

On-line Glasses Report

Using the Opternative Rx, each member of the team was asked to try to duplicate the consumer experience as closely as possible. That meant they needed to use the PD measuring method recommended, order some to try on if that was an option and wear them directly 'out of the box' when they arrived. We asked each of these team members to wear these glasses for a week (like we would advise our own patients) unless they felt unsafe or couldn't tolerate it.

We used 5 popular on-line sites to get a variety of experiences, yet different companies with respect to their potential target market. The companies were Warby Parker, Made Eyewear, FramesDirect, Zenni Optical and Coastal.com.

There was a common theme among the team members who explored and/or purchased eyewear and it goes like this:

- convenience - anytime of day, anywhere - on the train ride home, at work, at midnight, 24/7
 - price...more affordable than most retail stores and likely the driving force for consumers!
 - many of the on-line vendors truly have their 'social' act together with connecting your selection process to social media if desired -Facebook, twitter etc
 - they are persistent and arrange to have their ads appear on other non optical pages you visit once you've gone onto their website (cookies,tracking etc)
 - some make you feel like you are doing something socially worthwhile (buy one and they give glasses to needy)
 - some send frames for you to try on at home
 - they all make it easy to return with a prepaid label
 - the marketing, wording and packaging certainly makes you want to buy - For instance:
 - On the outside of the Warby Parker box it reads:"**Good Things Await You**" and "**Get Excited!**"
 - On the inside and paperwork it reads: "**Let's find you some amazing glasses**" and "**Share and Compare**" - this is where you log into the Warby social media page and share photos of yourself with your contacts for feedback and which one you look best in. Of course, every time someone does this, it mostly benefits Warby by expanding awareness/reach of their own product and also adds to their own contact list.
 - On the outside of Made Eyewear box it reads: "**Now You've Got Specs Appeal**"
- With Made Eyewear you select frames that you want to try on along with your Rx and they send you **2 complete pairs with CR39 lenses and AR**. I'd love to know how that strategy works out for them. Do they get a higher percentage of people keeping 1 pair or both by doing this? Is this a sustainable strategy? They also include instructions to adjust your glasses with a hair dryer and needle-nosed pliers at home. They supply a nice case and cleaning cloth for each pair with a discount coupon for the 2nd pair if you decide to keep it too. You can return both also.

FramesDirect suggests you don't try to adjust your new glasses on your own and bring them to a local optical shop for proper fitting if necessary.

Both Zenni and Coastal didn't offer any fitting options although Coastal sent a mini screwdriver kit. Both of these companies specialize in the very low price product and we could see it in the frame quality for sure. The Coastal pair broke with a small adjustment and when the team member called them about it they were told that they weren't supposed to be adjusted. The material used by both seems to be some injection molded, extremely inexpensive polymer.

Even though the frame materials varied from poor to acceptable, the actual prescriptions were easily within tolerance of what was ordered.

There are things that on-line companies do very well and their 24 hour availability, pricing and marketing can certainly appeal to consumers especially those in a certain age range, yet, I might take issue with the 'convenience' descriptor. Most people who shop on-line got their Rx's from within an eye doctor's office...and almost every eye doctor's office either has an optical shop within their practice or right next door. How is it more convenient to walk right by the shop (of course, some peruse first) and drive home to try on frames virtually, or order 5 pairs from Warby to try at home and wait 5 days for them to arrive?

Imagine getting a coffee at the Barnes and Noble bookstore cafe' and then going home to order a book through Amazon when you know that Barnes and Noble had plenty to offer. There might be many reasons to do that but I don't think convenience is the main reason. Price? Seems like the more likely rationale. In addition, it appears that the 'social connection' encouraged by Warby Parker and now other on-line vendors has contributed to promotion and reassurance which then motivates others to follow. People are now asking their friends if they are wearing "Warby's".

So, while we need to recognize what on-line companies do to make people want to choose them, we also need to know the contrasts and the things they don't do at all that are part of our everyday approach:

- No valuable advice on the frame selection/fit - you're on your own based mostly on looks only
- No evaluation of Rx/frame combination with respect to weight, thickness etc
- Not always many lens material options (most often just polycarbonate)
- You wear it 'out of the box'. They don't adjust the frame or maintain the fit. How many patients do you know that could successfully wear long-term any frame (unadjusted) off the frame board. When was the last time you fit a perfectly symmetrical patient (ears, eyes, brows, cheeks)?
- They don't ask (or necessarily care) if you see well with your new glasses or troubleshoot if you have a visual issue
- They are all extremely vague about Dr Re-do or Rx change although they generally promise 30 day money back
- SV lenses are their primary market (it's the easiest, least troublesome so why not?)
- They don't promote or even acknowledge that there are many lens options for most people to consider such as:
 - Sync, Eyezen, Relax, Anti-Fatigue type lenses for SV wearers
 - Computer lens options
 - Digital SV etc
 - Blue light filtering
 - Transitions selections
 - differing progressive lens technologies
- Most ask that you provide your own PD
- The patient needs to trust that the Rx is filled properly
- Some may advertise their altruistic giving but they don't support the local community where the consumers live

The last numbers I heard had the on-line purchases at about 7% with a projection of doubling by 2020. I truly don't know how accurate those numbers are but they seem likely. As you will see from the questionnaires completed by the team, everyone thinks on-line purchases will continue to grow. It's not something opticians or optical shops should fear. We already know that technological developments will continue to change most facets of our lives. This will also be true of the optical professions...things will be different in 5 years. There will be advances in optical technologies and changes in many portions of the current, traditional optical delivery system. We can wait for it to determine our future for us or we can help prepare and guide our future direction by staying aware of change and preparing through knowledge and foresight.