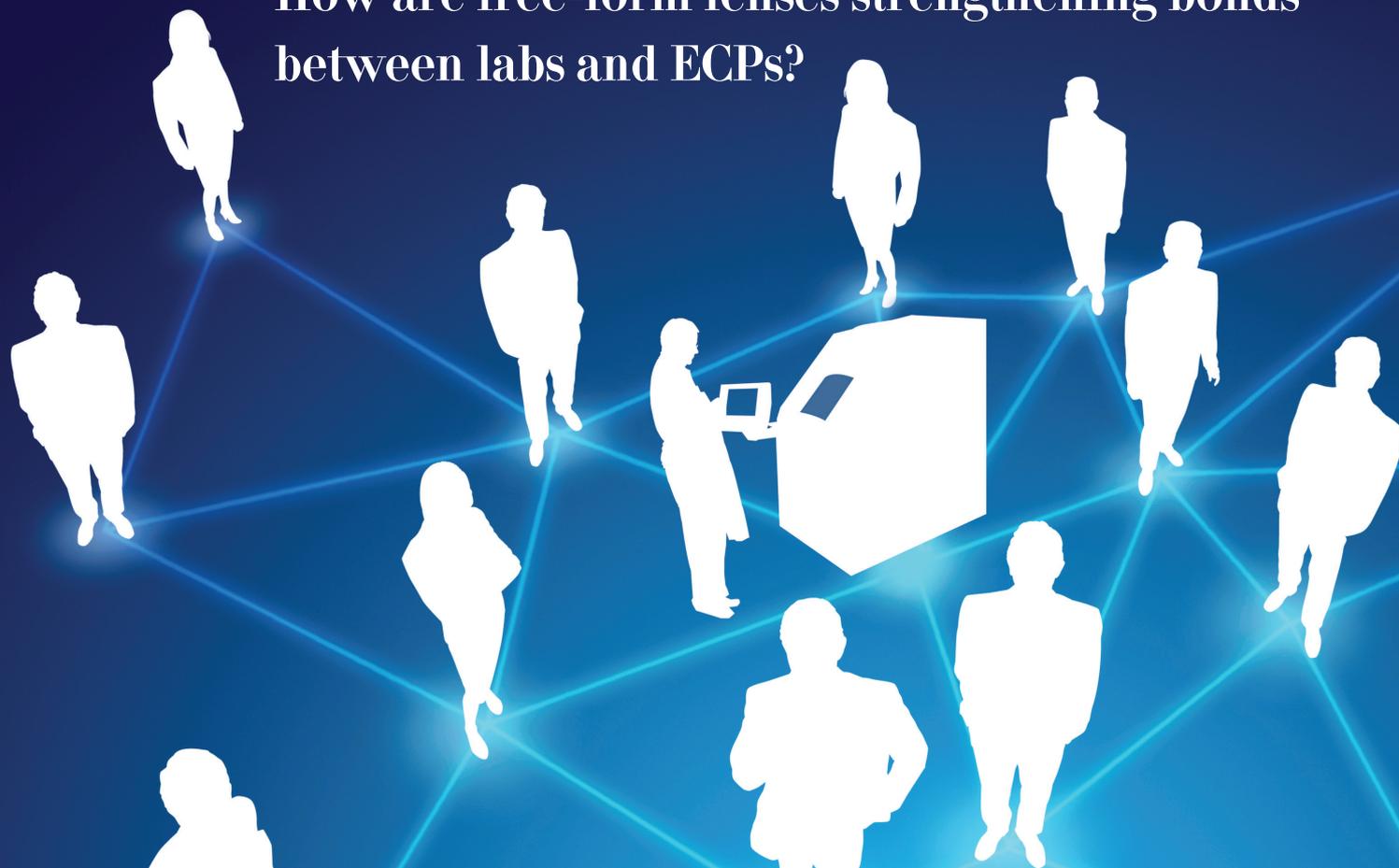


Making the Digital Connection

How are free-form lenses strengthening bonds between labs and ECPs?



BY ANDREW KARP / GROUP EDITOR, LENSES + TECHNOLOGY

NEW YORK—The movement of digital lenses from margin to mainstream over the past few years is a uniquely optical success story. The result of innovative lens design and cutting edge manufacturing technology, digital progressive addition lenses first emerged in Europe and Asia in the late '90s, with Seiko, Zeiss and Rodenstock leading the way. Eyecare professionals soon found that many of their presbyopic patients were willing to pay a premium for digital lenses in exchange for clearer vision and greater visual freedom.

Since the mid-2000s, Hoya, Essilor, Shamir, Zeiss, Seiko and other suppliers have expended considerable resources introducing their digital

lens designs and free-form manufacturing technologies into the U.S. market. Thanks to their efforts and those of their wholesale lab partners, optometrists and opticians here no longer view digital lenses as exotic. Today, they commonly prescribe and dispense a wide assortment of products, from entry-level designs to optimized and personalized designs.

Practitioners say they are embracing digital lenses because they allow them to deliver a higher level of patient care and because the lenses are profitable. Many report that digital lenses now account for the majority of their progressive lens sales in both units and dollars. The

recent introduction of digital single vision lenses is further expanding the market to the next generation of patients.

As ECPs increasingly integrate digital lenses into their practices, they rely more heavily on their surfacing lab, which now functions as both a distributor and manufacturer. The lab's sales rep, often working closely with the manufacturer's sales rep, must educate the practitioners and their staff about the performance characteristics of digital lenses, including the differences between the dozens of competing brands and lens designs. The lab must also teach the staff about the differ-

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Demystifying Digital: Tri-Supreme Optical

LAB: TRI-SUPREME OPTICAL

FARMINGDALE, N.Y.

MARK COHEN, DIRECTOR OF TRAINING



“As more new lens products come out, the ECP has had a hard time keeping track of all of them. They get very dependent on their lab. When you add digital, it gets even more confusing. They see articles about digital lenses all over the place and they want to learn more. That’s when they make the phone call to their lab.

“We’ve been doing digital for about a year now. We’ve educated the ECPs about why digital is the way to go. They want to know, ‘Why should I dispense it,’ ‘Why is better?’ ‘How do I fit it?’ ‘What’s different about it?’ We’ve created special training materials, including a PowerPoint presentation called ‘Demystifying Digital for the ECP’ that seems to be working very well.

“Taking digital Rx orders has been a challenge. Some of the accounts just don’t understand a particular digital lens. They say, ‘We want XYZ product, and when we tell them, ‘We need XYZ measurements,’ there’s silence on

the other end. Educating our accounts about personalized lenses is also somewhat of a challenge. I created a tool for our customer service and data entry staff where we took all our digital lenses, and made a chart to show them what the specs are for different lenses.

“We sell mostly progressives and some single vision, both Essilor and Shamir lenses. All the patient’s Rx information goes to either France or Israel for calculation. Sometimes a job gets kicked back. We have to be very conscious of what will work and what won’t, especially if the account has a \$1,000 sale in their hand. That’s why we have a lot of experienced customer service people to smooth things out, if necessary.”

Customer Comment:

MARTIN LEVINE

Optician for Raymond Helfand, OD
Staten Island, N.Y.



than fax them in or send them electronically. The customer service people at TriSupreme are great, and they are very knowledgeable. In addition to taking my order, they advise me when there’s a difficult Rx, and they also educate me about the latest lenses. That’s very important because there are always new lenses coming out. They get the latest

“The amount of information we have to exchange with the lab has increased. Because of the additional details such as patient measurements, the need for accuracy is higher. I prefer to call in my Rx orders rather

information from the lens manufacturers before we even get it.”

“I use a lot of Varilux Comfort Drx, also Shamir Autograph II. We also use digital single vision lenses, primarily on wrap frames. They deliver ‘crisp’ vision, especially for patients with a smaller PD and a large frame where you would normally get distortion at the lateral. Those patients are now seeing better with digital single vision lenses.”

Customer Comment:

WAYNE GOLDBERG, OD

Private practitioner in Rockville Centre, N.Y.



“TriSupreme hosted a seminar about digital. That was the catalyst in getting me started with it.”

“Now I tell everybody you can have your lenses one or two ways: conventional or digital. The first is a manufacturer making

curves on a machine vs. a computer guiding lasers to make digital lenses, which results in less peripheral distortion and more reading area. We don’t want them to leave here and think we haven’t exposed them to it.

“Awareness of digital technology is high among patients. Television forced the issue. Everyone under 40 is using an iPad, iPhone or other digital device. They get it. More than 50 percent of my progressive lens patients are now in digital lenses. The way technology is changing, I predict that in a few years digital will be the only way lenses will be made.”

More →



Private Label, An Affordable Alternative: Balester Optical

LAB: BALESTER OPTICAL
WILKES-BARRE, PA.

DALE PARMENTERI, VICE PRESIDENT/PARTNER



ments. All three measurements are required for Varilux Physio Enhanced Eyecode, which is a dual-sided digital progressive.

“Backside progressives like Autograph II, Varilux DRx and our Balester Advanced don’t require these extra measurements, and most ECPs don’t supply them. These lenses use default measurements which are based on averages.

“There is extra handling on the information systems side of our business, though. The lens companies keep releasing new styles, and we have to get the digital files. Often we’re getting a prescription in and don’t have the files.”

“Anxiety at the ECP level over how to dispense digital lenses is increasing their reliance on their lab. That’s why there’s more hand holding going on now. A lot of accounts are having a hard time understanding digital. We just produced an ad flyer (pictured top right) for our new private label Balester Advanced lens that explains some digital basics, like the difference between a compensated power and a conventional lens.

“Private label is opening up our customers’ eyes, because they realize they can actually buy digital at an affordable price. We tell our accounts to start offering digital single vision to younger patients. Private label allows you to get digital single vision into a practice at an affordable cost.

“As far as customer service, digital is just like another job. We did have to change our order forms to add vertex, pantoscopic tilt and ERC (Eye Rotation Center), which tracks eye move-

BALESTER ADVANCED™ — an in-house digital lens from Balester.
When Performance and Price are most important and Brand is of less concern!

A **BALESTER ADVANCED™** design lens with User Power optimization recalculates the design for the user’s eye movement

\$10 OFF any Critical Brand AR when equipped to any Balester digital progressive lens design

Compensated vs. Conventional

Viewing through the Optical Center of a Conventional Lens Errors in a Conventional Lens The Effects of Compensated Power

Power Ranges – Different Materials

Materials	All Progressives	Single Vision	Wrap Compensated SV	Office Reader
	All Corridors	Aspheric SV	4.00-8.00 Base Only	Office lens
1.5	+9.00 to -8.50	+9.00 to -12.00	+7.00 to -6.00	+5.00 to -6.00
Trivex	+8.00 to -8.50	+8.00 to -10.00	+7.00 to -6.00	
Mid-Index	+9.00 to -9.00	+9.00 to -12.00	+7.00 to -6.00	
Poly	+9.00 to -8.50	+9.00 to -14.00	+7.00 to -6.00	+7.00 to -9.00
1.6	+9.00 to -10.00	+9.00 to -14.00	+7.00 to -6.00	+8.00 to -6.00
1.67	+12.00 to -11.00	+12.00 to -16.00	+7.00 to -6.00	
1.74	+12.00 to -12.00	+12.00 to -20.00	+7.00 to -6.00	

These ranges are general guidelines. These ranges represent combined power limits. Cylinders -12 to -5.00 all products. Adds are currently available from +1.00 to +3.50. Ranges include all Polarized, Transitions and Photochromics. Wrap capability only available on Base Curves 4 through 8.

An ad flyer for the new private label Balester Advanced lens explains some digital basics.

Customer Comment:

DON MANNING

Owner, Design for Vision, a group of four independent retail stores with in-house optometrists in Bucks County, Pa.



“Overall we’ve had great success with digital lenses. Fifteen percent of all the lenses we dispense are digital. My dispensers have an average of 15 years of experience, so we come well prepared. We educate the patients so they expect a lens that will help them see better.

“The Visioffice [dispensing system from Essilor] is fantastic. It takes a while to trust that, because we’ve seen that the measurements it takes vary from what we get with a pupillometer. We take the printout from Visioffice and parlay that to the lab.

“What is a bit confusing is if someone with a compensated Rx goes to an outside source for verification. It’s a little bit of a grey area. We try to explain the compensated Rx to the patient, but that can be difficult.”

The Personal Touch: U.S. Optical

LAB: U.S. OPTICAL
EAST SYRACUSE, N.Y.
RON COTRAN, VICE PRESIDENT



“Digital lenses mean more personalization for the customer. We can even make it more personal because we can put the patient’s initials on the lens because we’re already engraving the reference markings, like with Zeiss Individual. You can even add the retailer’s name. It’s a branding opportunity.”

“Our invoice work ticket has both a prescribed prescription and compensated prescription on it. Let’s say you order minus 2 sphere. The actual compensated Rx could be 1.92 with a 12 cylinder or a quarter cylinder, or frame tilt. If an optician reads it he’ll say it’s off axis, or it should be a sphere. It can still be confusing for some people. When we have someone who is just starting to use a compensated Rx, we train them how to work with it.”

“Another area we feel our relationships with customers has become closer is single vision free-form. There’s a lot of money that’s being left on the table with younger people, those who are under 45 years-old. Many of them have iPhones or iPads. They’re into digital technology, so why not offer them single vision free-form digital lenses that are more precise, especially on stronger prescriptions? A practice could easily increase sales by \$150,000 a year and only increase its cost by \$15 to \$20 a pair. We’ve

introduced Shamir Autograph single vision and Shamir Attitude for wraps, Zeiss Individual single vision and Zeiss 3D, and Seiko Super MV single vision 1.67 aspheric.

“Single vision free-form is also great for wraps. We have an Mei System edger. Coupled with the wrap compensation you get in free-form, it produces a beautiful sunglass lens. You’re able to control edge thickness and other parameters, so you can do a lot of 6- and 8-base wrap lenses you couldn’t even do two years ago for sunglasses.”

Customer Comment:

MIKKI FREIDKIN

Optician and co-owner, with William McConarty OD, Village Eye Center, which operates two locations in Maryland and one in northern Virginia.



“When we started working with free-form, we found it to be an independent’s dream because of the personalized service and amount of care we put into each patient.

Because of how technical these lenses are we had to change a lot of the way we look at a typical progressive. It used to be you didn’t have too much control over the end quality result, but now we have enormous control. Patients are satisfied with the results. They say, ‘I’ve never had vision like this.’

“With the compensated Rx, you have to take a leap of faith in people who are making the lens for you. Our lab, U.S. Optical, is a true partner and has the same concern for each individual patient. They are there at a moment’s notice to problem solve, if necessary.”

“Although we got hit with the recession, our numbers continue to grow. We are probably dispensing 99 percent of our progressive in free-form. I base this growth entirely on the fact that we’ve embraced this new technology.”

Customer Comment:

MAGGIE SAYERS

Master optician and development coach at Treasure Coast Eye Associates, a Vero Beach, Fla. practice owned by Brice Roselli, OD.



“Digital and free-form have helped opticianry move into the twenty-first century. We can explain the technology to our patients, and fill their needs for high definition vision and comfort. It gives opticians an opportunity to set ourselves apart and be leaders.”

“Our U.S. Optical rep does a tremendous job of educating us about digital lenses and free-form surfacing and explains how to talk to our patients about the lenses confidently and authentically. U.S. Optical’s website also has an online tour of the lab, which I use for my CE education courses.”

“I use a distometer to measure vertex distance and another tool to measure pantoscopic tilt. Then we generate a detailed printout, which I ship to the lab, along with frame. There is no phone communication with the lab. I always rely on the lab if I need to have something particular, like a certain edge thickness in a particular mount. I call it in and they can just key it into the computer and find out what the thinnest edge is or what the finished job is going to look like. The lab and I support each other to bring everything together for the patient. The teamwork approach is wonderful.”

More →

Creating Pull-Through: Homer Optical

LAB: HOMER OPTICAL
SILVER SPRING, MD.

DON BARTON, SALES MANAGER



“We started producing digital lenses last fall, and ramped it up in 2011. We felt there was a lot of confusion about digital among our customers, not just in terms of the benefit to patients, but for what it can do for the doctor’s practice as well. So we brought in experts such as Mark Cohen of TriSupreme, and Pete Hanlin and Tara Cook of Essilor to educate our sales team so we could take it out to our customers and work with them one on one. We use the ‘Demystifying Digital Lenses’ program that Mark developed. It not only explains what digital lenses are but explains how they are different from one another, such as Essilor’s Drx platform versus their Dual Optics platform.

“VSP was a big driver for educating the ECPs about digital lenses, when changes were made to their compensation. Previously, there was no real incentive for ECPs to use the highest end progressives. Now with the restructuring in 2011, there’s an incentive for ECPs to use the highest categories of lenses because they provide the highest compensation. For doctors who are VSP members,

if they stayed with [Varilux] Comfort lenses or that category of lens, the compensation changed to negative for the ECP. That really made it a topic of conversation with our company, and the solution was to educate practices.

“We’ve also developed a Retail Price Calculator tool to show the doctors where they were in 2010 with VSP, and what changes needed to be made for 2011. We felt we needed to have proper pull-through to implement it. All of our sales consultants give the ECPs a financial analysis once a month that shows them where they are specifically with progressives and their digital mix, and compares to where our labs are in terms of digital lens penetration. It also helps them know how to mark up the lenses properly, retail-wise.”

Customer Comment:

PAUL RYAN, OD

Owner, Dr. Specs Optical in Audubon, Pa.



“We started dispensing digital lenses a little over a year ago. Nine out of 10 patients who wear progressives get Varilux Physio Enhanced, unless they’re insurance-based. Since we got the [Essilor] Visiooffice in May, we’ve been getting into more personalized digital progressives and have a good response, despite the price increase. We’re using it for more specialized prescriptions, such as a higher power or astigmatism.

“The difference with digital lenses is that they give a wider field of view. There’s less distortion, less pointing and shooting with the nose and more scanning ability.

“My practice is a younger practice with a lot of emerging presbyopes and younger families. My patients say it’s great. I don’t think we’ve had any non-adapts so far. Digital sells itself.

“We offer digital lenses at three different price points that reflect the different levels of personalization. We start with a Physio Enhanced for about \$300 to \$450 for a Physio Enhanced Eye-code (including eye rotation measurement) to \$600 for Varilux Ipseo (including eye and head movement tracking).”

Customer Comment:

BARBARA HUGHES

Optician, Physicians Eyecare Center, which operates three locations in Maryland.



“Every progressive we dispense is digital. We just do Varilux. We also do single vision free-form.

“Our office uses the new Visiooffice office machine that takes measurements. It really makes a big difference as far as fitting. We measure seg heights, pupil distance and how they hold their heads. We put the frame into a special holder. The computer reads the markings on it. Then all the data is put into a calculation program that we print out and send to Homer by courier, along with the frame. Eventually we’ll be able to send it to the lab electronically. We have very few redos.

“Homer has a good rep who educates us on anything that’s new and what we need to know to do our job better. They come in on a regular basis and bring us information packets. I consider them a partner, as well as the lens manufacturer’s reps.”

Tailoring the Product Mix: Hoya Vision Care

LAB: HOYA VISION CARE

SAN DIEGO

LISA LINGARD, SALES MANAGER



“When I started introducing free-form to our accounts a few years ago, the average optician would retreat a bit. The word free-form was thrown around loosely. Accounts knew it was a better process, but didn’t understand why or how. Initially they were intimidated and fearful of discussing it with patients. But lately we’ve noticed they are making the transition from being afraid of free-form technology to wanting to become educated about it. That makes our role as reps even more important. We’re demystifying the technology, giving them tools to make it simpler for them to dispense the lenses to patients.

“We have a very good library of training materials available to our sales team. We can offer our accounts a ‘lunch and learn’ with our education director, Brad Main and his team. We have PowerPoints and single sheet leave-behinds they can stick on the lab wall, plus we have a webinar and the Professor Murray website, too.

“When the free-form revolution started, we had a much smaller product offering. But now Hoya

has an entire family of free-form lenses, including single vision, flattop 28, entry level free-form and a highly personalized lens, iD MyStyle. Because availability has increased, we can customize our product offering for our customers.”

Customer Comment:

JOE SENALL, OD

Simon Eye Associates, an optometric practice with six offices located throughout Delaware.



“There was a time before all this technology emerged when private practices were moving toward getting the least expensive progressives they could. But digital has changed that.

“We use Hoya’s most advanced free-form. It features a double integrated surface design. You can’t just go buy a box of them, throw them in the back of your finishing lab and cut them down. They’re personalized.

“We have a real partnership with Hoya. Their local rep is like part of our team. They teach our opticians. There’s a learning curve for opticians. They require more training because they need to take a lifestyle history and patient measurements. We’ve even travelled up to the Hoya lab in Hartford, Conn. and met the lab people face to face. There’s a payoff for us. We’re independent, and there’s a lot of competition from chains and big box stores. Because of the type of lenses we offer, we’re developing a more loyal patient base. The patients become promoters of our practice. For

the first time, we’re actually getting patients because we can get Hoya lenses. That never happened five years ago.”

Customer Comment:

THOMAS A. LUCAS, JR., OD

First Eye Care Killeen, Killeen, Texas.



“I graduated optometry school five years ago. One of my goals is to always differentiate my optical from commercial entities, and free-form and digital lenses is obviously one way to do that. That creates a need to develop a good relationship with your lab. Distribution of digital products is limited, so getting that relationship with a lab you trust and has the capability to do these things is crucial.

“When I first started in practice we used a lot of molded lenses. Now I’m spending more time with our lab [Hoya Dallas], talking through jobs. Not a day goes by when I don’t talk to the lab. I have a lot of respect for them. We’re assigned a special customer service person, and we can have access to them 24/7.

“We only offer three digital lenses: Hoya iD Lifestyle, inStyle and MyStyle. About 70 percent of our progressive lens wearers are wearing Lifestyle. Patient satisfaction is high.

“We take Hoya’s marketing and extend that in our practice. We actually try to brand Hoya product in our practice. The doctors talk to the patients about Hoya products. It’s doctor driven.” ■

Creating Cost Effective Options: Classic Optical

LAB: CLASSIC OPTICAL

DAWN FRIEDKIN,
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER



“We’ve been running digital surfacing for two years. It’s added a whole other level to our industry. The advent of digital surfacing is a real game changer. It’s shifted the responsibility from the lens manufacturers to the labs.

“Private label digital lenses are where we’re going to see lot of power. We’re planning to launch ours this fall. It’s called Classic HD and we’ll offer it at three levels: basic, advanced, ultimate. It will complement the other digital PALs we offer. We welcome this as an opportunity to give our long-time customer base this new revolutionary technology cost effectively.

“The majority of our business is contract work for managed care companies, government medical assistance programs and correctional facilities. We’ve been able to use the large manufacturers’ lens brands, particularly their low-end digital products, to add into program where traditional progressives existed. Now with our own private label digital we’ll be able to add different levels into those programs.”

Customer Comment:

CARL MOROFF, OD

NY-based optometrist and managed care specialist



“When a lab is producing a commodity product, such as a standard single vision or bifocal, you don’t need a lot of interaction between the lab and the practice. The prescription is the prescription, so to speak. When you get into free-form, though, the technology is such that to maximize the benefit to the patient, close collaboration between practice and lab is essential. Depending on which lens manufacturer’s technology is being used, the practice and the lab need to collaboratively decide the best way to fit lens and prescribe for that particular lens technology to determine the best outcome for patient.”

Customer Comment:

KAREN HOBBS

Optician with Nash Optical, North Carolina Dept. of Correction, in Nashville, N.C.



“Being in a prison environment, we don’t really know all the new stuff coming out. We don’t have any reps coming in, so we really count on our rep from Classic Optical to keep us informed.

“I use the Shamir Element free-form lens. I

put 90 percent of my progressive lens wearers in it. Our price point is really low, \$109 a pair. The customer can file out of network for insurance. With the price being lower, they’re getting more bang for buck. They paying \$40 out-of-pocket, then the rest is picked up by insurance. That way they’re getting affordable alternative with the newest technology.

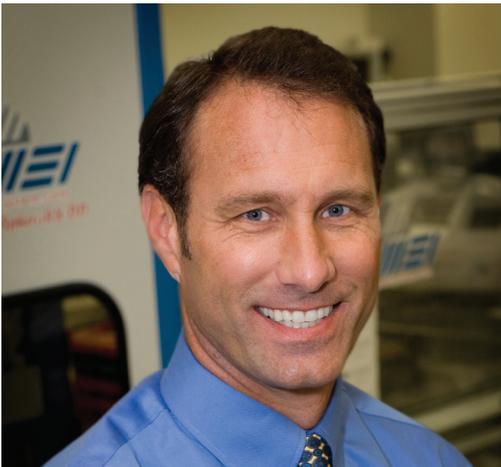
“It didn’t take much time to get used to working with digital lenses. I have noticed when I was fitting other progressive we had 5 to 6 percent that couldn’t adjust. Now, with free-form, we only have 1 to 2 percent non-adapts. It’s made life easier for us. A lot of customers don’t even know they’re wearing it.”

Emphasizing Education: VSP Lab

LAB: VSP LAB

COLUMBUS, OHIO

SWEN CARLSON, LAB DIRECTOR



“Making digital lenses is something of a jump in the curve of the trajectory of how lenses have been evolving. It’s being recognized not just as a little tweak, but as a significant jump in technology. Our customers are very interested and actually seek us out more than in the past. They want to learn what digital is all about and how they can benefit from it.

“Our preferred method of educating customers is to have them visit the lab. We strongly encourage it, and we offer to be flexible and come in on weekends. If we can get them out on the floor and walk them through the process where they can see inside the generator chamber how we’re actually grinding lens, and using a fine-point diamond lathe to shape the interior surface of lens, it really strikes a chord. They see much less equipment is involved in digital versus conventional processing, especially the difference between using aluminum lap tools and soft tools. Even the less technical customers get it. We describe how the information we input into the calculation software

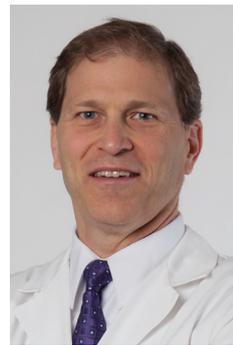
determines how we’re going to grind lenses, as well as information like vertex, pantoscopic tilt and facial wrap.

“For those that can’t come to the lab, our sales force uses iPads to demonstrate the technology. We’re developing applications to tell our story better, such as a step by step photo collage. We’ll be adding video, too. Their time is so tight in the office, but this makes for a pleasant, fast education.”

Customer Comment:

STEVEN CURTIS, OD

Riverview Eye Associates, Columbus, Ohio



“I consider the lab an extension of my practice. I trust them. And I earn the trust of my patients by providing the things they expect. When it comes to lenses, they expect accuracy and efficiency as well as value. If they perceive they’re receiving that, they’ll keep coming back.

“VSP Labs is providing me with a lens [VSP’s Unity PLx digital progressive] that provides accuracy, efficiency and this ‘wow’ factor of better optics. I’m wearing them now, and I’m really pleased with the optics, the clarity. I’m getting the high definition vision I thought was hogwash when I first heard about it. I can’t wait for some patients who are critical observers to try it. We’re practicing in an area of where we get a lot of technologically savvy and curious patients. We’re close to Ohio State University and some industries. Some patients want to know more than I know about product, they eat it up. We have to be on the edge or ahead of the edge to maintain our reputation.

“We’ve really only embraced digital lenses in the past few months, but I think we’re going to see exponential growth. About 30 percent of my progressive lens wearers are now wearing digital, but that will probably go up to 50 percent by end of the year.”



Continued from page 47

ences between conventional prescriptions and the compensated prescriptions that accompany digital lenses and help them adjust to dispensing lenses they can no longer measure with a lensmeter.

Just as important, the lab must work closely with its customers to ensure that the patient's prescription—which now often includes personalized measurements such as vertex distance, pantoscopic tilt and face form—is accurately communicated to the lab. The lab's customer service team makes sure the Rx data is complete and accurate, and they advise the practice on which lens is best for complex prescriptions.

These factors illustrate how digital lenses are enhancing the relationship between the practice and the lab. The following interviews with lab executives and their customers reveal how both sides view the changes. ■

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