

# Alliances Bulk Up

## Leading Alliances and Buying Groups Evolve as ECPs Face New Hurdles



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BY MARK TOSH / SENIOR EDITOR

**W**ith more challenges and competitive pressures for independent eyecare professionals to meet and overcome today, there's also been a raft of changes among the alliances and buying groups that work to help these ECPs navigate the turbulent times. These alliances have done their research and overhauled their offerings as they remake themselves to better meet the needs of independent eyecare practices.

Indeed, ECP alliances have developed new tools, resources and practice management programs to support their members. And they've looked to add more vendor partners and bring better pricing and rebate programs to the market.

This evolution has come to the fore over the

past two years as practitioners dig deeper and review the support programs that come with being part of a larger organization and the sense of community that alliances are known for providing.

As a result, alliances and buying groups report that they have seen increased interest and involvement by members and prospects over the past year. A number of new organizations, seeing an opening in the market around the idea of supporting the independent eyecare community, have launched their new models and are finding success.

Alliances have always been a major part of the eyecare sector, with one-third of doctors belonging to either two or three different groups, Jobson Research has found.

What these groups offer ECPs are benefits such as purchasing discounts, practice management advice and marketing assistance. And now, in re-

sponse to an even more challenging environment, they have evolved to provide an array of different tools and services. Their services have expanded to include practice-building education and other support tailored to the private practitioner.

Among the key challenges facing independent practices today are the issues around recruiting and training, along with having the ability or infrastructure to build systems that drive strategic objectives. This is key to developing high-performing teams. In today's eyecare environment, the alliance can systematize employee recruitment and training. In some instances, the alliance group can use an aggregated number of employees to find and negotiate employee benefits at a more advantageous rate (the number of employees across the alliance's membership is larger and more valuable to a benefit provider than the number in a

**Continued on page 48**



## Acquios Alliance: Working to Help Indie Practices ‘Remain in Control’

**A**cquios Alliance, a two-year-old membership group with a program designed to “mitigate the unique challenges private practice optometrists face and help them thrive, independently,” has had a successful debut and continues to add new services, resources and vendor partners as it seeks additional growth and builds upon the way it delivers value to members.

“This industry is always evolving and we are here to help clients evolve and differentiate themselves from the commercial locations and private equity-owned businesses,” Rick Guinotte, a business advisor and owner of Acquios Alliance, told *Vision Monday*. “Our podcast, ‘Thrive with Confidence,’ continues to deliver messages to guide all optometrists to be more successful in all phases of their career.”

Acquios Alliance, which now counts over 375 doors with more than 310 practices represented, grew out of the Acquios Advisors organization that was founded in 2015 as an advisory firm for ECPs. The advisory unit was founded by Guinotte and Kirk Kastens and they subsequently were joined by partner co-owner and advisor Tim Merrigan.

Guinotte said the organization has increased the number of vendors partners by a significant percentage (almost 50 percent) over the past year to approximately 60 partner companies, “in order to offer our members more variety with a selection of vendors that are independently minded and supportive of independent practices.” Two of the new partners are Norwood Device & Diagnostics, for instruments, and Binovia, which provides IT support, security backup, informatics and biomedical services across health care businesses.

In 2022 and moving forward, Acquios will continue to seek out vendors who are “ready, willing and able to assist private practices to differentiate their practices from others while growing their top and bottom lines,” Guinotte said. “We strive to continue keeping an open line of communication with the vendors. We find communication is important for all to be the best they can [be].”

He added, “Because our vendors are here to support the private practices, their inventory will be prioritized to the private practice.”

Asked about the group’s progress, Guinotte said, “Last year, I think we became more relevant in the industry. People became more aware of us. So we had multiple vendors reach out to us saying, ‘I heard about you through,’ and [that may have been] one of our doctor members or from another vendor. It was a lot of networking, but mainly [the growth] has come through referrals and people hearing about us through the marketing that we’ve done.... We’re very humbled.”

On the ECP membership side, one change Acquios has made over the past year is a revision to the membership criteria. Whereas in the past a practice had to be a client of Acquios Advisors to qualify for membership with Acquios Alliance, now a practice can sign up directly for the Alliance program for a one-time \$50 fee. Membership is limited to private practice/independent ODs.

The organization also added to its “learning library” to assist offices with the onboarding of new employees. Many eyecare offices today are experiencing challenges with attracting candidates with experience in the optical industry, Guinotte noted, and Acquios has developed a training library that helps all employees, even those with years of experience.

With inflation hitting consumers and businesses alike, there’s a sense that this and other challenges in the U.S. may actually benefit the growth of alliances and buying groups such as Acquios, Guinotte noted. This is due to a more challenging operating environment leading more optometric practices to seek ways to be better for their patients, and this is a situation tailored to the alliance growth curve.

“Over my many years in this industry, since 1989 to be exact, I have seen the optometric practices I worked in thrive during the economic downturns and rise back up in the best of times,” he noted. “People need and want to see. The general population will reduce their spending on

 Acquios Alliance™



(L to R) Tim Merrigan, Kirk Kastens and Rick Guinotte lead the Acquios Alliance management team.

what is not important to them, [but] vision is important and people will continue to come to practices for their eye health needs.”

In 2022, Acquios has scheduled a live event/workshop for Sept. 23-24 in Dallas as a way to help attendees “live and execute their mission” in their practice on a daily basis. (Acquios has held hybrid workshops in the past, but the September event is all live.) “We are encouraging offices to come as a whole team and learn side by side,” he said. The goal is for the attendees to take the information shared by Acquios Advisors and the Acquios Alliance vendors home and put it into standard practice.

He added, “My view of success is to see more private practices participate in the Acquios Alliance to help them remain in control of their inventory, product pricing and decision making for themselves without paying annual or monthly fees.” ■

More →



## CECOP USA Sets Goal of Becoming ECP's 'Trusted Partner'

**C**ECOP USA, an affiliate of the global CECOP organization, has been active in the U.S. since May 2020 and then stepped up its activity last year with a key acquisition and the appointment of an experienced leader. The key acquisition, in January 2021, brought The Alliance Buying Group into the organization, and the key appointment followed a few months later with Brent Alvord taking the role of chief development officer at CECOP USA.

On a global basis, CECOP works to deliver collective buying power, operational best practices, strategic solutions and other services to about 8,000-plus members across Europe and Latin America.

CECOP USA has between 1,500 to 2,000 members that bill through the group during any given month, according to Alvord, who officially joined CECOP USA on June 1, 2021, as the organization was assimilating the acquisitions of Combine Buying Group and The Alliance.

"In the last year, we have transformed our business from being a discounts and consolidated billing company with fantastic service to ensure we are trusted partners in many different ways for the practices we serve," Alvord said. "We want independents to know they are not alone and we have their back. We are helping them to thrive, improve their quality of life and increase their profits."

Alvord noted that CECOP USA conducted extensive market research in an effort to uncover the true "pain points" that ECPs are experiencing, and then worked to align its solutions into three areas of practice needs: people, growth and profits.

"We added over 20 robust service offerings, of which half are absolutely free to members," he explained. "For example, we now have a free online training platform that includes four different certification tracks and even an 'Optical 101' program for teaching someone outside the industry the optical fundamentals. We increased the number of vendors we work with to over 140 and leaned in heavily with a small pool of vendors to provide extra value."



*Brent Alvord, chief development officer.*



*(L to R) CECOP USA's John Schwieters, Meagan Dixon, Juan Delgado and Sherrie Rogerson staffed the organization's booth at the recent Vision Expo East event.*

In addition, CECOP USA has worked to leverage the international organization's \$1 billion-plus in global buying power to renegotiate many contracts in an effort to deliver best-in-class deals that practices can't get on their own or through other groups, he said.

"We added new rebate structures that we pay to our members so that the more they spend with us the more they receive. We had eight engagement dinners in the latter half of 2021 and have 20-plus 'Happy Hour & Education' events for prospects and members in 2022," Alvord said.



And, CECOP USA, was the single group with a dedicated booth at Vision Expo East, where the organization had seven executives available to talk about the new offerings. As a result, CECOP USA "attracted many new members," he said.

"They loved that there is no long-term commitment and no membership fee," he said.

Another new important addition, Alvord said, is a guarantee for new members: CECOP USA will demonstrate to these new members, in their first six months, various tactics that can add \$10,000 a year in profit or it will award \$1,000. "We have transformed so much in a short time and we really look forward to continuing to build our community and adding huge value for practices," he noted.

The group's 2022 goals are to boost member engagement and to bring real value to members' practices. "We also want to spread the word about CECOP USA and all the disruptive and innovative things we are working on for the industry.

"For example, we just invested in our first practice and are partnering with an eyecare professional to have it as a sandbox to test out vendor relationships, marketing programs, operational processes, and technology to create a knowledge base of wisdom on how we can help transform a practice and then share that information with our members."

During the pandemic's toughest times, practices preserved their cash as much as possible. As a result, it led ECPs to look more closely at their cost structures and find ways to do more with less. "All of this was beneficial for CECOP USA, where our mission is to help provide services that help reduce the hassle factors of running a practice while increasing practice growth and profit," he said.

Alvord noted that alliances and buying groups in the eyecare sector have been around for many years. About two-thirds of independent ECPs already are a member or utilizing a group organization in some way, and many even have multiple group affiliations. "While many groups have been stagnant with respect to innovation and change, I do think independents value great deals and services and a partner like CECOP USA that can make their lives easier and help them be more profitable," he said. ■

More →



## Alliances Bulk Up

# IDOC Rolls Out a Suite of Services to Support Indie ODs

The past year has been one of evolution and change for the IDOC organization, as the group moved to implement the key elements of a long-term strategic plan. Amid the changing business environment for independent ODs, IDOC saw an opportunity to innovate and adapt—not to just advise doctors about how to run their practice, “but to do it for them, better serving our members and the independent community,” IDOC president and chief executive officer Dave Brown noted. “This led us to the rollout of a complete range of ‘Let IDOC Do It’ services—meaning the practice off-loads the work to IDOC experts.”

Brown told *Vision Monday* that the goal behind this initiative was simple: IDOC wants to offer the kind of business expertise, tools, education and relationship-building that gives its members’ practices an edge and releases them from the burdens business owners face each day.

The organization has significantly invested into these services to bring to market the best products available.

In addition, he said, the ROI for members enrolled in these services has been significant. The five key areas the organization has concentrated on with this offering are:

- Marketing (website design, build and social media).
- Optical (inventory management).
- Finance (bookkeeping and benchmarking).
- HR (HR-staffed hotline, compliance documents, advice tailored to specific state laws).
- And Specialty to provide widespread coverage throughout the practice, freeing members’ time to focus on great patient care and pursuits outside of the office.

As part of this program, IDOC takes over the work of key parts of the practice. As a result, the ROI has been significant from the start for ECPs and IDOC has invested significantly to further support independent ODs.



*The IDOC staff at the group's Connection meeting earlier this year.*

Also over the past year in addition to the expansion of service offerings, IDOC has added seven new vendor partners and three ODs to its board of directors—Dr. Ansel Johnson, Dr. Katie Greiner and Dr. Janelle Davison—to lend their valuable offerings and expertise to the IDOC community. A few of the vendors also are “an offshoot of our internal DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) efforts and provide new options for our members to support diversity in their patient bases,” Brown said.

IDOC added seven new salespeople from various service selling backgrounds, as well as optical industry veterans, 10 new IDOC service-specific experts and an in-house marketing agency. Amid one of the toughest environments to hire and retain talent, IDOC was able to take its team fully remote, hire great talent to help IDOC succeed and repeat as a two-time winner of Great Place To Work certification, Brown said.

He added, “We now offer services that take work off the plate of the OD. And that work is typically in areas where an OD owner—and their staff too—are not trained to have expertise. Whereas our team is ‘All-Expert,’ trained bookkeepers, expert website builders, expert social marketers, trained inventory



*IDOC president and CEO Dave Brown (c) in a team-building session with IDOC's Alyssa Pirbhai, Ilana Thombs and Anthony Catalano.*

managers from retail outlets and more.”

Brown said IDOC's members operate more than 2,200 practice locations and that these members are “highly engaged,” with 100 percent of members utilizing IDOC programs, more than 95 percent using three or more vendor programs and the organization is “nearly at 10 percent utilization of our services after only six months since launch,” he added.

“It is our belief that ‘numbers’ do not tell the story of the value of an alliance. Engagement of

**Continued on page 46**

## The Eye Consortium's Message Around 'Independents' Resonates With Members

Since its founding in 2019, The Eye Consortium (TEC) has earned its stripes as one of the fastest-growing alliances for independent-minded eyecare and optical practices. The group's mission and philosophy are built upon the idea of creating a community of like-minded business people on the ECP side and to match them with a curated, specialized group of vendors who want to see independent eyecare continue to grow and thrive.

Indeed, TEC describes itself as “a high-level strategy” that is designed to accelerate the performance and success of independent practices in the challenging business environment that has become the standard in optical and eyecare today. Practice differentiation and premium patient experiences are among the keys to operating a successful and thriving independent and profitable practice, the founders noted.

These founders—Matt Alpert, OD, and Robert Chu, OD, who are practicing optometrists—have experience working in various roles across the eyecare industry and came up with the idea to launch the alliance out of a small study group they had initiated.

The goal of The Eye Consortium, in part, is to help practices maintain a unique environment for their patients, while increasing profitability. The founders note that after years of watching profits erode and dispensaries become commoditized, “a novel approach is imperative. Practice differentiation and the patient experience are keys to an independent and profitable practice.”

“We’ve had a pretty consistent growth pattern, and we’re up to about 1,700 or closer to 1,800 members as of March,” Alpert told *Vision Monday* in a recent interview, noting that he expects TEC to show continuing and consistent growth. “The message that we’re putting out in the marketplace about where [independent ECPs] spend their money matters, and differentiation [in the optical] matters ... This is gathering steam,” he said.

The group was “under the radar” at the begin-



ning, Dr. Chu noted, but “word-of-mouth and referrals have been the absolute No. 1 driver to get us where we are now.”

There are no membership fees and no long-term contracts.

At the heart of its model is the idea that TEC will partner with industry leading independent suppliers who do want to support independent practices and to see these ECPs succeed. A recent addition is the Evolution program, which offers additional benefits to support member practices and to enhance differentiation and independence.

The new Evolution supplier partners include Alcon, De Rigo REM, OCUSOFT, Zeiss Meditec, and an enhanced offer from Carl Zeiss Vision.

Along with offering its ECP members best-in-class products, TEC has been established around the idea of vendor exclusivity, as well. This idea “really kind of caught fire,” Alpert said. “We don’t just take any company as a vendor if they’re willing to offer a discount. We want the best-in-class and unique offerings for each slice of our industry. So our premier lens vendor is Zeiss, and because we’re offering them exclusivity, the deal we get is the best-in-class.”

As a result of the vendor exclusivity concept, there’s a unique relationship between TEC and its partners that produces benefits for the doctor and the vendor partner alike. And it enables TEC to continue to build innovative, best-in-class programs, differentiated products with the highest levels of service, and maintain the ability to make you more profitable, the group said.



Robert Chu, OD



Matt Alpert, OD

Alcon is the sole contact lens vendor, and one of the newest to come on board with TEC. The founders call the new partnership “the final piece of the puzzle to make our basket of offerings complete.”

TEC also has added OCUSOFT for disposable, ancillary products, and new frame vendor De Rigo REM. (The frame offerings, designed to offer a broader selection because of the uniqueness of the category, includes Modo and Lafont, also.)

Asked about the ongoing changes among the competitive marketplace for alliance groups in eyecare, the executives noted that they believe TEC has benefitted from this evolution and helped in the effort to add new member doctors, Alpert said.

“I think there are two things here. There’s a dissatisfaction about working with your competitor, and also doctors don’t want to be all homogenized into the same group,” he explained, noting that TEC is designed to steer clear of the product homogenization that might be characteristic of the mainstream retail channel or via other buying organizations.

“It’s similar to how the consumer experience is in the eyewear world,” he added. “A consumer goes out and they think they have choice ...but really it’s the same thing [at all of the major retailers]. And in the Alliance space, it became the same thing. It was all the same thing but with a different wrapper. We wanted to have something that was truly independent and differentiated to offer, and that didn’t just have a different wrapper around it, but the nuts and bolts inside, were actually differentiated.” ■

## Alliances Bulk Up



### ADO Sets Itself Apart With Unique Lens, Frames and Marketing Services

**A**DO Practice Solutions has been providing industry-leading savings and business services to help independent eyecare professionals manage their practice with ease, control costs and increase profitability for over 35 years. The organization, a unit of Walman, notes that it prides itself in keeping practices in complete control of their businesses.

“We are the group that originated the flat-fee model back in 2012, making us the first group to be considered an ‘Alliance with Buying Group benefits,’” said Jobe Sellers, vice president and general manager of ADO Core topics and programs. “So we’re the best of both worlds where the independent ECP doesn’t have to choose. They can benefit from all of our services without having to join an additional group to get the full benefits.”

At ADO, the main programs for independent ECPs focus on savings, growth and maximizing success. And all membership levels entail full implementation of the programs within those levels, according to Sellers. “Full implementation is definitely where we stand out from our competitors. Not only do we train, but we all implement what we train and consult on,” he added.

ADO offers three membership levels, each designed to align with a practice’s goals. “Each level provides unmatched cost-savings and growth-focused programs,” said Kim Bratcher, director of member relations for ADO.

The first level of membership is the ADO Core membership. Through an ADO Core membership, the group focuses on increasing the practice’s buying power with cost-savings programs and simplified purchasing processes. “We help the practice reduce and align its cost of goods while saving them time and energy so they can keep the practice focused on patient care,” Bratcher said.

This level of membership features a flat-fee membership rate with no contract, and it offers the best discounts from the largest vendors in all categories. There also are more than 20 unique vendor rebates across all categories including contact lens,

ophthalmic lens, frames and supplies.

This level includes quarterly rebates from each premier vendor partner based on net purchases, discounts and offers on everyday purchases and first-time purchase exclusives from all premier vendor partners. New in 2022 in this level are the addition of medical surgical vendor suppliers.

The Core membership also features “CLogic,” a contact lens program that offers savings opportunities and no minimum requirements. It provides access to both manufacturer and distributor rebate offerings. The CLogic program allows practices of all sizes to participate in contact lens rebates, and the rebates are guaranteed and are paid out on a monthly basis, which ADO said is unique to the industry.

The Core membership level offers ophthalmic lens rebates, with exclusive rebates from three manufacturers and a free frame-shipping program, which has existed for more than 10 years. This aspect of the Core level membership “grew immensely popular over COVID and continues to do so,” Bratcher said, noting that it allows a practice to leave its best sellers on-board, which increases revenue opportunities and decreases understock situations.

The free-shipping program is a great solution for practices that are short-staffed, and helps with frame board management and shipping costs, Bratcher said.

With the Core membership, members also receive dedicated resources to help practices, including ongoing staff training and customer service.

The second level of membership is ADO Accelerate, which offers business development support and tools to drive what’s truly important to building independent ECP’s business.

The exclusive programs in this level include Done4You Marketing, a professional marketing service provided for a fixed monthly fee with no contracts. It has produced notable results for practices utilizing its services, including achieving an optical revenue increase, on average, of 17 percent. This increase has held strong since 2017, ADO said.



Done4You marketing provides ECPs a dedicated expert to manage and execute all of their marketing initiatives. “I created this program in 2015 based on the needs of the practices,” Trish Olson, director of marketing and creator of Done4You Marketing, said. “And to this day, our members appreciate that we do full implementation of all their marketing and not just pieces of it.”

Done4You marketing has been dedicated to providing revenue-based results and customized marketing to help clients stand out in a competitive marketplace. “We’re focused on helping independent eyecare professionals across the country thrive with our cohesive marketing strategies in order to grow their practices and increase their capture rate, revenue per patient, and maximize third-party plans without seeing another patient,” Olson said.

Done4You Marketing works “from start to finish,” and it is designed to drive practice growth by increasing capture rate and revenue per patient, while maximizing third-party plans, Olson said.

The top level of ADO membership is known as the Peak Performance level and it includes all of the buying opportunities and resources of the other two membership levels, and it is designed to help each practice focus on maximizing success. This exclusive membership level includes all that ADO has to offer, including exclusive events, education, networking and strategic consulting for continued growth. ■

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## Alliances Bulk Up



# PECAA, Delivering More With HEA Adds New Resources, Tools

Change has been the routine, not the exception, across much of optical and eyecare over the past two years. Perhaps no organization has seen as big an alteration as the now combined PECAA and HEA groups, which have officially become “PECAA, Delivering more with HEA” after a deal combined the two entities in the summer of 2021. The rebranded company launched at the recent Vision Expo East event in late March in New York City.

As the groups came together, they also launched PECAA Max, which the executives said is “the industry’s only single source membership, combining the size and scale of a buying group with the community, connection, and practice growth expertise of an alliance group.”

PECAA Max members have access to all PECAA, Delivering more with HEA has to offer, including industry-leading vendor partnerships, consolidated billing, nationwide peer-to-peer communities, the PECAA annual meeting, and business advisory services in the areas of finance, optical, operations, billing and coding, and marketing. All of these tools and resources are included in a monthly membership fee, the organization noted.

“As an organization, we’ve really had the biggest amount of change in the past year,” Dr. Justin Manning, chief member experience officer, told *Vision Monday* in an interview.

He added, “Our primary goals focus on expanding the role we play in our members’ practice success. As we are the only organization that provides both buying group and alliance services in a single membership, membership means saving practices even more time and money by allowing them to ‘declutter’ their existing partnerships. More than ever, we are committed to meeting our members where they are, providing them the tools, resources and strategies they need to compete in 2022 and beyond.”

As the organizations came together, an updated leadership team emerged. This team included: Jamie Hughes, the former SVP and GM of PECAA,



Jim McGrann

who has become chief operating officer, and Dr. Lance Anderson, a co-founder and VP of strategic initiatives at PECAA, who has become chief strategy officer. Stephanie Lucas took on the role of chief growth officer, and the group named Michael Freiburghouse as chief financial officer. Jim McGrann, who led HEA, is chairman and CEO of the combined organization.

The initial reaction to the enlarged organization has been very positive. “It’s been extremely, extremely positive, primarily because they are two [formerly] independent companies that have a passion for and a history of supporting and growing the independent channel,” Dr. Manning said. “The members are thrilled to see two companies that are passionate about supporting independent eyecare coming together ... and that now have much greater size and scale to work on behalf of the independent.”

The group now serves more than 9,000 members (tied to businesses/Tax-IDs), which encompasses 12,000 independent eyecare professionals across all 50 states. The membership includes optometrists, ophthalmologists, opticians, schools of optometry, and large optometry/ophthalmology health centers.

Manning noted the group is working toward placing a strong focus on helping members “win



with e-commerce and omnichannel, managed vision care, and the full life-cycle of the business—from starting cold to executing the exit strategy that is right for each of our members.”

In the current environment for eyecare, PECAA, Delivering more with HEA believes there is a significant opportunity for independent eyecare to thrive and grow. “However, the competition continues to get smarter and more sophisticated in how they attract, market to, and sell to patients,” Manning explained.

“Inflation, staffing, managed vision care and [other challenges] impact a practice’s ability to be successful and profitable. Membership groups like PECAA and others exist to serve these needs of independents and allow them to tap deeper into the power they have as practice owners.”

One area that the organization is addressing is staffing at the practice levels. Beginning with the pandemic, staffing has become “far and away the biggest problem our members continue to face,” Manning said. “It is extremely difficult for our members to stay fully staffed, and they are struggling to expand and hire more.”

As a result, now more than ever, practice culture is key to attracting and retaining team members. At PECAA, Delivering more with HEA, the team is working to support the strengthening of its members’ practice cultures to support their staffing needs, the group said.

“Attracting and retaining staff is affecting their ability to grow and be profitable,” Dr. Manning noted. “In addition, stagnant vision care plan reim-

**Continued on page 48**

## Alliances Bulk Up



### Opti-Port Strives to Provide the ‘Right Community’ and Resources

**F**ounded over 20 years ago, Opti-Port is a national alliance of leading multi-office eyecare providers that leverages the combined strength of its member practices to create revenue-enhancing, cost-saving and market-expanding opportunities. Opti-Port is the only eyecare alliance dedicated solely to supporting large, regional multi-office practice groups. The alliance has grown to include 59 multi-location practice groups that represent over 500 practice locations, with several members routinely appearing in *Vision Monday’s* annual Top 50 Optical Retailers report.

Opti-Port leaders are focused on creating the right community and providing the right resources and savings to meet the needs of Opti-Port members. Some key areas of focus are:

- Continued work with key vendors to control inflationary challenges and empower organic growth.

- Expansion of exclusive study groups to unlock the shared opportunities and challenges faced by members.

- Increased educational opportunities for members.

- Additional member services resources to support the continued growth of our members. For example, introduction of Opti-Port’s private label contact lens products (launched in 2022).

“Opti-Port’s study groups are a particular super power that we have utilized to maximize profitability and sustain growth for our members for years,” said Jason Lake, OD, Opti-Port’s general manager. “Multi-practice groups face unique challenges and have unique opportunities—and our study groups are essential to unlocking both. In

**Continued on page 46**



Jason Lake, OD

### PERC Offers the Benefits of Collaboration and Buying Power

**F**ounded in 2008, PERC is a doctor alliance designed to ensure member practices greatly improve their bottom line by harnessing collective buying power to negotiate advantageous terms with vendors. The group’s no charge, risk-free membership model is open to all private practices and its low-burden to entry setup has unlocked rapid growth for the alliance, which recently surpassed 7,000 members, according to the alliance’s executives.

To continue providing savings and resources greater than those of competing no- or low-cost alliances while driving incremental value for members, PERC is concentrating efforts in several key areas, the executives noted:

- Delivering the best no- or low-cost alliance savings from industry leading vendors in the key member spend categories of spectacle lab and lens, contact lenses and frames.

- Offering a suite of private label contact lenses to members—the only no- or low-cost alliance group to do so.

- Evolving the PERC Advantage frame supply program with new brands and savings opportunities.

“The past few years have been a time of exceptional growth and learning for PERC, as we rallied to answer the needs of our 7,000-plus members,” said Jason Lake, OD, PERC’s general manager. “We expect to continue growing as more and more private practice owners realize the benefit of collaboration to achieve advantageous cost of goods and services pricing.”

PERC will continue to remain very focused on helping members save money in their largest spend categories. The group noted that it aims to be the obvious alliance choice for private

practices seeking a streamlined path to saving the most money outside of a high-touch, high-service alliance model.

“Savings have always been the foundational benefit of PERC membership and the value we bring members has never been more obvious than during the last several challenging years,” Lake said. “The pandemic brought the strength of our collective buying power into sharp relief as cost containment became even more critical to the private practice owner.

“For PERC, success is in attracting, engaging and retaining members in our easy-to-join, high-savings model alliance,” Lake added. “Our member community is the foundation of our strength, and we are honored they have trusted us to create value for their practices.”

PERC is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■

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## In Busy 2021, Vision Source Adds Members and Expands 'Next' Program

**V**ision Source is North America's most extensive network of independent optometrists, consisting of over 3,150 locally owned optometric practice locations with 4,500 doctors. Founded in 1991, Vision Source is dedicated to preserving the elite business of independent eyecare and providing highly personalized services delivered through a unique heritage of shared expertise, according to the organization.

The year 2021 was a period of growth for Vision Source, both in terms of expansion of the network, with 200 new members added, and in the resources and strengthened strategies deployed to members to ensure their practices are winning.

"We recently expanded our Vision Source Next program—the only private practice initiative that actively provides solutions for all of the life cycle challenges of optometrists," said Jeff Duncan, general manager of Vision Source. "The appointment of Dr. Mick Kling as the leader of Vision Source Next was a critical step for the program.

"Under his leadership, we were able to support the start-up of new practices, add associates to existing practices, and explore and prepare for the transitions between private practice owners. Through our newly introduced Vision Source Next Fund, we are able to support practice owners with supplemental funding to enable more private practice start-ups, expansions and transitions."

In the past year, Vision Source also introduced its Myopia Management protocol, the latest in the organization's suite of exclusive clinical practice protocols.

"The sight-threatening epidemic of progressive myopia is on the rise and it is critical to equip private practices with every resource and the right protocol to combat the condition," Amir Khoshnevis, OD, chief medical officer, said.

"We are able to consult with the collective brain trust of the best doctors in the country to create comprehensive, best-in-class protocols

which include clinical education and implementation strategy, giving our members a trusted resource and roadmap. Now, our myopia management protocol will arm private practitioners to create a lifelong and immensely positive impact for some of our youngest and most vulnerable patients," Dr. Khoshnevis said.

In response to a strong member desire, Vision Source enhanced its exclusive frame board management and integrated supply chain program, Frame Dream, to drive patient satisfaction and delight, practice profitability, cost and inventory controls, and streamline operations.

"We are approaching over 1,000 members who have adopted Frame Dream. As they experience the benefits of the program, many want to manage more of their frame business in this fashion," said Donna Mikulecky, chief operating officer. "Therefore, we have launched Frame Dream Premium and Focus on Frames, which provides additional benefits."

This includes more savings promotions, the PreView online patient frame selection tool, an analytics dashboard and unique in-office branding materials to amplify the benefits of the program.

"Our reason for being is to help our members succeed and we are unwavering in that primary goal," Mikulecky said. "To continue supporting the success of our members, we are intensely focused on three critical areas: improved revenue per patient; expansion of member practices through new patients, new associate ODs and new locations; and driving profitability through unbeatable cost of goods and services savings.

"To help deliver on these goals, we have provided our members with six key practice management strategies around frames and lenses, contact lenses, learning and development, managed care, practice lifecycle solutions and practice marketing," Mikulecky said.

With its member growth continuing last year, Vision Source noted that the infrastructure of the



*The Vision Source management team includes (l to r) Jeff Duncan, Donna Mikulecky, Amir Khoshnevis, OD, and Glenn Ellisor, OD, a founder of the organization.*

organization remains essential to delivering positive results for members, with nearly 350 people, including 180 local doctor leaders and 100-plus local staff leaders, dedicated to helping ensure the success of 3,150 member practices.

"Within the fabric of Vision Source, there is an ongoing dialogue among our members on how to help each other be more successful," Dr. Khoshnevis said.

"It is amazing to have a group of doctors who are continuously focused on accelerating practice growth for themselves and their private practice colleagues. This cultural collaborative element coupled with best-in-class people and resource support from our Vision Source team have really elevated our member practices performance above all others—always outpacing the industry in growth, sometimes by six times the industry pace," Dr. Khoshnevis said.

Vision Source will always measure success by the health of Vision Source members' practices and the organization's ability to deliver on its commitment to lead the way for private practice optometry.

Vision Source is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■

More →



## Opti-Port: Providing the Right Community and Resources for Members

Continued from page 42

the past year, our study groups have focused on continuing to scale their businesses during these dynamic times demonstrating our members can achieve anything when they put their collective minds and talents to work.”

Dr. Lake told *Vision Monday* that over the past year Opti-Port “has really expanded the study groups, and we’ve grown those to three groups ... with 30 some members, pushing 40 members. Those folks are growing at a remarkably faster rate.” The groups meet twice a year, and by virtue of working with peer groups it enables the group members “to accelerate decision-making so much faster, especially with multi-location” practices, he said.

Opti-Port also will hold a national meeting, for the second time, during the first weekend of November in Chicago. Opti-Port held its first national meeting in 2021.

“What we’re trying to do is create a much

more intimate setting, for the people who are there and want to collaborate,” he added.

Opti-Port sees continued expansion of its network in the near and long term. “There are growing regional practice groups across the country who are beginning to encounter the unique challenges our alliance was designed to tackle,” Lake said. “Those practice groups are coming to Opti-Port because they want to be a part of a growing, vibrant community dedicated to solving their unique needs.”

For Opti-Port, the truest measure of success is the success of its members’ businesses. “Our members are looking at sustained organic growth, enhanced profitability and increased size of their operations as indicators of success,” Lake added. “Therefore, our group is intently focused on continuing to deliver the programs, initiatives, and key insights that drive these successes for members.”

Opti-Port is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■



Opti-Port held its first national meeting in 2021, and will meet again in November in Chicago.

## IDOC Rolls Out a Suite of Services to Support Indie ODs

Continued from page 36

members in utilizing the alliance offerings, supporting partners and growth of the practices are correct metrics,” Brown noted. In 2022, IDOC wants to continue membership adoption of its new services as well as have more practices—even if in another alliance—adopt IDOC services.

“In 2022, we are striving to continue providing our members with outstanding service as we expand our member base, grow our full suite of hands-on services, and foster fruitful collaboration with our vendor partners,” Brown said.

Brown said IDOC would like to see 5,000-plus practices using IDOC services, “and soon.” IDOC members are not required to use any of the ser-

vices, which Brown said reflects “how serious we are about helping independent optometry.”

He added, “There is no reason practices should be doing all this work on their own. We can do their marketing, host their website, do their digital marketing, close their books, provide HR help at the most crucial moments via a 24/7 hotline, and manage their entire frame inventory process.”

IDOC has seen “a recent influx of new practices, cold starts and buyouts, where ODs are seeking out help to get started, and taking advantage of all that IDOC has to offer from our services and member benefits,” Brown said. “This population will be able to grow faster and position themselves for success right out of the gate.” ■

# IDOC



Dave Brown



## Leading Alliances and Buying Groups Evolve as ECPs Face New Hurdles

Continued from page 30

single practice).

A clear opportunity of the alliance is to develop and implement training modules that drive the systems of best practices and patient care with the objective of achieving enthusiastic satisfied patients in concert with financial performance outcomes.

Asked whether current circumstances are driving increased interest from ECPs, IDOC president and chief executive Dave Brown noted that he believes there are “two schools of thought amongst ODs” about the benefits and value of participating in an ECP group. “For some, they focus on cost savings, rebates and discounts and move from one alliance to another to find the latest offer and latest savings,” he said. “Other practices avoid this trap and focus on the big picture to take advantage of what [some alliances] can offer.”

Brent Alvord, chief development officer at CECOP USA, said he believes the way many alliances and other groups have evolved is a boon to the independent eyecare community, which is beset by so many threats in today’s market. This runs the gamut from online disruptors, private equity consolidators, retail chains, managed vision care, and even a practice’s own lack of optimization.

“I think the global environment is still experiencing some supply chain issues, rising interest rates and inflation,” he added. “In addition, the war in Ukraine just provides a cloud of uncertainty. However, our experience is that many eyecare professionals are resilient and hopeful. They aren’t hindered by pessimism because their focus is still on helping their patients’ vision. We are blessed to be in this industry that is both a need and a want for the consumer,” Alvord said. ■



## PECAA, Delivering More With HEA Expanding its Role for ECPs

Continued from page 40

bursements and inflation/rising cost of goods challenges their ability to be profitable. We’ve listened to our members and are working this year to invest in new tools to help them address these challenges. We’ve expanded our member business advisory team to include an optical consultant and delivered our Optical Success Initiative with our private label frame line—InD Eyewear.”

The private label frame line has been in the market for about a year, and also has received a favorable response, he said.

In addition, PECAA, Delivering more with HEA has expanded its partnerships with and support of state associations. To date, the group has partnered with 24 state and national professional organizations, recently adding the state optometric

associations of Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Manning added, “As we engage with our members and the broader eyecare community, we look forward to our existing members taking advantage of all PECAA Max has to offer as well as inviting new members into the program to engage with the vendor partners that we believe are most committed to supporting the independent eyecare professional.

“In addition, success is our members engaging with more of our member services, from direct consultations with our Member Business Advisor team to attending more of our business and continuing education events, and attending our annual meeting, which is set for May 19-21 in Palm Springs, Calif., the best live event in eyecare.” ■

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