



Millennial ECPs IRL

The 'Entrepreneurial Generation' Takes on Optical

BY DEIRDRE CARROLL / SENIOR EDITOR

NEW YORK—We've spent a lot of time talking about Millennials as consumer and patient and how they will affect the future of the optical industry. But what about Millennials as doctor, as business owner, as employee in real life (IRL)?

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has said that by next year, they will comprise 36 percent of the U.S. workforce, 46 percent by 2020, and by 2025, 75 percent of the global workforce. Today, 15 percent are already managers and in 12 years, they will be calling the shots.

In fact, many aren't willing to wait that long. Often called the "Entrepreneurial Generation," 48 percent of Millennials had the goal of launching their own start up in 2012, according to the Edelman 8095 Global Survey 2.0, and a 2012 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation report found that 29 percent of all entrepreneurs were already between the ages of 20 and 34 years old.

Millennials are continuing to become a growing force in the small business community. The Manta 2014 Mid-Year Small Business Wellness Index found that, 76 percent of Millennial small business owners reported having a successful first half of 2014,

higher than any other generation. They also made more hires during that portion of the year (44 percent) and expected to make the most hires (52 percent) during the remaining six months.

But this is 2015 and we want to know about the Millennials in the optical industry. What about the ways they shape their business, its practices, their philosophies and how that will shape the future of the industry? For the latest VM Millennial Project installment we asked several Millennial ECPs—a mix of opticians, managers, owners and ODs—from across the country just those questions. This is what they had to say...

In May 2015, VSP conducted a survey of ECPs and found that all generations recognize the size and power of the Millennial consumer; however, Millennial ECPs think a bit differently about how and when to win over their peers.

In fact, Millennial ECPs plan to focus on the Millennial consumer. While the majority (75 percent) of all ECP respondents VSP surveyed believes Millennials will have an impact on their business within the next five years, the majority of Millennial ECP respondents anticipate the change now.

So this obviously begs the question, what are they doing about it?

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Transparency and Collaboration

Relative to Boomers and Gen X'ers, Millennials have a different view of how work should get done and come into the workforce with a different set of expectations. Transparency and collaborative environments were reoccurring themes of importance among the Millennial ECPs we spoke to, be it with their professional colleagues, patients or customers.

"Optometrists in California were only able to treat glaucoma as of 2008 and many of my peers in older generations feel uncomfortable managing glaucoma," said Jacqueline Theis, OD, based in Northern California. "It has been a pleasure discussing cases with my peers for all of us to learn from. As a younger graduate, my education was more heavily focused on ocular and systemic disease than previous generations. However, my didactic knowl-



Ric Bennett, 34
Assistant Manager
Spex - City North
Chicago, Ill.

edge lacks the expertise they have from years of clinical experience, and by working alongside my peers from all generations and educational backgrounds we are learning and evolving in the profession together."

"I am fortunate to work closely with very optometry-friendly OMD's locally," said Jennifer Stewart, OD of Norwalk Eye Care in Connecticut. "I consider myself part of a team of eyecare professionals. I am very proactive at referring my patients to both OMDs and ODs when I feel the patient needs specialty care.

"I also go to work with the mindset that I am a CEO and businessperson, as well as a doctor. We are taught how to do all the medical parts of our



Daniel Brunson, 33
Store Manager
Hicks Brunson Eyewear
Tulsa, Okla.



Justin Coleman, OD, 33
Visionworks
Lexington, Ky.

practice, but yet many doctors are not, or have not, run their practice like a business. I have found a lot of doctors have more of a 'hands off' approach to the optical, and let their staff manage it. I work closely with my opticians to keep our optical very profitable and make changes quickly, as needed. Staff can often be a challenge but we are lucky to have cultivated a great team that works extremely hard, wants to learn, and understands and applies what our practice philosophy is."

"Working side-by-side with an optician of another generation, I've noticed that my method seems fast but not hurried and the way I present the options and information helps guide the eyewear purchase in a way that makes the process go smoothly and quickly," explained Heather B. Stearns, licensed optician at Fields of Vision Eyecare in Lebanon, N.H. "I don't like to force the customer into anything and I believe that the 'hard sale' is a thing of the past. I'm interested in getting a solution, but want to make the person as comfortable as possible with the process and that's where flexibility is key."

"I've really honed my ability to open up a dialogue with anyone," agreed Tiffany Welch, managing optician of SIGHT Optical Boutique in Grand Rapids, Mich. "I ask different questions other than your typical, 'What kind of glasses are you looking for?' Instead, I might ask about their wardrobe, or which pairs they already have to establish what's missing from their optical collection.

"I've noticed some opticians who have been in the industry longer may just assume they know [what] will work best based on past experience. After establishing their needs, I am open and

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honest when showing the best options, I do not hide prices or gloss over information; I want it to be a collaborative process in which the patient gets both what they need and the best that we can offer,” Welch said.

“In any service profession your customer changes, their needs change and their wants change,” said Ric Bennett, assistant manager - City North at Spex in Chicago. “How you work with them must be malleable and evolve to reach them successfully and serve them best. I think my approach is much more ‘let’s try it.’ If the process doesn’t work, get rid of it. If it proves successful, it can only enhance the patient experience.”

Technology and Efficiency

Millennials are quickest to adapt to the ways in which the mobile internet is changing the fundamental logistics of their lives, and they are the first to demand the workplace do the same. Across the board, nearly all the ECPs we spoke to said advancements in technology—everything from appointment scheduling to EMR and inventory management to free-form lens fitting—has made their business more efficient.

Daniel Brunson, store manager at Hicks Brunson Eyewear in Tulsa, Okla, said, “My motto is ‘action always beats intention.’ If I



Carissa Dunphy, ABOC, 34
Optician
Duvall Advanced Family Eyecare
Duvall, Wash.

get an idea I run with it. This includes embracing new technology if I think it can help us operate more efficiently and effectively.

“For example, I implemented a paperless practice management system as soon as I had the capacity to do so. At the time, it was not easy for my older generation colleagues to accept, but now we are so much better off for it. In fact, technology is now everywhere. Our marketing reaches clients through e-mail, our blog

and various social media platforms. We use the Visioffice system to digitally measure lenses.

“We store all of this information digitally on our servers and interact with virtually all of our labs and frame vendors through some sort of web-based portal to place orders, something I have



Jennifer Stewart, OD, 34
Norwalk Eye Care
Wallingford Eyecare
Norwalk, Conn.

noticed the Millennials on my team seem to be more comfortable with. The most significant role is played by our own management systems and the data stored there. The information at my fingertips is invaluable for the decisions I need to make in areas such as marketing and inventory management,” Brunson said.

“Technology helps increase the efficiency of the eye examination,” added Dr. Theis. “With equipment that can communicate to each other I am able to more efficiently transition the data from the autophoropter to the auto refractor to the EMR. I can also assess numerous studies in one place (visual field, photos, OCT) which can help with diagnosis and management of disease. The recent requirement of electronic health records has been a challenge to some of the offices I have worked in that are still transitioning. With experience in numerous types of electronic medical record systems, I have worked closely with these offices to offer suggestions for programs to purchase and ways to make the system work in the office’s favor.”

“The current trend in the medical world is getting out from under all of the wasted paper,” agreed Spex’s Bennett. “I see our business in the foreseeable future as being mostly digital. This will allow for easier information sharing and less company waste. Technology also allows access to a point of view other than mine

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Lisa Hernandez, 33
Licensed Dispensing Optician
 Wallingford Eyecare
 Seattle, Wash.

for the patient. Someone who may be on the fence about a particular frame only needs to snap a picture, send it to a few trusted friends or family members and get instant positive or negative reinforcement from someone other than the person ‘selling’ to them. Patients are almost shocked when we suggest they take pictures. It allows for breathing room and that change of mind that you have their best interest at heart.”

“Technology plays a huge role in the optical industry and I foresee a lot more technology being introduced into our practices over the next five to 10 years, such as new machines, lenses and billing processes,” said Lisa Hernandez, licensed dispensing optician at Wallingford Eyecare in Seattle. “Those of us in the industry have to keep up with all of it so we will constantly be learning in order to stay current. I feel like we have to work harder to capture patients because of all the online ordering. Where the older generations didn’t have to worry about people buying glasses online or in a warehouse store where you can also buy groceries and tires.”

As Justin Coleman, OD, at a Visionworks practice in Lexington, Ky., put it, “Older practitioners have merely adopted the internet; I was born in it, molded by it. Social networks, online reviews and internet shopping/price checking are all second nature.



Kristin O'Brien, OD, 28
 Mid-Continent Optometry (Vision Source of GVR)
 Wagner Optometry
 Platte Valley Medical Center
 Denver, Colo.

“And with that understanding, I’m not trying to fight or rebel against the changing tide, but rather figure out how to utilize it so that I can provide goods and services to a wider patient base than previously available. Technology is the ever forward march toward betterment. That’s what technology means to me. How can I improve the outcome for the patient and what will it take to make that happen? It’s not what you have, but what you do with it,” he said.

Patient Experience

Ultimately, this increased adoption of technology has one purpose according to these Millennial ECPs; allowing them the time to focus more on the patient/customer interaction to make sure they receive the best experience possible.



Kevin R. Kretch, 28
Owner/Licensed Optician
 Eyes on Chagrin
 Woodmere, Ohio

“I am always challenging my staff to become more efficient and increase patient satisfaction, and continue to grow the practice; something that is very hard in a very established practice,” explained Dr. Stewart. “We are always coming up with creative ideas to increase revenue, move patients through the practice more efficiently, and continue to provide patients with the latest technology in both the optical and clinical care. Some doctors may find this to be time consuming or a challenge, but for

me it keeps optometry fresh and exciting and keeps me on my toes. I’m always fine tuning what I say in the exam room to keep my message clear and see the changes that makes in

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our optical as well.”

“I think it’s traditionally accepted by the majority of people that optometrists are doctors who prescribe glasses yet, we do so much more than that,” according to Kristin O’Brien, OD, of Mid-Continent Optometry (VisionSource of GVR) in Denver. “I’ve adjusted to this misconception by making sure I educate my patients during every step of their eye examination; this begins at the front desk and is followed through the entire visit and reiterated by the post-examination survey. I best connect with young families, fortunately a huge part of my community demographic, and hopefully my patients will age with my practice. It’s mildly chaotic at times but in the end, everyone leaves with smiles on their faces and it’s



Jacqueline Theis, OD, FAAO, 28
Kaiser LaClinica de la Raza
VC Berkeley School of Optometry
Northern California

siasm for what I do make up for that,” said Carissa Dunphy, optician at Duvall Advanced Family Eyecare in Duvall, Wash. “The most rewarding part of what I do is finding the best optical solution for each individual patient. There is a lens out there for every person’s needs and by keeping my product knowledge current I can serve patients wonderfully with superior lens choices. I can help each and every one of them find what best suits their needs. My favorite patient is one who has something very specific they need for their lifestyle and we find the right solution for them.”

“I love it when I show someone what they’ve been missing out on, whether their first pair of glasses or a long overdue change in their prescription. It makes for a visible change in their demeanor,” agreed Dr. Coleman. “People want to know that the person caring for them cares for them. I explain things using analogies, stories, euphemisms, examples, whatever gets the point across most easily, but you have to choose your audience. Sometimes we forget that patient care is an individualized practice and that you just can’t put everyone into tidy categories.”

The Future of Optical

These Millennial ECPs also have some strong opinions on the future of optical. Meaning you may not only already be missing out on appealing to the Millennial consumer if you are not already doing so, but you will continue to face stiff competition from your younger colleagues who are doing so now and have no plans to stop.

“Over the next five to 10 years, I see my practice and our profession growing tremendously with the increased num-



Heather B. Stearns, 26
Licensed Optician
Fields of Vision Eyecare, Inc.
Lebanon, N.H.

a great feeling when you see them around town and the kids point and say, ‘That’s my eye doctor!’”

Kevin R. Kretch, owner and licensed optician, Eyes on Chagrin in Woodmere, Ohio said, “My favorite part of the eyecare delivery process is the customer interaction. I am blessed to have such wonderful customers and really enjoy the one-on-one time I spend with each one. Each customer is different and desires different things, you have to tailor your practice to each and every customer. My customers are like my family. My favorite customers are the ones who listen to my recommendations. The one who makes it show that they value my knowledge and let me do what I do best.”

“Patients may see me as having less experience than older generations but my lens technology knowledge and enthu-

ber of patients who will be needing medical primary eyecare for chronic systemic conditions like diabetes and am excited to see how accountable care organizations form and play a role,” said Dr. O’Brien.

“Despite some of the fears many optometrists have about our evolving health care system, I think it offers a unique position for optometrists to market ourselves now more than ever to show ophthalmologists and primary care doctors what we’re capable of and how we can be of service. Outside of my practice, I plan to continue growing the Student Optometric Leadership Network and Optometric Insights so I can help inspire the future generations of our great profession.”

Helping to shape the future of the industry is important to most of these Millennial ECPs. “Throughout the next five to 10 years, I expect my career to take a more HR centered role as technology creeps in,” said SIGHT Optical Boutique’s Welch. “I envision the online market for optical jobs will be a big opportunity in the future, as this profession becomes more about personalized experiences in brick and mortar. When choosing employees to staff a brick-and-mortar op-



Tiffany Welch, 28
Managing Optician
 SIGHT Optical Boutique
 Grand Rapids, Mich.

tical shop, you are essentially choosing the personality of your shop, and the vibe patients will feel when they walk in. I believe in team building, growth within a position and long-term employee satisfaction.”

“I will be watching to see how the latest digital innovations might impact the eyewear buying experience both in store and online,” added Brunson. “I know I will be relying more on digital tools of some sort to connect with my clients and to measure their lenses, but as an optician I believe

our industry must continue to provide that important in person, human element if we are going to maintain superior standards in eyecare. I also see video platforms like YouTube playing an important role now and in the next five years. I believe people are hungry for a behind-the-scenes look at the designers behind the eyewear.”

“I plan on treating this not as a job, but a craft,” concluded Dr. Coleman. “While over the last two years I have worked hard to become proficient in patient care, it is now time to really hone my skills and work toward providing better care for my patients with each passing year.

“It’s not a competition, so I only have to be better than what I was and help others to provide better care as well. A rising tide lifts all ships. Outside of the exam room, I have been laying the groundwork to join an existing practice so I can both apprentice under and partner with an established practitioner. This will allow me to further my abilities so that I can obtain the satisfaction that comes with ownership and allow me to support the local community as a good neighbor should.

“When you make yourself and your business a source of giving, it always comes back. I think that is what the Millennial generation has fostered; an appreciation of community. That has really shaped the outlook and timbre of how we do business,” Coleman said.

VM Asked...

Some ‘Traditional’ Practices Millennial ECPs Can Do Without:

The “Hand Off”

The Hard Sell

“This is the way it’s always been done” attitudes
The old feel of “us versus them” (OD vs OMD)

Paper charting systems ■