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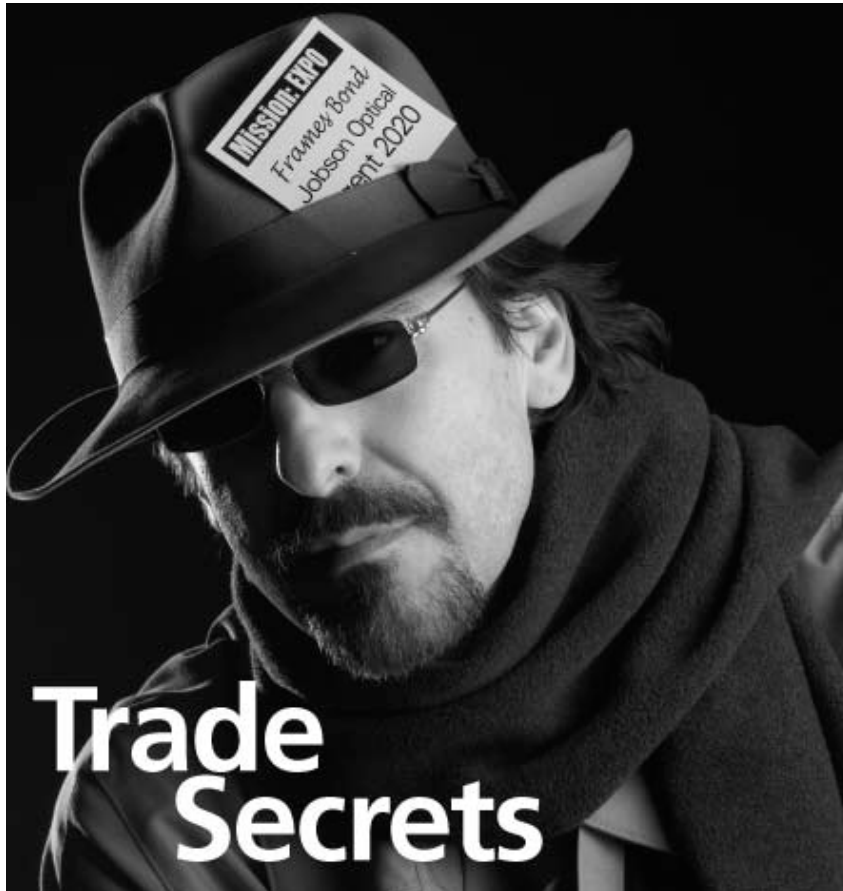
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TIM DE WAELE

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Expo's top agent has a magnetic appeal when it comes to uncovering the secrets of any trade show. He gets the job done in Revolution Eyewear's style IMF 471.

Do you have what it takes to "take on" a trade show? Be Pro-Active. Listen to the hot tips and top secrets to success as 20/20 taps into some masterminds from all sides of the optical trade show equation. —Seth J. Bookey, Jackie Micucci, Gloria Nicola and James J. Spina

A modern trade show can be a complex and sometimes overwhelming affair. Add on the multiple layers inherent to the optical arena and that structure compounds with a sometimes staggering array of added facets. More and more these days the brew is a blend of interrelated ingredients including merchandise, medical advances, processing, technology, marketing and education... and... those are just the obvious cornerstones of optical's virtual "show floor."

In an effort to get to the root of potential gained by attending such a show 20/20 decided to sidestep the "modern" aspect and address the historical essence of such an event. Trade shows are actually rooted in the antiquity of diverse historical cultures. And at the basic root is the simplicity of both thought and product exchanged. Thus stated the key to success is sometimes hidden in the complex strategy of... the buyer... and the seller. So put on your glasses and don your thinking caps (remembering too that there are some tremendous educational opportunities awaiting interested attendees) as we trade secrets with some top optical agents.

"We go mostly to the shows here in the states for networking. For the international ones, we go to get a jump on what's happening not only optically at the show, but also to walk around Milan and Paris and see what's ahead fashion-wise. The U.S. shows give us an opportunity to get our managers together. It's productive for us as a business to have internal networking time. With retail, it's tough. You're open seven days a week. You can't pull managers out of the stores all the time."

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—Nancy DiCosmo,
president, Au Courant Opticians,
three locations,
headquartered in Ann Arbor, Mich.

“Our preparation for a trade show starts at the same show the year before. I sit with our customers and ask them what they like about the show, what they don't like, what they have seen, what they would like to see, what they have bought or would like to buy. We compile all that information and combine it with current fashion trends in order to create product our customers want. Then when we call them before the show, we tell them we listened to them and are providing specific product with their needs in mind. It is essential to partner with our customers. Our customers are our guests. We take care of them in an environment that is calm and soothing—from the booth colors to the unhurried time we spend talking with them.”

—Sheila Vance,
founder and designer, Sama Eyewear

“I schedule appointments with my regular vendors. I usually highlight things and call my reps and make appointments. One of the reasons I go [to Expo East] is to browse the Galleria and see smaller lines I don't normally get to see. Vermont is a small state and vendors don't always get up here.”

—Pam Parizo, optician and owner,
Parizo's Champlain Valley Eyecare,
Rutland, Vt.

“Trade shows such as Vision Expo allow me to not only see my current vendors' new products, but it also enables me to make comparisons with other similar products. It is not uncommon for me to find exciting new products that work well in our dispensaries, sometimes from new vendors entering the marketplace. These new vendors (or fairly new manufacturers) will often have products at a savings over traditional vendors.”

—Phernell C. Walker, II,
vice president, operations and education,
Budget Opticals of America,
14 locations across Texas

“For years we have looked forward to our trade shows as an amazing opportunity to be utterly, completely ourselves in front of our clients. We find that the more 'I.a.Eyeworks' we can be, the more our clients—and potential new clients—can be informed about our brand. Our booth becomes a chance for the client to experience the brand, meet the team and see the product in an environment that is relevant for I.a.Eyeworks. For this reason we have never excluded ourselves from the trade fairs or from our clients. We love our optical industry and want to right in the thick of it... and participate.”

—Katie O'Connell,
international sales director, I.a.Eyeworks

“Trade shows are how I find out what the latest eyewear is. A lot of my competitors don't carry even half of what I carry in my store. I bought more than \$15K worth of merchandise [at the last Expo]. Even if I don't buy, I still stop at a lot of different booths. I just can't wait to get there.”

—Juanita Moman, owner,
Moman's Eyecare, Gadsden, Ala.

“To prepare for an upcoming trade show, we sit down and identify our focus for that particular show. We schedule meetings with core vendors and new ones as well. It's kind of a sprint—it's great that you can meet with 16 or 17 vendors at one time. We use both visits and show appointments. We spend more time meeting with the organization of the vendor at the show. We usually don't do big purchases at the shows.”

—James Rosin, owner, Rosin Eyecare,
12 locations, Berwyn, Ill.

“A primary objective for us at a trade show is to demonstrate to our customers and to the industry the size and scope of Sâfilo Group. We have used our very popular fashion show to convey this message. While there is a great deal of selling taking place in our booth, we find the show to be an excellent environment to develop, grow and solidify relationships with customers and partners.”

—Dick Russo,
senior vice present of sales, Sâfilo USA.

"Meeting with our customers is just a part of the overall experience for Lafont at a trade show. We work extremely hard to convey messages of color, style and merchandising based on the look and feel of our booth experience. Madame Lafont usually goes out shopping to a variety of markets in the host city right before the show in order to bring in fresh inspiration for the booth and eyewear displays. That creation of a mood has a very dramatic effect on our customers that they can use to relate to our eyewear and as inspiration when it comes to displays in their own stores."

—Ray Khalil,
president, Lafont Eyewear

"When we attend trade shows it's more in the equipment area. There are few lab sales reps that come through anymore other than the lens vendors. So we need to go to shows for that. Lens manufacturers are there as well so we can work some deals."

—Mark Allred, president,
Southern Eyes, Concord, N.C.

"We try to engage retailers by asking them about their business. That way we can find out what's important to them. For example, if it's rimless eyewear, we would show them an example of the lenses we can do for rimless. Then they might ask to see the machine that made the lens. We try not to just talk about features and benefits, but instead we try to find out what their needs are."

—Tim Aiken, vice president
of sales and marketing,
Briot/Weco USA.

"I set up appointments. Half of our business is done on the floor and the other half is off site. We do have vendor appointments all year too. Both are important. It's nice for reps to see your location in your town and it's nice for us to see a better representation of their business at the show, meet other members of their team and see the atmosphere they create for their products at the show."

—Emily Mikel,
vice president of marketing,
Folline Vision Center,
five locations, Columbia, S.C.

"We prepare launches in key product categories based on lines that we acquire on an ongoing basis. We do a lot of product demonstrations at shows for dispensers in order to provide them with tips of the trade. For example, we demonstrate how our new rimless pliers take the hassle out of working with three-piece mounts. We also offer a lot of show specials for those who write orders."

—Debbie Fitzgibbons,
Hilco marketing/
communications manager

"What I believe sets our trade show efforts apart from the industry is that ClearVision's focus is to make real 'one to one' connections with our customers. Our goal is to offer great customer service by providing compelling promotions, fun parties and exciting giveaways, with a team that's eager to please. It's all about excellent service, accommodating people and great product."

—Corinne Johnsen,
public relations manager,
ClearVision Optical

"A lot of the vendors didn't know we existed until we went to the trade shows. Some of the contact lens companies didn't know who we were. We can take care of contact lens business in a day, which used to take months to set up on the phone at home."

—Regina McCollum Sullivan,
OD, owner, Focal Point Optical,
Norcross, Ga.

"To prepare for trade shows I look at class schedules and which companies I want to visit, and target the ones I am geared toward looking at. I depend more on rep visits, because the shows are only a few times a year. For example, there was new Ralph Lauren style I would have missed going show to show. Plus, [the reps] monitor my boards."

—Susan Pert, manager,
Third Avenue Eyewear,
Longmont, Colo.

"The people working our booth are trained to ask questions. Because we're still relatively new

to the U.S. market, they'll ask the retailers if they know about Polycore. Once we talk with them, we'll send them away with a bag containing a basic set of product literature and some type of giveaway, like jelly beans."

—Ann Shanley,
customer relations manager,
Polycore Optical

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