

October 2013

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A house brand renaissance features expanded niches and technological advances, as well as presentation and service tips

By Amy Spiezio

House brands, or non-licensed brands, have moved beyond their previous optical role as a board filler or super-low-priced option. Offering more style, technology, and sales support than ever, these collections are coming into their own.

“In the past, house brands or non-licensed brands were synonymous with inexpensive, basic product that had little design and no cohesion as a collection. The driving factor was low price. Today, many non-licensed collections are marketed as premium eyewear brands and are very successful and prestigious in the marketplace,” says Bev Suliteanu, vice president of product for WestGroupe.

Following is a rundown of some highlights and insights for house brand success.

TAP INTO TECH

TOne of the biggest leaps for the house brand has been the growth in its role as a technology-driven product category. Whether it’s memory metals, new chassis, hinge developments, or the latest clip, these frames may not have a brand, but they have a technological draw that attracts and keeps patients.

“Technology, from a consumer standpoint, has a lot more of a draw. It’s great to have those name brands and there’s definitely a draw, but they have a life cycle. Technology has a little longer following, and the patients are more likely to come back and ask for that technology year after year because they like what it does and the functionality of it as opposed to just the

Ways to Build Your House Brands



Viva International Group's house brand Sassy's fall collection



Present frames without their clips on the board and with regular eyewear. Shown, Aspex's Takumi style TK936

Below: Evatik style 9083 from WestGroupe



style or the look or the fit or anything like that. That's where technology has a real stronghold in the market, [and] you will see a lot more longevity in the market because of it," says Aspex's vice president of sales Robert Kennard.

STOCK FOR INDIVIDUALITY, QUALITY, AND PROFIT

2 House brands can serve as a point of differentiation. "I'm a sole practitioner, a lot of people do what I do, and now we have the Internet. What can I show you as the patient that's unique enough to keep you coming back next year and [the year after that]?" asks Howard Woolf, OD, of Woolf & Woolf Optometrists in Pasadena and Baltimore, MD.

At Woolf & Woolf, they have 500+ styles, with 40 to 60 percent from fashion lines, "because you have to have it in order to do what's right for the patient," he says.

But the tech-savvy house brands may be more profitable in the long

run, because "styles that bring a unique value to the transaction can be marked up higher because of their benefit to patients," Woolf says.

Quality at lower prices is a strong selling story. "The house brands of today are nothing like they were 10 or 15 years ago," says Vivid Eyewear co-owner Elliot Friedman. "We take great pride in our materials, shapes, and color combinations. We have no up-front licensing fees, allowing us to offer our products at a modest price point, which in turn creates a greater profit margin for our customers."

PROMOTE LIKE A BRAND

3 When making a commitment to house brands, ECPs have to approach their sales as they would a name-brand collection, with attention paid to

their presentation.

"They should be promoted and displayed the same way that licensed brands are marketed," Suliteanu says. "Use the point-of-sale materials to help merchandise the brand and create a presence for them at the store level. We put a lot of emphasis on the marketing of our brands in order to help promote the brands, both to the ECPs and the consumer. All of our brands have point-of-sale materials that help build the brand image."

DISPLAY AND PRESENT

4 Though putting out frames is good to let patients know you have a variety on hand, Woolf suggests that the display is just that: a display, not a shopping wall.

Instead, he has found great success picking the best frames for his patients based on their Rx and lifestyle information and giving those to the opticians for patient hand over.

"We have a large display, but I pick the frames. There's the top

Finding the Sweet Spot

5 Want to sell more house brands? Consider putting them in your sweet spots. What are they? Notes Aspex's vice president of sales Robert Kennard: "There are sweet spots in every dispensary, and the most well-oiled machines know where the sweets spots are."

Shouldn't your name brands take those spaces? The name is the draw for them, Kennard adds: "So [because] licensed brands or the really big brand names have a huge consumer recognition, you can really put them any place in your dispensary and the patient is going to be able to find those whether they have signage up or just the logo on the demo lenses."

So that leaves space for house brands in sweet spots, typically located on both sides of a wall mirror or at eye level as you pan through the dispensary. By placing house brands in these sweet spots, Kennard says, "you'll have a greater chance of the patient finding those and falling in love with something that's going to suit them perfectly."

Customized Eyewear

6 Offering one-off custom eyewear frames, Individjual Eyewear started in Abilene, TX, 11 years ago with research and development and began selling four years ago through its website, individjual.com. Starting with a block of Italian plastic and European hardware, the company uses a Fit Kit completed by patients to develop and create eyewear suited for faces of every size and shape. "Our object is to make the patient look great, to flatter his or her face," company CEO Randall Barnett says.

Another consideration of the collection is the relatively low pricepoint for a bespoke frame.

"Our objective was to make them reasonably priced," notes Barnett. "They're still expensive, but we've been able to drive the price down where now an entry-level, basic custom frame is \$745."

And now the process is also involving ECPs. "We discovered that optometrists struggle finding adequate product for the hard-to-fit patient. And though it might not be more than five to 10 percent of their patient load, those optometrists have expressed the frustration they have because of

frustrated patients who do not have a frame that fits."

Through the dispensing fee program, patients can work directly with Individjual for the frame creation. At the end of the process, instead of sending the frame to the patient, they send the frame to the eyecare provider, "so that they are the final stop in the process, and they get the revenue for fitting the lenses and other add-on options. We are also paying a \$75 dispensing fee at the time of delivery." Re-orders will also be sent through the ECP with an additional \$75 per pair, plus lens fitting and add-on fees. "The idea is to solve the problem of the eyecare provider having to mount a whole new program; to take the pressure off and turn a hard-to-fit patient into a happy patient," Barnett adds.



frames—those are the frames that are tried and true, that I know work. I'm not trying to get rid of them; they are the frames I know that consistently look good. I will pick the first [few] for the staff," he says.

When your patients do shop the frame boards, presentation can help streamline the process. For house brands with bells and whistles such as inclusive clips, Kennard recommends presenting the eyewear first.

"A lot of offices have the tendency to display magnetic clip eyewear in their sunglass case or on their sunglass board," says Kennard.

Instead, he recommends that ECPs display eyewear without the clips and sell the frame first based on its merits and then the clip as an added bonus for patients. **EB**



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Presenta Nova Inc. 13-17 Laight Street, # 504 p +1 888 959 1471
New York City, NY 10013 f +1 888 959 1471

info@presenta-nova.com
www.presenta-nova.com