



ADAPT TO SUCCEED



Six steps to wooing patients away from online retailers.

BY SHALU PAL, OD, FAAO, FSLs

Our profession continues to evolve. Technology advances, methods of diagnosis and treatment improve, our level of knowledge increases, and our ability to help patients grows. At the same time, competitive challenges force us to rethink our business processes. Specifically, online retail sales of contact lenses have affected our practices' contact lens sales and profit margins. How do we win patients back and protect them from harm?

CREATING PATIENT LOYALTY

The biggest problem created by online sales of contact lenses is that it has led to public misconceptions about contact lens safety and the importance of eye examinations. Through education

and excellent customer service, we can improve patients' safety and, at the same time, earn their loyalty.

Step No. 1: Understand the Patient

We must identify what each patient needs and wants. The discovery process begins with the basic questions our staff members ask when patients call our offices. It continues in the

clinic with diagnostic testing and history taking and extends into the examination lane. Among the information we are gathering is their interest in contact lenses as well as their individual preferences and needs. This is our opportunity to debunk misconceptions about contact lens wear, to emphasize the importance of proper contact lens fitting, and to explain how our practices can best serve their needs, including managing their contact lens orders.

Step No. 2: Educate the Patient

Our first encounter with potential new contact lens wearers is a golden opportunity to educate them on the best practices for lens wear. A key differentiator from online retailers is our ability to recommend the wearing time, replacement schedule, care routine, and specific brand appropriate

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Online retail sales of contact lenses have affected optometric practices' contact lens sales and profit margins.
- ▶ Through education and excellent customer service, optometrists can improve patients' safety and, at the same time, earn their loyalty.



GOING SOMEWHERE?

My staff is ready to discuss with patients the advantages of purchasing their contact lenses through our practice. Some of these advantages are listed below.

- + Free replacement of torn or damaged lenses
- + Free exchanges of supply if lens power changes
- + Free shipping
- + 24-hour availability to order lenses from us via email
- + Free lens top-ups if some are needed to hold the patient over until the next annual examination
- + Gift card toward purchase of sunglasses
- + Competitive pricing
- + Professional consultations and care
- + Insertion and removal training
- + Free travel-sized containers of solution
- + Personalized help, answers, and care
- + Rebates conveniently processed

for the individual in front of us. This is also the time to discuss the importance of routine eye care for maintaining safety, the need for backup glasses, strategies for avoiding risks, and problem solving. Done right, this conversation establishes a connection between optometric caregivers, patients, and their safety.

I base my own recommendations on patients' best interests. My staff handles their questions about costs (fitting fees, lenses, solutions).

Step No. 3: Train the Patient

New contact lens wearers require education on lens insertion and removal. My staff members conduct this training. They share the same contact lens values as I do and answer questions in the same manner I would. They take their time to ensure that patients feel comfortable with their routine.

Step No. 4: Elevate the Patient Experience

Examination of existing contact lens wearers is an opportunity to reeducate them and elevate their contact lens-wearing experience. During the case history, we can dig deep to identify areas of discomfort or concern that can be fixed. We can review our role, the purpose of routine care, safety protocols, and best practices by which to ensure that patients have a long life of contact lens wear.

It is also important for us to remain current. Are there new technologies that can help us to improve patients' experiences and give them a reason to come back to our practices every year? What incentive do they have to visit our clinics every year if we never do or offer anything different?

Step No. 5: Manage the Patient's Order and Offer Convenience

Our staff members should be able to hold detailed discussions with patients about the costs of contact lenses, available rebates, online sales, the risks of switching brands without input from an eye care provider, and the need for annual evaluation. If a patient plans to purchase contact lenses elsewhere, it is important for the staff to ask where and why. Doing so creates an opportunity for them to explain the advantages of obtaining contact lenses through the practice instead (see *Going Somewhere?*).

Step No. 6: Follow up With the Patient

We can improve patients' success with contact lens wear and demonstrate the value of personalized eye care by following up promptly. For example, if one of my patients is new to lens wear or is using a new design, I request a follow-up appointment in 1 to 2 weeks to evaluate the fit. This allows me to see the lenses on the patient's eyes after a few hours of wear and to address any concerns. If the patient does not return for the follow-up appointment, my staff calls to ensure that we complete the fitting process, explain the need to complete the fit, and provide education on the importance of proper procedures.

THE POWER OF PERSONALIZED CARE

One way to engender loyalty in our patients and boost our contact lens sales is to show the advantages of personalized care. Simply put, we can give patients things that online retailers cannot: the best possible care, excellent customer service, perks, education on how to be a successful wearer, and support. ■

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