



FINDING MY PLACE IN OPTOMETRY



The author recounts his transition from student to employee to OD owner.

BY JUSTIN BAZAN, OD

The excitement of graduating from optometry school was wrapped in a naivety that I recognize only now, as I look back upon my experience. I was unaware then of the innumerable paths that this profession offers. I thought graduation was merely the conclusion of my optometric education and the beginning of my becoming an optometrist.

To my surprise, the transition from student to optometric physician was not so simple. I've since come to realize that optometry is not merely a job, nor even a profession. Optometry is a journey. At least for me it has been.

In the following paragraphs, I'll

describe for you my journey and offer some advice that may help anyone reading this who shares a mindset similar to my own.

OPTOMETRY SCHOOL

For me, optometry school was challenging. Not academically—grades never mattered much to me—but more because of the expectation for one to conform and follow a certain standardization. The importance of being held to a standard of care was not lost on me, but I noted the way it crushed creativity.

I've always been an independent thinker, and, although independent thought was not curbed per se during

optometry school, it was not fostered and certainly not rewarded. The mentality I took on as a student was that I had to learn particular things to pass a test and do those things exactly as others had instructed me to do them. I became proficient at recognizing what was important, learning why it was important, and then mastering it to the appropriate level. This has proven to be a critical business skill.

One thing I failed at, however, was learning the importance of networking. Joining student clubs or community-based organizations such as the American Optometry Student Association didn't appeal to me. Being involved in anything beyond the minimum needed to graduate and pass boards just didn't seem worth the time.

Networking was a missed opportunity that would have put me ahead in reaching my goals. Students who are involved in the aforementioned groups get to attend conferences during which important connections are often made. I have seen firsthand how those who attend these conferences network and establish connections that accelerate their paths to success. I've seen students who have networked well land their dream job even before graduating. Many others have been able to accelerate their path to success by making important connections

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early on. I, unfortunately, was not one of those students and had to find work in the help wanted ads.

BECOMING AN OD EMPLOYEE

The 4 years flew by; I graduated, took a few months off to enjoy New York City, and then entered the workforce.

My first job at a large regional chain freed me from the institutional restrictions of optometry school. It was the first time I felt connected to patients, in that the care I was providing to them was my own. I began to explore different styles of delivering care and tailoring the patient experience. The robotic protocols of student mentality dissolved, and the creative, passionate provider in me emerged.

At first, it was all about showing up, putting in a solid day, and then forgetting about work as I threw myself full force into the epic offerings of New York City. However, after some time, the days began to feel the same and the job became a grind. Something was off. There loomed something more than just showing up, seeing patients, and then living a life free of eye docs after work.

I began to think optometry was more than just what I do. It became a piece of who I am. I began to see that the profession of optometry is more

than just patient care. The opportunity was there for it to be exponentially more rewarding. My mentality had moved from student to employee, and now it continued to evolve into that of owner.

Although I was not formally defined as a manager, I began to soak up business knowledge. My entrepreneurial spirit began to emerge. There was an abundance of knowledge to be absorbed—real-world practical knowledge, everything from inventory to merchandising, from human resources to accounting. And of course, sales. I used what I learned and began to work as if I owned the practice.

Often I hear docs in retail situations say they just spin and grin. No matter what your work situation, always view it as an opportunity to learn and advance you along your career path.

The business knowledge and skills that I gained, beyond the clinical skills of an eye doctor, increased how rewarding my work felt. It became evident that I not only liked the business aspect of optometry, but I was also going to be great at it. The offices I worked in crushed their projections, and patients were raving.

Even with this success, however, once the way I was providing care evolved past the company's comfort

level I hit a ceiling, and I was given the opportunity to strike out on my own.

TESTING THE WATERS

I had a hunger for business knowledge and, although I was a voracious reader, it was hands-on experience that I valued the most. At this time I began the fill-in phase of my career, which allowed me to get out and experience what other offices were doing. Finding fill-in work in New York City was as easy as heading to the job listing tab on my optometry school's website. Today there are even more ways, including email lists and social media. On the horizon, there will be companies and their related apps to help match ODs with their ideal fill-in work.

By ping-ponging my way among all five of New York City's boroughs I learned a lot of things that I would incorporate into my own office one day and even more things that I would do. For example, I realized that many offices don't focus on the patient experience. It was hard for patients to book an appointment or find out key information about the office, and the in-office experience was not something they looked forward to. I would focus on creating a great online presence, use online scheduling, implement advanced technologies, and ensure that they would look forward to their visit. The experience was eye-opening, enlightening, and encouraging.

Often in this period I thought to myself, "Wow, if this practice is operating this way and has been successful for the past 30 years, I know I'm going to be just fine." For example, I saw offices that were chaotic and poorly run, and others that seemingly had no accounting system, a rotating roster of employees, and poor patient care doing decently well, so I knew the bar was set pretty low.

Meeting and engaging with OD owners enriched my optometric experience and introduced me to

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FIND YOUR TRIBE

Looking for optometric camaraderie? Here are some resources I've found helpful.

- ODs on Facebook (Facebook group)
- Young ODs of America (Facebook group)
- Seek out involvement on consulting projects, advertorial boards, speakers' bureaus, and other industry activities
- Get involved with your state, regional, and national optometric organizations

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people who shared a similar passion for the entrepreneurial side of eye care. Optometry was taking me on an adventure, and I was ready for it. It was time for me to do things my way and open my own independent practice.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Opening a practice cold was exhilarating and exhausting, but also satisfying and rewarding. It was the ultimate canvas for passion, creativity, and professional skills to combine in a way that added layers of enjoyment to my life. At times it felt like I was taking a few years off to deal with a seemingly endless to-do list and put out what felt like daily fires, but looking back, opening my own practice was probably one of the most valuable experiences of my life.

Opening cold was tough, but it gave me a skill set and mentality that helped me understand that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. It helped give me a perspective that anything is possible and if I have an idea, I should feel confident in seeing it to fruition. Hard work does pay off, and the days may seem long, but the years will fly by. Stick with it, stay the course, and in no time the feeling of accomplishment will settle in.

FIND YOUR TRIBE

I found my tribe when I was welcomed into a couple of groups

of optometric practice owners. Whether online or in real life, networking with these like-minded individuals has always led to new opportunities, provided guidance and help, and allowed me to share what I've learned. These passionate practitioners also pointed me in the direction of other avenues in the eye care profession and industry and showed me how to navigate them.

Optometry will provide you with memorable and rewarding experiences throughout life. As you make your way through optometry school, have faith that you need not be too concerned about the path you take, or even the final destination. Just recognize that it's a journey and enjoy the ride. ■

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