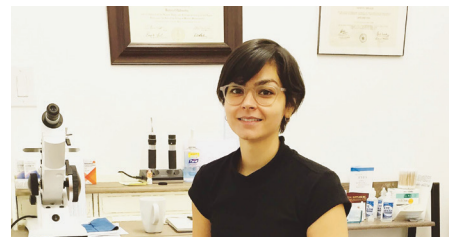


Living the Eye Life

New ODs Talk Early Career Challenges



BY CATHERINE WOLINSKI / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

A rising number of new optometrists, most notably young women, are entering today's optometric work force. It's a career choice that promises relative security in the job market, as the demand for eyecare increases in the U.S., and one that offers a variety of landscapes and commitments, whether an OD chooses to work at a private practice, corporate practice or in a multidisciplinary setting; and in each of these scenarios, whether an OD chooses to work as an employee, or own a practice of his or her own.

Despite the flexibility offered by the optometric profession, "new" ODs are not without their challenges when entering the work force. Among them are record-breaking student loans; a competitive job market; an increasing number of insurance

policies, and patients who use them; and a general lack of understanding or preparation for the business setting. Yet, even in the face of these obstacles, the leaders of this cohort are able to adapt and succeed, as exemplified by the 10 young optometrists *VM* spoke to for this story.

According to the 2014 AOA Survey of Optometric Practice, 31 percent of optometrists who responded to the study were under the age of 40, and the average age of new owner optometrists, or those who owned their own practice and graduated optometry school within the last 10 years, was 35. Of these new owner optometrists, 36 percent were female, and women also comprised the majority of non-owner optometrists, at 51 percent, and new non-owner optometrists, at 58 percent.

From a variety of perspectives, male and female, picked from a potpourri of modes of practice across

the nation, *VM* found that young optometrists (in this case, 10 who have graduated between 2007 and 2013) each have their own story to tell about getting started as professional ODs.

Whatever challenges they face—from six-figure student loans, to taking over a bankrupt practice, to running a corporate office while still maintaining memberships in optical networking groups and never missing a soccer game—this new generation of eyecare professionals is more than up to the task. Here are some of the savvy savers, community connectors, and proactive professionals who are keeping the integrity of optometry alive, all while constantly adapting to its flux, seeking out new technologies and introducing fresh ideas to patient care. In other words, these are the young ODs who are living the eye life. ■

Savvy Savers

Perhaps one of the most daunting issues for today's new ODs, at least quantifiably, is student loans. Just ask Kristin O'Brien, OD. Although she made as many payments as possible during optometry school, O'Brien, the owner of Vision Source of GVR in Denver, Colo., graduated the Michigan College of Optometry in 2013 with student loans well into the six figures: "I graduated with over \$200,000 in student loans," she said, noting that her interest rates stood at a steep 7.9 percent.

According to O'Brien, it was what she did after graduation that saved her. "When I graduated, one of the best things I did was continue to live like a college student for two years," she said. "I kept my 2004 Ford Taurus, lived in a modest apartment [and] I didn't go out for lavish dinners." Though this conflicted with what she—and many students—imagine as their immediate future after graduating, living within her means was essential to taking the next step to starting her own business. "I didn't live like students envision a doctor lives. If you can save in those first two years and keep your cost of living down, that helps out a lot."

Another tactic O'Brien found useful for chipping away at student loans was paying as much up front as possible, as well as opting for a plan with a shorter time span. "I would encourage the 10-year graduated plan. The payments are lower and more manageable in the beginning," she advised.

Syed Hussain, OD, a 2009 graduate of Salus University who now practices at MyEyeDr. in Laurel, Md. mirrors O'Brien's sentiment. Hussain also runs and edits his own personal finance blog, "The Broke Professional" (thebrokeprofessional.com), which he started in August 2013 after having "talked to a number of colleagues who didn't grasp what they should be doing [financially]" as new doctors.



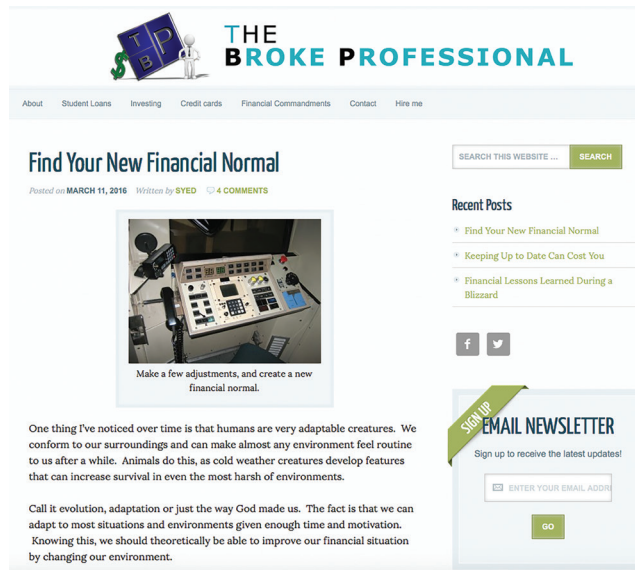
"When I graduated, one of the best things I did was continue to live like a college student for two years. I kept my 2004 Ford Taurus, lived in a modest apartment and didn't go out for lavish dinners."

- Kristin O'Brien, OD

Among the topics Hussain covers in his blog is what he refers to as "lifestyle inflation," or the change in living habits once optometry students graduate and begin working as doctors. "When you're a student, most people live like

students—eat the basics and sleep wherever there's a bed. When you're a practicing optometrist, even though you technically have the income to afford [an inflated lifestyle]"—he

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“Starting a private practice looks like it’s in the distance, but all it takes is a few steps and constant, consistent work. Find what you like, try to learn about it and hopefully that will increase your worth even more than just your income.”

- Syed Hussain, OD

“A lot of young women graduate, get married, start a family and feel like they can’t take over a business. I’m here to tell you that you can.”

- Maria Sampalis, OD

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referred to a friend’s decision to lease a BMW, even before graduation—“just living a few years on a student lifestyle helps with paying off student loans, along with saving for retirement.”

Investment, too, is a strategy Hussain believes recent graduates should consider; he takes part in MyEyeDr.’s 401k plan, set up his own Roth IRA, and has taken an interest in real estate. For those interested in starting their own business, he said, “starting a private practice looks like it’s in the distance, but all it takes is a few steps and constant, consistent work. Read up on different investment options—real estate, stocks, internet—there are a bunch of different options out there. Find what you like, try to learn about it,

and hopefully that will increase your worth even more than just your income. And also, read my blog.”

Along with saving and investing money, some ODs suggest the seemingly obvious—make as much as possible. “Take opportunities to do fill in work,” said Maria Sampalis, OD, who graduated the New England College of Optometry in 2007 and now owns her own corporate practice, Sampalis Eye Care, in Warwick, R.I. “Try to work extra and be frugal.”

Courtney Dryer, OD, graduated with student loans from the Southern College of Optometry in 2011. By 2013, she owned her own practice, 4 Eyes Optometry in Charlotte, N.C., which recently celebrated its third anniversary. Within the first three years after graduation, Dryer

said, “I paid the minimum amount, and I also worked six to seven days a week to get my practice off the ground. Now that my business is prospering, I have been paying it down in big pieces at a time.”

Setting Up Shop

It seems that owning a private practice crosses the minds of many new optometrists upon graduation, but many believe they are without the resources to do so. However, others find that they are able to accomplish opening their own practice, even if it wasn’t necessarily in their plan.

“When I graduated, I never imagined that I

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was going to open up my own store. This was not even on my radar,” said Saniya “Sunny” Shoab, OD, who recently opened her own practice, Sunny Eye Shop in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. “I probably wouldn’t have opened up my own office if I was able to find a decent place to work in the city, but the job market for optometrists here in New York is pretty competitive.”

Shoab embodies the simultaneous anxiety and sense of possibility that new optometrists harbor: a 2010 graduate of the New England College of Optometry, she currently faces a student loan, business loan and slower patient flow than expected when she opened her store and practice six months ago, but she is forging ahead with her best interests in mind.

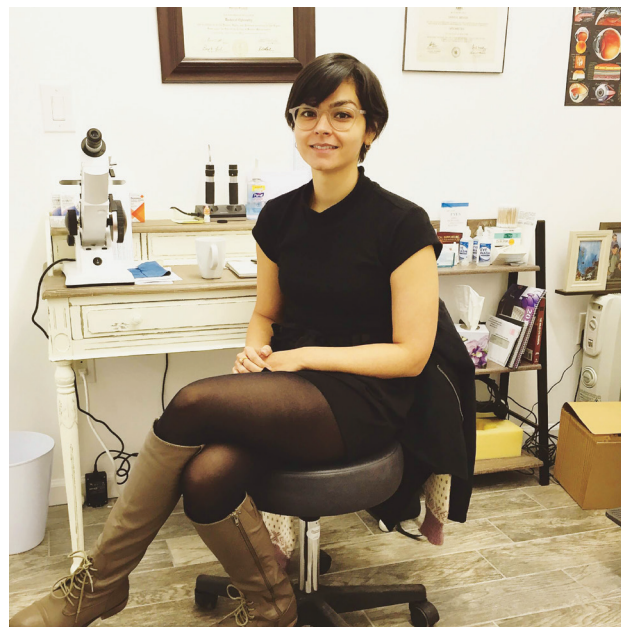
“[Optometrists] usually have eight or nine appointments in a day, and we haven’t gotten to that volume yet, not even close,” she said. “I have a student loan and a business loan, [and] that’s kind of daunting. Opening a business is a little scary.” But the benefits of business ownership are still outweighed by its current drawbacks—“it’s more relaxed, I get to control what I’m selling, [and] I’m really excited about what I’m doing,” Shoab said.

“[After graduating], I wanted my own practice but didn’t have the opportunity,” said Sampalis. “When the opportunity came up, I took it, and I’ve been much happier working for myself. I encourage taking the step to go private or corporate. The benefits are incredible.”

For some, like O’Brien, opening up a practice is in the plan from the start. As a student, O’Brien started the Michigan Optometric Student Private Practice Association to supplement her curriculum, which was lacking in private practice and business related topics. The group’s focus was “to help promote private practice and cultivate leadership in the industry, and help students have a resource for quality speakers and

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- Saniya “Sunny” Shoab, OD



learn from one another,” O’Brien said.

She also co-founded (and still serves as executive board president) of the Student Optometric Leadership Network, a group which fostered connections with leaders in the private practice space, including those who would later become her partners.

“Two doctors who were looking to expand their network outside their own contacted me when I was in my second year of optometry school. We kept in touch, and when I moved to Colorado for my last semester to finish my internship in a suburb of Denver, we were able to make things work—[I helped] open the practice during my last semester here, and opened the doors right after graduation,” she said.

As several young optometrists expressed to *VM*, private practice ownership promises flexibility, control and one-on-one time with patients that many other doctors, like Nick Blasco, OD, tend to miss out on at more medically/surgically based practices, or group practices/chains. “I think it’s great to be in a practice where you can

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“I’m looking to add a new optical measurements device; I’d like to embrace 3D printing; and I’m always looking for new frame technologies and materials in collections.”

- Courtney Dryer, OD

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manage and treat the way you feel comfortable with,” said Blasco, who graduated from the Illinois College of Optometry in 2013 and now practices at Eye Care of Iowa, a medical-based private practice with five locations in the greater Des Moines area.

As a multi-location associate optometrist early in his career, Blasco said, moving around from practice to practice can be challenging, especially



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- Nick Blasco, OD

when continuously having to adjust to new settings, staff and patients.

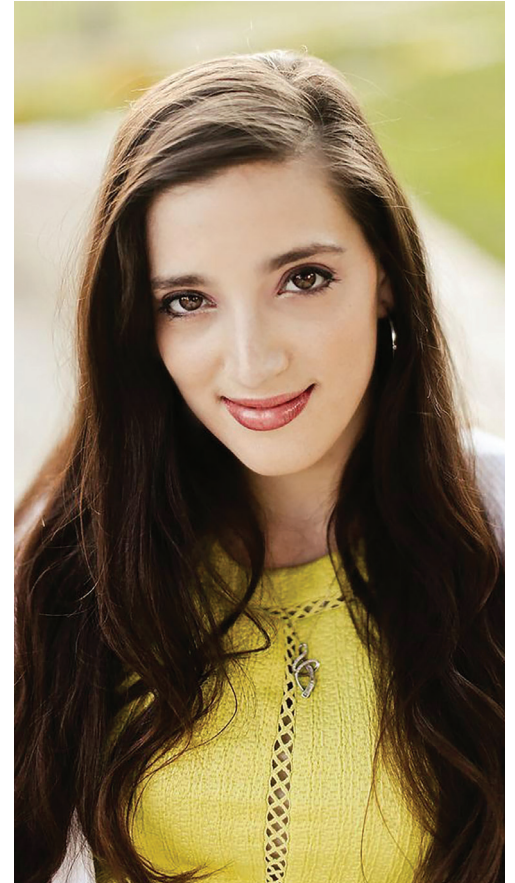
“Because I’m the youngest, I rotate through all five offices. It’s a change of scenery, which kind of makes things interesting, but that’s the biggest struggle, too,” he said. “Working with staff and trying to understand what they’ve been going through during the week ... it takes time to figure out.”

But others are completely content practicing as employees of larger, or even private, practices. “I am beyond content with my current employment,” said Suzanne LaKamp, OD, a graduate of the University of Missouri - St. Louis College of Optometry, class of 2012. She now practices in Overland Park, Kan. at Durrie Vision, a private clinical practice specializing in refractive surgery. “I maintain a nice work-life balance. Owning a practice is more than a full-time job. It requires many extended hours during nights and weekends, and I have no desire to give that up in the near future,” said LaKamp.

“While I am passionate about my career and what I do, I try to not let it define or consume me. I would much rather spend my free time doing other activities that I love, like painting or dancing, or spend it with my family.”

Likewise, Jennifer Lyerly, OD, graduated the Southern College of Optometry in 2011 and has been practicing as a non-owner for just shy of five years. “I realized there are some really good perks,” she said, citing steady income, paid vacation and “not having all the responsibilities of running a business” as examples. “It’s actually a little bit better. It lets me be more diverse.” Like LaKamp and many others, Lyerly also sees practicing as a non-owner as a better option for raising children. “I’m looking to start a family, which is not the best time [to start a business],” Lyerly said.

Then there are those who do it all, like Ann Rea Miller, OD, owner of Visual Eyes in Lima, Ohio, who touts the possibility—and positivity—

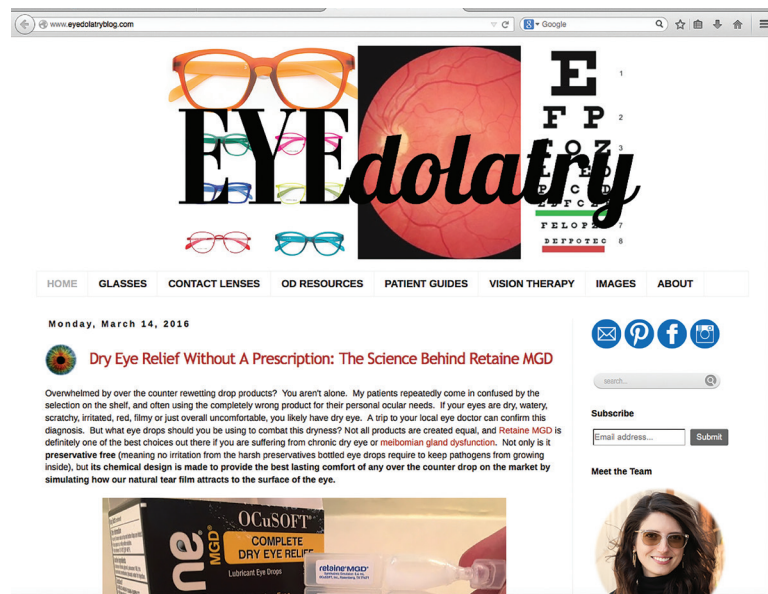


“I am beyond content with my current employment at Durrie Vision, a private clinical practice specializing in refractive surgery. I maintain a nice work-life balance.”

- Suzanne LaKamp, OD

of practice ownership as a mother. “The flexibility of this career is pretty awesome,” said Miller, who graduated from Ohio State University College of Optometry in 2008, then worked as an associate for five years before taking over a local practice that had gone bankrupt. “Some people look at it as a lot of work, and it is, but you control your

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- Jennifer Lyerly, OD

atmosphere. You have the flexibility of running the business. I have a little boy and I take Fridays off so I can spend the day with him," she said.

Sampalis, too, says family life is no reason to give up on owning a practice. She simultaneously started a family and a business, and believes that balancing family life and business ownership is not only possible, but the essential pillars to her happiness.

"A lot of young women graduate and get married and start a family, and feel like they can't take over a business while starting a family. I'm here to tell you that you can," she said. "It was hectic, but I was able to do it. You're able to set your schedule the way you want, and work it around your family. I've never missed a soccer game."

Patient Impatience, Meet High-Tech Techniques

Whether the best route is working in or owning a private practice, corporate practice, or working in a multidisciplinary setting, new owners and non-owners alike all agree on one approach to practicing: adapting to and doing what's best for patients. The most common issue faced when trying to achieve this, whether in a surgical setting or boutique setting, is time, an obstacle best overcome by embracing technology.

"Patients recognize technology as quality," said O'Brien. "I feel like the more technology I have available, the more offerings I can give to

my patients. For the working class that I serve, a lot [of patients] choose not to be dilated, so if I can provide an alternative—even if it's not the best [treatment]—it still allows me to catch something visually significant that I otherwise would not be able to see."

To streamline processes at Eye Care of Iowa, Blasco also turned to technology; with his help, the practice has redesigned their company website, implemented contact lens ordering online, and is looking into replacing clipboard-and-paper forms with iPad waiting room forms.

"When you look at reviews, a majority [of patients] are talking about time. Because you can get a 15-minute eye exam in a mall, public

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perception and opinion about what optometry consists of is skewed. [Patients] don't want to be here an hour," he said. "We want to streamline the process so that when patients come in, it's smoother and more efficient," he said, noting their concern with getting back to work or to weekend activities. "Because ultimately, what we work for is patient satisfaction."

Lyerly also feels there is a separation between what young optometrists hope to accomplish and what their patients' time will allow. "I think coming out of school right away, you have this idea of what practicing is going to be like. Your idea of practicing is in this full scope way, where you're dilating every single patient.

"Then, you get into a situation and realize your patient doesn't want you to do all those things," she said, referring to the steps of a comprehensive eye exam. "Patients want to get in and get out. I think that was the hardest transition for me—[learning] how to give the exam the patient needs and wants."

As Blasco and Lyerly embody, one way to keep up with patients and still continue to practice in a full-scope way is staying up-to-date with the latest technologies in the dispensary, in the exam room and on the web. One of the ways Lyerly makes up for patients' lack of time and her own desire to practice more fully is by authoring a blog, Eyedolotry (eyedolotryblog.com), for which she extensively researches topics from custom contact lenses to vision therapy, and answers questions vetted from students and readers around the world. By forcing her to keep up-to-date with optometry's latest treatments and technologies, blogging gives Lyerly the satisfaction of being on the cutting edge, as well as the fulfillment of owning her own online business.

At Visual Eyes, Ann Rea Miller executed an exam lane overhaul. "Within the past year, we implemented a new ocular vision field machine,

"The staff had zero computer training—so little, in fact, that one employee was perplexed by the long black [key] on the keyboard. It was the spacebar."

- Ann Rea Miller, OD



a DRS camera, and an Icare tonometer [a "no-puff" instrument for measuring intraocular pressure]," said Miller. Since the Icare tonometer can be operated by her optometric technician, Miller is freed up for other tasks, and patients are in and out more quickly.

Prior to her taking over the practice—and to its bankruptcy—Visual Eyes was far from tech-savvy, Miller said. "The office had one computer when the prior doctor had been here," she said. Right away, she implemented an electronic medical record system and made sure her staff was properly equipped to support it.

"Now we have seven or eight computers.

The staff had zero computer training"—so little, in fact, that one employee was perplexed by the "long black [key]" on the keyboard. "It was the spacebar," Miller laughed.

At Durrie Vision, LaKamp stays content by serving her patients with state-of-the-art surgical equipment. "Refractive surgery is an exciting field, since technology is always evolving and improving," she said. "There is the KAMRA inlay, for instance, recently available for patients experiencing the strain of presbyopia. For refractive lens and cataract surgery, there are newer multifocal intraocular lens

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New ODs Step Out of the Exam Room to Connect With the Community

Of course, connecting with the community can—and should—happen inside the exam room as well as out. Involvement in the community, whether through optometric associations or local neighborhood groups, is both a personal choice and a networking tool that many young ODs are proponents of. Here are some ways they're getting involved.

Connecting with the community is a business choice that has been central to Sunny Eye Shop, which supports local artists and business owners both inside and outside of the practice.

In addition to taking part in local community markets and holiday fairs, Sunny Shoaib, OD, keeps the local artists top of mind by putting their work on display in Brooklyn, N.Y. Collections have included jewelry, candles, pottery and ceramics. "A lot of these artists don't have their own storefronts," said Shoaib. "Because I'm a local business owner, I definitely like having the community feel."

At Visual Eyes, in Lima, Ohio, Ann Rea Miller, OD, maintains an active membership in the AOA and Ohio Optometric Association, even serving as the OAA's Zone 11 president in 2011. The role required setting up meetings with her peers. "That was a neat experience because [I got] to meet the other optometrists in [my] area," said Miller.

Outside of optical, she is also a member of the Lion's Club, her local Chamber of Commerce and is on the advisory board for a local hospital. "I definitely recommend being a part of [the Chamber of Commerce]," she said. "It's very good for networking because of the business events they put on."

Making good connections can also happen online, like for Maria Sampalis, OD, at Sam-



Sunny Shoaib, OD, models a pair of local artists' earrings on display at her practice, Sunny Eye Shop, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Photo via Facebook.com/SunnyEyeShop.



palis Eye Care in Warwick, R.I. Faced with optical social networking groups that tended to lean toward end-of-day venting, Sampalis started her own Facebook group, Corporate Optometry, open to industry professionals who have questions about practice management and patient cases. The group now has nearly 2,500 members, and is useful "for debunking myths, business quotations and as a supplement to other [optometric] forums, with a more positive slant."

Kristin O'Brien, OD, Vision Source of GVR in Denver, though not a mom herself, finds a local mothers' group on Facebook to be her

best connection to her community. "My best [social media networking tool] has been the Green Valley Ranch Moms Facebook group," she said.

"Even though I'm not a mom, I get two to five referrals a week [from being in the group.] Because the community is growing so rapidly there are always new people moving in, and the housing communities recommend joining the group."

According to O'Brien, patients who are members of the group will tag her in discussions about where to find an eye doctor, at which point she is

able to respond. "It's free and it's been our best referral source," she said.

As former president of the Student Texas Optometric Association, Bimal Patel, OD of Focus Refined Eye Care in Houston, Texas now serves on the TOA's New Grad Task Force, a group that holds events and panels to help students transition into practice. "We have different social events here in Houston [where] I help by answering their questions," Patel said. "I'm also in young professional organizations within the community, mainly for networking purposes." ■

—Catherine Wolinski

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designs or powers available which may better suit the visual needs of some patients, as compared to previous multifocal designs.”

Be it an EMR-enabled desktop computer or a new way of administering lasik, keeping up with current technology is a necessity, and some new ODs even keep the future top of mind. Courtney Dryer’s foresight at 4 Eyes is three-fold: “I’m looking to add a new optical measurements device; I’d like to embrace 3D printing; [and] I also look for new frame technologies and materials in optical collections,” Dryer said.

For Bimal Patel, OD, a 2013 graduate of the University of Houston College of Optometry who recently opened his own practice, Focus Refined Eye Care, in Houston, meeting client needs means taking a whole new approach. At his fashion-forward practice geared toward young, hip professionals, Patel greets patients with a style consultation, an eye massage and a glass of wine or beer.

“I didn’t want it to feel like your typical doctor’s office,” said Patel, who opened his boutique in January. Having come from a medically-based environment where patient quota tended to outweigh personal experience, Patel sought to get back to his roots, and the reasons he chose optometry among the health fields in the first place: one-on-one time with patients and fashion.

“When the patients check in, they’re with me from beginning to end. I like the fashion side of things, so I do a styling consult to determine what kind of statement they want to make with their glasses. While I’m picking out their eyewear, the eye massager mask heats up and massages their eyes, and they can have a drink of their choice.”

But it’s not all for show, Patel said. His Houston-area client base skews toward “young professionals in their mid-to-late twenties and early



“As long as you stay optimistic and positive, that’s the foundation you need. Concentrate on what’s in front of you and what the next step is.”

- Bimal Patel, OD

thirties,” a population that is accustomed to long hours in front of the computer, whether office worker or artist. “The heat helps release oils in the eye glands, so the eyes are more moist at the end of it.”

As exemplified by these young ODs, being open and available to different relationships and opportunities is key to optometric success when starting a career. “You have to be nuanced and good at reading people,” said Lyerly.

“As the world changes, being a business owner might look totally different than it does when you’re in school. [Students] need to be creative about how [they] envision [their]

future. The traditional path you go into school thinking you’ll follow may not be the path that future optometry takes. It’s never too early to take charge of something, whether it’s online or a local community group.”

And, above all, maintaining a sense of positivity is essential. “You definitely want to have a positive attitude throughout the process,” said Patel. “As long as you stay optimistic and positive, that’s the foundation you need. Concentrate on what’s in front of you and what the next step is.” ■

—Catherine Wolinski is a N.Y.-based freelance writer and former associate editor of Vision Monday.