

Practice Trends-Who Gave the Internet a License to Practice?

Internet sales of contact lenses are by now a fact of life in the optical marketplace. And now consumers are able to make Internet purchases of eyeglasses. Optical professionals continue to ask themselves how this is allowed to persist? And they further wonder why anybody would want to purchase something as critical as a pair of contact lenses or eyeglasses over the Internet?

Do Something About It

The phenomenon of Internet sales is an example of a service that has leapt ahead of legislation. Consider that the Worldwide Web was launched as recently as 1991 and that by 1993 its use was proliferating at a rate of 341,634% (annual growth rate). This was truly a case where legislators were gob-smacked by the sudden uptake by consumers, educators, researchers and marketers of a communication product that had no precedence. The Worldwide Web crosses continents, oceans and legal jurisdictions. Philosophically we may be citizens of a global village or a North American Free Trade zone but in reality commercial trade still has borders to cross and different laws which govern it.

In the case of optical sales, regulation is provincial and centres around very specific activities that constitute either a legislated scope of practice or that are found legislatively on a list of restricted/reserved/controlled activities. Your regulatory body has jurisdiction only in...well...its own jurisdiction. Consequently the real question is, "Where does the Internet sale of contact lenses take place? Does it take place when the order is placed in Ontario, or Newfoundland or Alberta? Or does it take place when the seller has received the order and processed the credit card payment (which may be in China, or the Philippines or New York State)."

Some governments have developed Internet legislation. The Alberta *Internet Sales Contract Regulation* is a good example. The weakness of this regulation is that Internet sellers don't ordinarily have a physical presence in the location where the consumer places the order. Even in a case where a suit is brought and a judgment won, implementation of the judgment faces a huge impediment if there is no reciprocal enforcement of judgments legislation in the jurisdiction of residence of the Internet seller. This continues to be an unresolved issue.

Why Would Anybody Want to Purchase Contacts & Eyeglasses on the Internet?

Price is usually the first answer that comes to mind and it's what you no doubt often hear from consumers. Studies have been done on what drives people to shop on the Internet. Interestingly, price was not the most significant driver of online purchase. The main drivers of online purchasing were "ease of purchase" and ability to "learn about new products." Price, while important, came in at a

distant third. You may not be able to best the Internet companies on prices but start thinking about the other features consumers find attractive.

Before doing anything drastic, first estimate how much of your business has been lost to Internet sales or, how much you anticipate you will lose to Internet sales. If you find the resulting figures to be significant then you need to develop new marketing strategies. Don't underestimate. When Sears started catalogue sales in Canada in the '50s, Eaton's -whose catalogue business was the backbone of their organization for 100 years- thought Sears would be short-lived competition. We don't need to tell you the end of that story.

Compare 'Apples' to 'Apples'

Some of the perception about Internet sales is just that – a perception and not a reality. For example, contact lenses and glasses have never been sold at a less expensive price through legitimate practitioners than they are currently being sold. If a consumer asks you for the lens or eyeglass specifications with the intent of ordering online, head off the price argument before the consumer has a chance to make it. Do your homework and figure out what the consumer is going to pay via an Internet purchase as compared with the cost of doing business with you. Have it printed on a brochure or a point of purchase card to demonstrate that quality and service doesn't have to be sacrificed for price.

When you're calculating comparative pricing don't forget to add into the Internet prices charges for shipping and handling, any membership fees that may be applicable, and professional fees you would charge if the person had to come to you to have the glasses adjusted or the contact lenses inspected. The fallback position the Internet companies have is *you*. Go to any of their websites and you'll find that they advise Internet consumers of contact lenses and eyeglasses to go to their optical professional if they have any difficulties or if they need measurements taken. Your expertise was developed with a huge investment of time and money. It should not be offered without significant return.

Convenience & Choice

Whether we like it or not, the average person regards time spent waiting for a contact lens check-up or wading through over 1,000 frames as time lost. Are there some ways we can address 'ease of purchase' and 'learn about new products' to make a visit to the optician less vexing than a trip to the dentist? Optical professionals represent a huge repository of information that consumers would love to tap. Don't wait for them to walk into your dispensary to ask their questions. Meet the Internet competition in their own marketplace...on the Internet.

Generally speaking, we as optical professionals don't leverage the opportunities presented by the Internet very effectively. In a survey of independently-owned

optical dispensaries it would be typical to discover that only 20% have websites. So...

- find someone to develop a dynamic website for you. Don't try to do it yourself. Load the website with educational information.
- Include pictures and specifications of the terrific frames you carry.
- Update the on-line catalogue regularly.
- Enable consumers to pre-select several frames before they come in to place an order by letting them e-mail you with their choices and an indication of the day they'll be dropping in.
- Wherever you can fill orders by mail...do it. Make it easy for clients to purchase solutions, cases, contact lens replacements. Just make sure you add a reasonable charge for shipping and handling.
- Many frame suppliers have their catalogues on-line. Provide links for your clients to the websites of your suppliers so they have the broadest style choice available.

Attempting to prevent Internet sales is like trying to hold back a tsunami force wave. It's not going to happen. Expecting a regulatory body to accomplish what international legal minds have been unable to accomplish is futile. The choice for 'go ahead' professionals is to identify opportunities from innovative competition.