

# VISION MONDAY

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## Cover Story: Protecting PAL Profits

How ECPs and retailers are selling progressives to price sensitive patients

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Cover Story: Protecting PAL Profits

- Cautious Consumers Still Want Quality Lenses



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NEW YORK—Progressive addition lenses, or PALs, epitomize so-called “premium lenses.” Over the past decade, continual advances in PAL technology such as digital surfacing have

yielded better optics, greater customization and improved comfort and cosmetics. This has helped PALs retain their premium luster and allowed dispensers and retailers to charge top dollar for them. A leading brand name PAL fully loaded with a personalized design, high-index material, anti-reflective and scratch resistant hydrophobic-oleophobic coating, photochromics and a polished edge might cost \$250 wholesale, yet retail for as much as \$450.

VM found that doctors and dispensers are using a variety of strategies to sell PALs to patients who are feeling the pressures of the recession and are especially price sensitive. At Randolph Eye in Mattapan, Mass., optometrist Ronald Cline offers tried-and-true PALs at reasonable prices, an approach he said appeals to the mostly low- to middle-income patients who comprise the bulk of his clientele.



Jacqueline Leonard of Southwest Eyecare in Albuquerque, N.M. said this Gunnar Optiks in-store display attracts a lot of attention from progressive lens-wearing customers.

“We usually offer progressives that cost between \$180 to \$200,” said Dr. Cline. “We don’t encourage the very high-end products. Our workhorse lens is Varilux Comfort. I wear it myself. Although the Varilux 360 lenses are higher tech, they’re very high priced and I haven’t found them to be that much different. Our patients don’t appreciate a lot of the higher technology.”

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Southwest Eyecare in Albuquerque, N.M., is promoting some of the latest digitally-surfaced progressives. Jacqueline Leonard, office operations manager and optician, said that although business is down about 23 percent overall compared to pre-recession levels, lens sales are increasing. “I attribute that to premium lenses and progressive lens prices,” she said. “We didn’t increase lens prices per se, we just added another tier of premium lenses, which consists of the Shamir Autograph II.

“Last year, we sold very little free-form product, but this year we’re selling quite a bit,” she continued. “Our optician wasn’t aware of the benefits of free-form, but our lab, Optic Blue in Lubbock, Texas, came in and explained them.” Sales of computer lenses such as the Shamir Office, which features near and intermediate vision zones but no distance zone, have also helped raise lens revenues, Leonard reported.

Southwest Eyecare also carries the Gunnar Optiks progressive. “They are packaged in consumer-friendly way so it’s easy for us to talk to patients about the lens,” said Leonard. “Gunnar has a nice display, easy to understand brochures and a consumer-friendly Web site. They also do a lot of consumer advertising in magazines for computer users.”

Leonard said that although the total number of PALs sold by Southwest Eyecare hasn't increased noticeably, patients are shifting to higher performance lenses, which in turn is boosting PAL revenues.

At Spectrum Vision Center, which provides family vision care in the San Diego, California suburb of Murietta, David Dortch, OD is also upgrading PAL wearers to the latest digitally designed and surfaced lenses. "I've been a big fan of Zeiss for a number of years," Dr. Dortch said. "The Zeiss GT2 has been a good workhorse lens for us. We're branching out into new lenses such as the Zeiss Individual and GT2 3D Short, and trying to shift the mindset of our patients toward freeform-type lenses."



David Dortch, OD uses the Zeiss i.Terminal to measure a patient for progressive lenses at Spectrum Vision Center in Murietta, Calif..

Dr. Dortch acknowledged he may get some pushback from PAL wearers who don't want to pay a premium for a lens such as Zeiss Individual, which Spectrum Vision Center sells for \$450 versus the GT2, which it sells for \$250. "Price will be an issue we'll be confronted with more and more," he predicted. "Ultimately, it will boil down to performance. If we can take those patients who were dissatisfied with progressives and satisfy them, then we'll know we're succeeding."

Dr. Dortch is seeking testimonials from patients who like their new PALs. "We want to capture what patients are saying about how much easier these lenses are on their eyes, how they experience less strain and are able to find the sweet spot in the lenses more easily," he said.



At Brandywine Optical, a dispensary that serves a 3-O practice in Wilmington, Delaware, offering a full range of progressive lenses at several different price tiers is the key to increasing PAL sales. "We offer every brand available, with pricing from the lower end such as Essilor's Adaptar up to Varilux Physio 360 and Hoya iD," said optician Jerry Angert.

When purchasing progressive lenses, price sensitive patients at Leader Heights Eye Center in York, Pa. usually trust the recommendation of optician Sandra Shaffer.

"We started phasing in tiered pricing about six months ago," said Angert, adding that the current economic situation had some impact on deciding to do it. "We offer three different tiers for a complete pair of glasses," he said. "Each tier starts with a basic offering of progressives, lower end usually. If they want a Physio 360 or iD, they'll pay a premium. We let customers mix and match frames and lenses. Most people are staying right in the middle. It takes a commitment to spend bucks, to get a really high-end progressive."



Packaging PALs together with frames is an approach that works well for Value Vision, a three-store optical retail chain near Buffalo, N.Y., according to manager Terry Miller Lampke. When purchasing progressive lenses, price sensitive patients at Leader Heights Eye Center in York, Pa. usually trust the recommendation of optician Sandra Shaffer.

Packaging PALs together with frames is an approach that works well for Value Vision, a 40-year old optical chain consisting of three stores in the Buffalo, N.Y. area. "We offer package pricing

for everything. That's what making us successful," said Terry Miller Lampke, manager of Value Vision. "All our frames are priced the same, and they're all covered by insurance."

Value Vision sells a package including a frame and a progressive lens, which it advertises as an "invisible bifocal," for as little as \$147. Customers can use discount coupons clipped from the company's Yellow Pages ad to get the best price on a progressive.

"Our standard progressive is the Younger Image," Lampke noted. "We rarely order Varilux or other brands." Lampke said the Value Vision's progressive lens sales as well as its total sales are up from a year ago because its affordable package pricing appeals to value-minded consumers. "People with insurance love to come to us, as well those who buy on a cash basis. In this economy, we'll probably survive better than some of our competitors," she remarked.

Although price is an important factor for most PAL wearers, the recommendation of their doctor or dispenser often influences their purchasing decision more than their pocketbook.

"Even though some patients are price sensitive, they generally trust what we say when it comes to progressive lenses," said Sandra Shaffer, an optician at Leader Heights Eye Center in York, Pa. Shaffer noted that when purchasing PALs, patients typically stick with the lenses they are used to and do not economize by purchasing less expensive PALs. "We give our patients what's best for them," she explained. "We wouldn't change which lens we dispense them just for price. If they're in a Varilux or a Kodak Concise, we'll keep them in. It depends more on their prescription and the depth of the frames."

Shaffer said that she and other staffers stay up on the latest developments in PALs by attending classes at Vision Expo and having trainers come in from wholesale laboratories such as Homer Optical.



Optician Debora Ramirez of Optical Illusions tracks a patient's head and eye movements using Essilor's VisionPrint system.

As any experienced dispenser knows, taking accurate PD measurements is an essential part of dispensing progressive lenses. Although measurements taken with handheld PD rulers were once deemed adequate, the increasing sophistication of the latest digitally surfaced PALs requires dispensers to measure not only monocular PD, but vertex distance, pantoscopic tilt and facial wrap. Lens manufacturers such as Carl Zeiss Vision, Indo, Essilor and Shamir as well as vendors such as A.B.S. Smart Mirror and Activisu have introduced tools and systems to take more detailed and accurate measurements. A growing number of eyecare professionals are relying on these technologies to successfully fit patients in the more advanced PAL designs.



Eli Ben-Moshe, OD, measuring a patient for progressive lenses with Indo's Center system.

Dr. Dortch is a fan of the Zeiss i.Terminal, which he and his staff Spectrum Vision Center have been using for over a year. "People are using their close and intermediate more and more," he observed. "We need to optimize the lateral area in their lenses and make sure they have best balance between distance, medium and close up zones. It takes

something like the Zeiss i.Terminal to allow the lenses to be fit accurately.”

Dr. Dortch said the last PAL-wearing patient who was fit using the i.Terminal had been fit previously by another doctor who didn't use the system. “The report from my staff was that it was the best pair of glasses he ever had,” said Dr. Dortch.

“Patients have been intrigued and impressed with the high tech nature of the i.Terminal assessment,” he said. “Probably the single biggest drawback is the time it takes to set up and collect the data needed. But in time, I'm sure that too will become minimal.”

At Newport Ave. Optometrists in San Diego, California, Eli Ben-Moshe, OD favors the Indo Center system for measuring patients for PALs. “We've tried other systems, but found the Center to be more accurate and the easiest for my employees to use. It's the only one that doesn't have human error when taking measurements such as monocular optical center and monocular PD. The Center gives us much more confidence with progressives,” said Dr. Ben-Moshe, who typically prescribes Shamir Autograph and Piccolo progressives. “It automatically transfers measurements to my edger without any human error, and uses a bar code system so you don't even have to enter numbers.”

Some eyecare practices employ more than one type of measurement system. Optical Illusions, a dispensary that services the 60-year-old practice of Drs. Swanson, Sowers, Lee and Yager in Orlando, Florida, uses two systems. Essilor's VisionPrint system measures a patient's head and eye movement and is used for fitting Varilux Ipeo progressives. The Z-View Wavefront Aberrometer, which measures higher order aberrations is used for fitting iZon PALs from Ophthonix.

“Patients are used to having us just put a PD stick up to their nose and dot the lenses with a felt marker,” said optician Debora Ramirez. “When they see these types of devices they are very impressed and become very excited about getting their glasses. Some patients may have heard that progressives are hard to get used to, and this allays their concerns. It's very precise, very professional. It differentiates our practice from our competitors.” According to Ramirez, patients from as far away as Delaware have come to Optical Illusions to be measured with the Z-View.

Stephen Rozenberg, OD, who is a partner in 10/10 Optics, an optical boutique in New York City, has tried some progressive lens measuring systems and has been dissatisfied. But part of the difficulty with dispensing progressives is the lenses themselves, he stated.

“Progressives, on paper, are the best thing since Mom's apple pie. The problem is the complexities and mathematics of every design is not understood by most eyecare professionals. It's kind of random. If a lens we like doesn't work, we'll try another.

“There's also a certain level of inaccuracy in measurements,” Rozenberg continued. “Even though we have all these instruments, there's still a margin of error. A lot of people who wear progressives don't keep their glasses in the same place on their face all the time.

“Progressives are not perfection,” he said. “Most people would see better with a computer lens or a single-vision reading lens than with the appropriate area on a progressive. But most people who wear progressives are happy, and we all make money, so it’s OK.” ■