

COMPETING IN AN ONLINE WORLD

GROWTH



Have you ever ordered products online? You know that the internet often beats a visit to an actual store handsdown in terms of convenience - you don't even need to get dressed or leave your house! With

just a few clicks or taps on your screen you can shop for a great deal.

The market for online shopping is growing at a remarkable rate. Approximately 87% of U.K. consumers have bought at least one product online in the last 12 months, and the United Kingdom is second only to Norway for making e-commerce purchases in Europe. Opinions on why people shop online vary but research has shown that reviews (other shopper's experiences) still come second to product quality and to the price of the item. Value is still very important to consumers. Consumers want the convenience, affordability and range of choice online shopping gives them.¹

It can seem like an unfair market if you are in the bricks and mortar environment and therefore have the attached costs such as property, staff costs, heating, lighting and rates. But how do we make the most of what we offer vs the 'click' experience?

No digital experience will ever replace a strong relationship between an engaged patient and an empathetic optician. However, the right technology can certainly enhance that relationship — and make it possible for you to serve even more patients. Taking the time to provide top-notch customer service, educate patients, and form an ongoing relationship between patients and a trusted eyecare provider are strategies that will not be impacted by online trends.

The first step to engaging patients and maintaining their loyalty is getting them through the door. Digitising your marketing and PR tools is one of the strongest ways to

attract more patients and get existing patients to come back. Read on to find out how to increase your convenience, affordability and range of choice to match what online shopping gives consumers.

YOUR DIGITAL PRESENCE (Convenience and range of choice)

Increasingly, a patient's experience will begin online, so you need to make sure that at this and every other step of the journey, you are providing a great customer experience. In today's on-demand world, the online customer journey is defined and shaped by the customers themselves. Can you do more to showcase your frame range?

Most online eyewear providers feature a catalogue that shows the frames they offer in detail making it possible to view each available colour and read a description of the features, such as what materials they're made of, the type of joints the frames have, and other features. How do you do this with your website? How do you build this towards an opportunity in the practice? Showing features is great but it's the benefits that your patient will buy.

How well do you explain the lens choices available? Again showing the features but concentrating on the benefits for lens coatings, lens materials, thinner lenses, protection from UV, are photochromic lenses a good idea?

Talk about contact lenses, as they will fulfil the needs of many of your existing patients as well as provide an additional income for you. Explain how easy contact lens wear can be and how it can complement the glasses wear they already love.

- **Shout about your USPs – whatever makes you great and unique!**
- **Educate the customer using a mix of patient education topics.**
- **Make sure that your offers/promotions are appealing and clear.**
- **Is your website mobile device friendly? In April 2018, 51.2% of web traffic globally was via mobile device².**



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GETTING INVOLVED

If business is a little slower for you, take the opportunity to get more involved with social media. Today, 66% of UK adults of all ages are social media users, according to the ONS³. Having a presence on social media allows opticians to help shape the narrative about health care and products and services offered.

Utilise social media sites like Instagram and Facebook which give you the opportunity to show off happy patients in their new frames.

Mixing posts that highlight your extensive eyewear selection with posts that feature your practice culture and personality will make your practice feel inviting and give patients a reason to stop by for their purchase, rather than buying from an anonymous online seller.

BE AVAILABLE IN A 24/7 WORLD (Convenience)

In a busy 21st century, many of your customers will be cash rich but time poor. We must look at ways of being available to them. Maximising your digital presence is vital and can be achieved as described above.

One way to save time and build trust with patients is by preparing them in advance of their visit. You can send patients links to informational videos on your website before they come in for their appointment letting them know what treatment options you offer for their condition, what tests they will receive, and what to expect during their visit.

Many optical practices now offer extended hours on evenings and weekends, walk-in appointments, and same day service. These are smart ways to attract today's breed of customers, who are used to instant gratification and 24/7 access. Look at what your town/shopping centre is doing in terms of late nights/extended trading. Can you take advantage of the extra footfall nearby?

Clinics - what is your availability? Look to increase capacity if there is an availability issue. Even if there is no theoretical capacity issue, do you need to consider the impact on clinics if you drive more volume through positive activities.

Do you offer domiciliary services? Maybe you have an untapped local patient base that for a variety of reasons are unable to visit your practice. The most readily available stats show that 3.3% of eye exams are domiciliary⁴.

OWN YOUR TOWN/COMMUNITY

Increase local PR activity and get noticed! Look to see if there are any opportunities for links with local charities and groups.

Don't be afraid to play up the philanthropic side of your business. Participating in volunteer efforts that are relevant to your target patients is a great way to give back and an effective way to encourage patient engagement, while also positioning yourself as an expert and getting your practice's name out there at the same time.

In slack times, hit the street. Leafleting and lens shine activity (offer to clean the specs of any glasses wearer and tell them what your USPs are) are great ways of interacting with shoppers (your prospective customers) in town.

As mentioned previously, consider domiciliary services locally.

MAXIMISE EVERY OPPORTUNITY IN STORE (value of expertise to buy the correct products = affordability)

For your practice to maintain a real advantage make sure your customers get a oneofakind, memorable patient experience from the moment they walk through the door.

Interactive patient education videos can make intimidating topics more accessible to patients online, more importantly in the test room, and help them feel in control of their care decisions. Anyone can Google their symptoms, but a website does not provide the context, reassurance, or ability to address individual questions and concerns the way an optician does.

When patients understand your explanations, it builds confidence in your care recommendations, improves your practice's reputation, and can boost patient referrals.



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An advantage to the patient of going to a traditional optician is that you can walk them through the process and take the proper measurements. When they order online, they must make each decision on their own, and it can seem overwhelming.

In April 2010, Glasses Direct carried out a survey and asked the public what they worried about when they were buying glasses online. Just over half of the people they asked said that they were worried about not having an optician fit their glasses. The online seller says it's best to try them on first promoting 'try them on at home with their free Home Trial' or 'virtually' with their virtual try-on Ditto™. But these neglect to mention that the input of an experienced optical professional is vital to assess fit for comfort and suitability linked to Rx and lens needs.

Position your opticians as personal stylists with access to an entire inventory of frames patients can try on, in person. Guided interactions beat online self-selection!

To retain patients in store, think about providing iPads equipped with virtual try-on technology to let patients see how they'd look in frames you may not have in stock. Lens demonstrations through samples or videos will help the patient better understand the benefits.

Great vision requires accurate measurement – important for frame fit, lens centration and compatibility of frame/lens combinations taking into account Rx and lens type, such as multifocals and office lenses. The optician's expertise will always trump any online offering in these respects. Do you make the most of this explaining the stages and importance of fittings and measurements? Do you have instore technology helping the patient see and understand the importance of accurate measurements?

Maximise each patient interaction – discuss everything from eyewear needs to eye health history to lifestyle behaviours, even down to factors like face shape and eye colour. With these considerations in mind, you can gather a curated set of options for patients to try on until they find their ideal fit. Patients cannot get that from a website.

Patients also cannot get follow-up care from an online seller (often the seller will simply offer a refund and not attempt to solve any issues). Make the most of your

availability to answer questions/concerns. Offer free 'service checks' on the glasses where they can be checked for fitting and comfort as well as any loose screws or lenses.

Utilise these ad-hoc opportunities – for patients coming in to have an adjustment or repair etc - is there an additional purchase they may wish to make? Cases, accessories, cleaning products, cords, chains - gifts for others or something for themselves? This can again help to enhance the in-store experience by providing real benefits not available from the online sellers.

Multiple pair purchases could be the ideal outcome for you and your patient. By showing your expertise in these areas and matching patient needs with your full offering of products:

- **Promote sunglasses – often seen as an item for the summer season, they can be a great sale for the patients off for some winter sun overseas as well as during the summer**
- **Don't forget sports eyewear for those hitting the ski slopes or playing sports.**
- **SALE/PROMOTIONS - do you want to offer a discount/offer to drive more footfall? You may be in a situation where you wish to push end of season stock to make way for new styles. Another way to generate more business and get rid of old inventory at the same time is to try a 2 for 1 offer.**

Further resources and ideas can be found in the ABDO Business Support Hub:

See the Growth and Product & Marketing sections.

FURTHER INFORMATION

<https://www.nasdaq.com/article/uk-online-shopping-and-e-commerce-statistics-for-2017-cm761063>

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/306528/share-of-mobile-internet-traffic-in-global-regions/>
2. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/datasets/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividualsreferencetables>
3. GOC Optical Sector Report 2014-15