



## Maximizing The Expo Experience

March 29, 2009 12:21 AM

NEW YORK—As in past years, Vision Expo attendees are coming to the Javits Center to see and purchase the latest products and learn new skills to help them grow their practices and businesses. This year, many Expo attendees, conscious of the current economic crisis, are walking the aisles of the exhibit hall with a greater sense of purpose and a sharper focus on maximizing their Expo experience.

Although not all regions of the country are equally affected by the recession, eyecare professionals on both East and West coasts reported that their customers are looking for ways to economize.

### **The Retailer Perspective**

“I’m a little bit more price conscious now, given how the economy is doing,” said Sue Stoneburner, The Spectacle Shop, Eugene, Ore., who is here looking for new frame lines. “I want to buy frames that will give our customers the best value. In Eugene, we’ve been hit hard. The next few months could be kind of scary.”

Pat Langone, owner/optician at The Optical House in Wakefield, Mass., said he is also adjusting his Expo purchasing so it is in line with his customers’ budgets. “Our business is doing okay, but we’re seeing consumers definitely watching their spending—we’re selling a lot of meat and potatoes, and not many fancy bottles of wine,” remarked Langone. “Here at Vision Expo, I’m looking for low-priced frames, mainly for insurance patients, along with office furniture, lenses and computer equipment.”

Some attendees, such as chain executive Sam Herskowitz of Sterling Optical/Emerging Vision, believe the worst is over. “I think today’s economy is a ‘good news, bad news’ situation: the bad news is, it’s still rough out there,” Herskowitz said. “The good news is, it’s not as rough as it was a few months ago. Everybody is trying to adjust to the current economic environment. We had a really good 2008 through the Fall, then things got tough. But each month since November has been better and better.”

Although some eyecare professionals and optical retailers are beefing up their value-priced and mid-priced eyewear selections, others are concentrating just as much attention on strengthening

their mix of higher-end merchandise.

**“We try to have price points from budget to very exclusive,” said Barbara Cline, manager of Randolph Eye Associates, which operates two locations in Randolph, Mass. “Yesterday, I bought a lot of name brands because there are a lot of people who come in today looking for certain name brands. Today, I plan on going to The Underground and The Galleria to purchase higher-end [frames].”**

Larry Sands of Optical Shop of Aspen is cautiously optimistic that his high-end frames will continue to sell well. “The word on Madison Avenue, where we just opened our Chrome Hearts store is that doors will be closing soon. But ours is open for business and that business is still strong.”

### **The Exhibitor Experience**

“Although early indications are that we are off by 14 percent on day one attendance, a great number of our exhibitors have indicated that business activity is strong and has exceeded their expectations,” said Tom Loughran, event director for Reed Exhibitions. “We are pleased to see that the preliminary data for Day Two attendance numbers are encouraging, and we are extremely hopeful that we will close the gap with last year’s event.”

Expo exhibitor Marj McGraw, of Nouveau Eyewear has noticed that Expo attendees are evaluating purchases with a more discerning eye than in past years. “The buyers have been making focused buying decisions and there are not as many browsers,” she noted.

Yet other exhibitors said they and their customers have yet to feel the economy’s effects. “What bad economy?” asked Roger Shyer of Eastern States Eyewear.

Don Howard of the Kenmark Group had a similar reaction. “The retailers I’ve talked to at the show seem pretty upbeat; many are saying they’re seeing the same amount of customers, but those consumers may not be spending as much money,” said Howard.”—*Expo Daily Staff Report*