitting down with Domber.

Some of the collections that are carried at 10/10 Optics include Gold & Wood, Thierry Lasry, Bird & Cage, DeLoor, Orgreen, Hoffmann Natural Horn, Blake Kuwahara, Pro Design, Theo, Bevel, Barton

Perreira, Feb 31st, Markus T, Woow, Anne et Valentin, Lucas de Stael, Maui Jim and Specs of Wood.

“Nothing takes the place of a satisfied person walking out your door, spreading the word,” she said. With that being said, knowing the customer and demographic is equally as important. 10/10 Optics specializes in luxury eyewear and Ruth knows that her “store is not for everyone. You have to have a certain amount of money or be willing to spend a certain amount on your eyewear. I’m not interested in everyone.

“I’m not about the glasses. I’m about your experience, and the glasses are how we serve it up.”

Making Your Business an Extension of Yourself

Be Inventive and Creative
One Hip Chic Optical, Inc.
Rochester, New York

When describing the atmosphere of One Hip Chic Optical, Inc., owner Tamra Asmuth feels her location exudes a soothing vibe for her customers. The Rochester, New York boutique is located on the second floor of a turn of the century brick building. Views of trees can be seen from the windows of the spacious, minimally decorated interior of Asmuth's optical location. The frame selection that she carries are shown in drawers that are lined with handmade papers.

"I'm an art appreciator so working with beautifully creative frames makes me happy. I like to think of my boutique as an art gallery for eyewear, and I'm the lucky curator," she said.

Asmuth who opened up One Hip Chic Optical 19 years ago and has been in the optical industry for 35 years believes that independent optical business are setting themselves apart by providing goods and services that their competitors don't. For her, that means providing unique frames from small boutique eyewear companies as well as selling high quality lenses and caring deeply for her customers. Some of the frames that Asmuth carries are Anne et Valentin, Theo and Bevel.

Her personal philosophy as an independent retailer is that her business is an extension of herself.

"I enjoy the meaningful relationships that often develop—the everyday hugs, my birthday calls. It's that personal touch that helps establish loyalty in customers. What's especially wonderful is that it enriches my life too," she said.

While the personal touch is enriching, Asmuth noted that running a thriving business is not for the faint of heart. "It takes courage, drive, perseverance, a clear vision of what your goal is and a solid focus to achieve it. Having a unique style is what it takes to stand out. Being inventive, unencumbered and creative is imperative," she continued.



As for advice she'd give to those just starting out, it's all about having a solid business plan.

"With thoughtful consideration a business owner should concretize the reason their business will exist, identify the story they'll tell the world through their business and establish just how they'll accomplish this. Staying true to the story without deviation is imperative. That's how a brand is created. That's how a successful business is born."

(Clockwise from top) Tamra Asmuth has been in the industry for 35 years and opened One Hip Chic 19 years ago. While her collections are shown in drawers, some are displayed sitting on shelves made of books. An exterior shot of One Hip Chic Optical is located in a turn of the century building in Rochester, N.Y.

Better Branding Helps to Transition From the Traditional

Big 10 of Branding BuckEYEcure Northfield Center, Ohio

Bob Woodruff, OD, has been in practice for over 35 years and has embraced many changes within the optical industry in his search to stay relevant as well as strive for current trends from the marketing side. He believes that independents need to brand themselves in a way that is completely different from their big-box competitors in order to stand out.

“The ‘other side’ has the perceived allure of cost and marketing, accurate or not. We cannot and will not compete with that. We offer solutions customized to our patient’s needs and lifestyles at reasonable fees and we approach them as individuals, not as a number. This helps generate word of mouth referrals which is still a strong referral source,” he said.

BuckEYEcure is located in a small medical complex on the main street through town and has reduced visibility from the street. However, they have fun with the name and theme of the office which plays on the favorite college football team in the state.

Woodruff worked with Bill Gerber’s Optical Marketing Group (OMG) to devise a unique and local connection and look to his office space. The office features a scarlet and gray color palette throughout with custom lockers in the frame area, the school logo and a front counter that features footballs in a cage.

“We also have the ‘Big Ten’ of frames. We’ve transitioned from the traditional ‘doctor’s office’ to one that is bright, simple and open. We have no reception area but have scattered seating encouraging people to browse through the optical.”

Along with this theme that appeals to the community, Dr. Woodruff supports and participates with many community and school groups and is active in service organizations and churches. “I love being



Bob Woodruff, OD, and owner of BuckEYEcure has been in practice for over 35 years and believes that branding helps differentiate the indie from its competitors. The ‘Big 10 of Frames’ plays off of the football conference that the community’s favorite team competes in. The interior of BuckEYEcure is an ode to the Ohio State Buckeyes football team, further connecting Dr. Woodruff’s practice to an integral part of the community

in the community, not just drawing from it.”

Additionally, they monitor which insurance plans are popular locally and try to participate with them to get people in the door.

“We have one of the leading ophthalmologists in Cleveland in our office monthly for cataract and lasik consultation,” Woodruff said. “I maintain cut-

ting edge technology to provide comprehensive care. Patients recognize and comment on that. I have exceptional staff who are well trained and great with people. And I believe we exist to serve people and that if we truly take care of them the business will thrive. Optometry can be fun and rewarding. It is for me.” ■