

Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

Amid Challenges for Independents, Alliances and Buying Groups Offer New Programs



Image Credit: Getty Images / sorbetto

BY DANIEL BREEMAN / SENIOR EDITOR

From continuing supply chain issues to private equity acquisitions and consolidation, to staffing issues and finally to an uncertain economy with the looming possibility of recession in the coming months, independent eyecare professionals are carefully navigating their next moves as they look to remain profitable and expand their practices in 2023. To help alleviate some of these pressures and stresses, ECP alliances and buying groups are clearly stepping up their game with new and enhanced programs and services with the goal

of helping ECPs navigate their way through a challenging business environment that presents both observed obstacles and unforeseen challenges on the horizon.

In support of their members, alliances and buying groups have developed new tools, services and practice management programs over the past year and appear to have more in store for the remainder of 2023. This support includes easier access to vendors, growing vendor bases and larger discounts along with enhanced services such as human resources services. Practice-building education, access to key opinion leaders and easier

payment terms to assist with case flow issues have also been added or enhanced.

Oliver Spandow, chief operating officer at IDOC, said, “One change we see accelerating is an increase in cold starts and new practices opening across the country. We also see continued return to live events. 2023 will bring new technologies, economic challenges, and ongoing staffing opportunities to independent practices.”

“We want to continue servicing our members where they need it the most,” added Ignacio Macias, CEO of CECOP USA, who recently launched its

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CECOP 60 program for new members to permit additional payment terms.

Independent practices will continue to face significant pressure in 2023, according to Jonathan Worrall, who took over as president of PECAA in January of 2023 after PECAA was acquired last fall by VSP Vision. He cites staffing, training, revenue and cost of goods as challenges independent practices have faced since the pandemic and those which are likely to continue in 2023.

Worrall said, “In addition, the current state of the economy contributes to additional pressure as economists debate the reality and potential severity of a recession. The good news is private practice is still the preferred patient choice.”

In addition to deeper vendor rebates and enhanced loyalty programs rolling out among ECP alliances in 2023, there is a renewed focus on staffing and human resources management tools as independents look to hire and retain the best and brightest personnel.

Acquios Alliance is offering a human resources workshop to help owners and managers “better understand all aspects of HR management,” according to CEO Rick Guinotte. “Too many people believe HR is hiring and firing. But it’s not. It is about hiring the right people for the right position, developing that person to be the success they and the office needs and so much more. Setting up and implementing tools to educate and invest in practices’ most important asset—the employees, which is what makes the great practices stand above.”

Amid challenges ahead for independents in 2023, alliances and buying groups are clearly taking the lead to assist ECPs with innovative new tools and programs that will better help them grow their practices and best serve their patients. *Vision Monday* reached out to some of the leading U.S. alliance and buying groups for this report. ■

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– Rick Guinotte, CEO at Acquios Alliance



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– Oliver Spandow,
COO at IDOC



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ABB OneBill Provides Consolidated Billing Service for Independent ECPs

Founded in 1984 by a small group of private optometrists, ABB OneBill <https://www.abbonebill.com/> is a division of ABB Optical Group focused on enhancing the independent professional optometrist's ability to compete in a rapidly changing marketplace. This includes providing a consolidated billing service, favorable purchasing arrangements, vendor discounts and programs, business management and marketing support, educational programs for practitioners and staff, medical billing services via a third party, and other support services.

"ABB OneBill (formerly known as Primary EyeCare Network) exists to support the independent eyecare provider," said Erika Jurens, senior vice president of strategic development and commercialization, ABB Optical Group. "Their challenges are our challenges. We feel the pain that our independent eyecare professionals (IECPs) have been facing with staffing challenges as well as supply chain issues.

ABB OneBill

"ABB OneBill has launched so many exciting offers to help address many of the challenges. The team is heavily focused on how to best integrate all that ABB Optical Group and ABB OneBill vendors have to offer that will have the biggest impact for each member," Jurens said.

As part of ABB Optical Group, ABB OneBill members can access the full suite of business solutions, services and products available to ABB Optical Group customers. ABB OneBill offers negotiated competitive discounts to its members, education, and consolidated billing.

"We provide efficiencies like paying vendors upfront on their behalf and customized Medicare forms," said Jurens. "ABB OneBill also provides



Erika Jurens

"It's no surprise to anyone that COVID has reshaped how many organizations are now servicing their customers. 2023 will continue to push and challenge ECPs to think about how they are providing service to their patients. The push of consumers online and how that has reshaped health care is significant. Patients are more demanding; employees are harder to retain and hire and remaining competitive and relevant is crucial for differentiation."

– Erika Jurens, senior vice president of strategic development and commercialization, ABB Optical Group

an informative reference guide with year-round resources for members. New vendors are added to the portfolio with ongoing discounts and rebates back to our members."

ABB OneBill is also looking ahead to the remainder of 2023 and helping ECPs tackle the many challenges that come along with an uncertain economy and even more expected from their members in the post-pandemic era.

"It's no surprise to anyone that COVID has reshaped how many organizations are now servicing their customers. 2023 will continue to push and challenge ECPs to think about how they are providing service to their patients," Jurens said. "The push of consumers online and how that has reshaped health care is significant. Patients are more demanding; employees are harder to retain and hire and remaining competitive and relevant is crucial for differentiation.

"ABB OneBill aims to provide the ECPs the resources they need to navigate industry challenges and add efficiencies and cost savings to their practice. Consumer purchasing behaviors have

changed with an increased focus on convenience and online ordering. One of the many services that ABB OneBill provides is access to best-in-class online contact lens ordering platforms like Abby. Launched last year, helloabby.com, ABB Optical Group's e-commerce platform, ensures the patient-doctor relationship stays intact."

ABB OneBill offers members access to an array of vendors (frames and contact lens distributors, laboratory services, business services, equipment, ophthalmic products) and the convenience of having all billing consolidated into a single monthly statement. Customers enjoy an easy payment structure/system with flexible payment options and the ability to pay at the click of a button, according to the company.

Membership is free and current membership stands at 2,200 members.

"We have doubled the size of our team to support future growth opportunities and provide even better service to our members," added Jurens. "Their focus is to bring on new vendors and negotiate the best discounts and rebates for our members." ■

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Acquios Alliance Aims to ‘Empower Private Practices’ With Continued Growth and New Programs

Acquios Alliance <https://acquiosalliance.com/> is a three-year alliance group featuring a membership program “aimed at mitigating the unique challenges private practice optometrists face while helping them to thrive independently.” It grew out of the Acquios Advisors organization that was founded in 2015 as an advisory firm for eyecare professionals and is adding new programs this year to help its members reach their full potential and practice goals, management said.

“As events and conferences returned to pre-pandemic policies last year, this was our first year of being able to truly educate more private practitioners about the value and uniqueness of Acquios Alliance and Advisors,” Rick Guinotte, a business advisor and owner of Acquios Alliance, told *Vision Monday*. “There is interest in becoming a member of Acquios Alliance both as private practice to take advantage of vendor offerings, as well as additional vendors showing interest in becoming a part of our group.

“With the additional consolidation occurring in the optometric industry, the drive to assist doctors by giving them an avenue to be offered product to set them apart from chain and online companies has been rewarding for our members. With interest in Acquios Alliance and Advisors delivering on our promises, our mission statement and core values, we are confident in the future of private practices for themselves, their teams, and most importantly, their patients,” Guinotte said.

Acquios Alliance members receive access to a curated list of vendors, webinars, workshops, newsletters and podcasts covering the latest trends and industry news, along with support from an alliance led by Acquios Advisors <https://acquios.com/>. Membership fees are \$50 per month.

Acquios Alliance currently counts over 410 doors with more than 325 practices represented. There are also approximately 820 opticians. The advisory unit was founded in 2015 by Guinotte and Kirk Kastens and they were joined by partner co-owner and advisor Tim Merrigan.

The challenge ahead in 2023 involves helping its members navigate through a continued maze of mergers and acquisitions, as well as steering them in the right direction when it comes to vendor partnerships.

“With the more recent mergers and acquisitions between some third-party vision discount plans and commercial practices, more optometrists are looking within and seeing the value they bring to improve their patient’s quality of lives,” noted Guinotte. “Also, with a strong vendor partner of ours, Neurolens, an instrument that helps patients minimize and in many cases, eliminate migraine headaches with a lens available but not covered by any vision discount plan or medical insurance, doctors are understanding patients will pay out of pocket for quality product and service.

“Because of this newfound confidence, more offices will reduce their ‘dependence’ on vision plans. Acquios Alliance is about empowering independence, and we know more practice owners will be seeking avenues to learn what vendors are here to support them and their goals,” Guinotte said.

In addition to offering savings on products for its members, whether opening a new practice or enhancing an established practice, the alliance group believes “the product we have vetted offers the best in return/exchange policies necessary to deliver great options to their patients and also products that can make a healthy profit for their practice.”

Acquios Alliance also continues to deliver quarterly meetings to help optical teams better serve their patients. Guinotte said, “Our two-day workshop teaches opticians how to educate their patients to know more about their lenses, frames and



(L to R) Tim Merrigan, vice president, Scott Cline, advisor, and Rick Guinotte, president and CEO, lead the Acquios Alliance management team.

all options related to eyewear. We don’t teach people to sell, we leave that to others. We are here to teach and guide opticians to educate and give their patients options. We help them to communicate their value points to the patients. Along with better educating patients, we teach them to work closely with the representatives serving their practices.

“The representatives from labs as well as frame vendors can play an integral part in staff knowledge, employee retention, and better patient care. Opticians need to know how to work with the representatives and choose the right product for the people in their community. When opticians have a voice in the brands they invoice, the more success the office experiences. Teaching frame board management is key to the office’s profitability.”

“We also offer an HR workshop to help owners and managers to better understand all aspects of Human Resource Management. Too many people believe HR is hiring and firing. But it’s not. It is

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ADO Practice Solutions: A Doctor Alliance With Buying Group Benefits

ADO Practice Solutions <https://www.adopracticesolutions.com/> prides itself on keeping practices in “complete control of their business.” A division of Walman, ADO offers its members more than discounts—it is an optometric doctor alliance that provides a variety of practice management and growth services with the expertise and industry partnerships to help grow eyecare professionals’ practices, according to the company. The goal is to function as an extension of its members’ practices, helping them become more efficient, productive and profitable.

ADO Practice Solutions has been helping professionals achieve their goals by providing valuable resources, tools and support,” said Jobe Sellers, vice president and general manager of ADO. “With three membership levels, they cater to the diverse needs of members and help them reach their full potential.”

At the ADO Core membership level, members enjoy savings and access to exclusive discounts on a variety of products and services. This membership level is ideal for eyecare professionals who are looking to save money while still getting access to quality resources, according to Sellers.



Benefits at this level include free frame shipping, a program that allows customers to order both frames and prescription lenses from a variety of vendors in one step. The program, which is a partnership between ADO and Walman Optical, offers over 25 vendors to choose from, eliminating shipping charges for the member.

The Core membership also offers a CLogic contact lens rebate program designed to provide a benefit to eyecare practices by offering guarantees on contact lens purchases. By combining manu-

facturer and distributor rebates, the program aims to provide higher rebates than what is typically offered in the industry. This could be an attractive option for eyecare practices looking to maximize their rebate earnings and reduce the cost of purchasing contact lenses, according to Sellers.



Also falling under the Core membership umbrella is the Premier Partner program, designed for members of ADO that provides benefits and discounts in partnership with various vendors in the frame, supplies and financial industries. The program offers savings and growth opportunities for its members through exclusive discounts and rebate programs from participating vendors.

Ophthalmic lens rebates finds ADO Practice Solutions partnering with Walman Optical to offer exclusive programs with three ophthalmic lens partners: Essilor, Shamir, and Unity. These programs create a synergy between the lab and the alliance that is not available anywhere else, according to Sellers, providing a unique benefit for eyecare professionals.



These programs include special pricing, rebates and other incentives for purchasing lenses from the partnered manufacturers and distributors.

At the ADO Accelerate membership level, members have access to the group’s DONE4YOU marketing service, a full-service advertising agency that can help them grow their business and reach more patients. Members also receive a full subscription to FUEL Staff Development & Education program. “This level is perfect for professionals who are looking to take their business to the next level and need help with marketing and advertising,” Sellers said.

ADO Peak Performance is the group’s premium membership level that is focused on maximum success. This level provides access to the highest

quality resources and support, allowing professionals to achieve their full potential and reach new heights in their careers, according to Sellers.

Looking ahead in 2023, ADO is aiming to help its members in the ongoing struggle with staffing issues, as well as helping them reduce costs in an uncertain economy.

“With a lot of members still struggling with staffing, we have put a lot of focus on helping them gain additional resources and have created a program to train existing and new staff to help with fast onboarding and employee satisfaction,” said Sellers.



The FUEL Staff Development & Education program is a comprehensive training program designed to help both new and existing staff members develop and improve their skills. With access to over 200 resources and courses, employees can receive training in a variety of areas, including job-specific skills, leadership development, customer service, communication and more.

“Inflation can have a significant impact on individuals and businesses, and it’s important for them to take steps to manage its effects,” he maintained. “For ECPs, this often means looking for ways to reduce costs, such as streamlining operations, negotiating better prices with suppliers, or investing in technology to automate certain processes. It may mean adjusting their spending habits, creating a budget, or saving more money.”

With 35 years of experience, ADO offers a no-contract fee membership structure to add flexibility for ECPs, who can cancel their membership at any time. “ADO Practice Solutions provides a comprehensive solution for professionals looking to achieve their goals and reach their full potential. With three membership levels, ADO caters to the diverse needs of their members and helps them succeed,” Sellers said. ■

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CECOP USA: Helping ECPs ‘Where They Need it Most’

CECOP USA <https://www.cecopusa.com/>, an affiliate of the global CECOP organization, has been active in the U.S. since May 2020 and helps independent optical practices thrive and increase their bottom-line profit. CECOP USA offers discounts, promotions, consolidated billing, marketing services, HR services, training, continuing education and financial consulting resources. With no membership fees and a growing vendor base, the group continues to strive to be the ECP’s trusted partner.

CECOP USA currently boasts around 1,700 members in the U.S. while internationally CECOP has more than 8,000 members, according to CEO Ignacio Macias. “We are truly the largest global support organization dedicated to independent optometry.”

Over the past year, CECOP remained focused on delivering what its membership wanted despite a challenging business environment, including improved loyalty programs. Current member benefits include: help with vendor issues that are resolved within 48 hours 98 percent of the time, one bill for the more than 150 vendors CECOP USA works with, considerable buying power, financial consulting, continuing education and training, and marketing services.

“Without a doubt, the biggest challenge we have faced as an organization this past year was the wave of private equity acquisition and consolidation seen throughout the market,” said Macias. “To respond, we relied on our innovation and adaptability as an organization. We adopted a much more aggressive sales and marketing strategy that has already paid dividends. In addition, we improved our loyalty programs and engagement efforts with our current members to retain more business and detect ownership changes sooner.

“In 2022, we improved our loyalty program to give back more of what our most engaged members spend. In addition, we have created unique



Ignacio Macias

and exciting programs with the vendors most utilized by our membership base.”

Looking ahead in 2023, the group expects a different financial landscape, with an eye on a possible recession and with further tightening of budgets.

“We are entering 2023 in the context of a completely different financial and economic landscape,” said Macias. “However, when independent ECPs look to tighten their belts, they turn to and rely upon organizations like CECOP to mitigate the effects of the economy. We also expect manufacturers to be more aggressive with promotions. This is another area where we step in. Working tirelessly with our vendor partners, we ensure all our members are aware of the best deals available to them and how to take advantage of them to help their bottom line.

“Looking to 2023, we want to continue servicing our members where they need it the most,” Macias

said. “We know cash flow can be a big issue in a recession, therefore, we founded our CECOP 60 program for new members to permit additional payment terms.”

Also new for 2023 is the CECOP Experts Committee, a resource for ECPs in which they can engage with key opinion leaders on industry issues.

“We are very excited to announce our new CECOP Experts Committee,” said Macias. “The Experts Committee is a resource to help independents be more successful by relying on key opinion leaders to identify pain points experienced by all independent ECPs and find solutions to offer the community of like-minded individuals.

“We are also reinforcing our sales to continue to offer our members outstanding consultative support. We have increased our investment in marketing as well as customer service so we can continue to solve 98 percent of issues within 48 hours for our growing membership,” Macias said. ■

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I Care Co-op: 'Built for ODs by ODs'

Established in 1984 by optometrists in Rhode Island, the I Care Co-op <https://rhodeisland.aoa.org/member-center/doctors-of-optometry/member-resources/rioa-marketplace/i-care-co-op?sso=y> (ICC) is a true cooperative of independent optometrists (55 offices) who, by their membership, help chart the direction of the buying group, according to the group's executives. Members are currently located in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Southeastern Massachusetts. The doctors created the ICC to provide a local, if not regional, option for independents to make purchases associated with running an independent eyecare practice, according to Tim Bonin, chief executive officer of ICC.

"As an organization, we like our position in the marketplace and the story we tell to optometrists who are tired of hidden or aggressive charges and/or annual fees. For ODs looking for no frills, trusted and efficient purchasing opportunities, the I Care Co-op is likely for them," said Bonin.

In addition to the unique ICC offerings and

I Care Co-op
Built for ODs, by ODs.



growth programs as well as many "standard" buying group discounts, the I Care Co-op has developed and built an exclusive Revenue Sharing Program. "Now called RSP+, the program separates us from many of our "competitors." Our Co-op's motto—Built for ODs, by ODs—defines all we do, including aggressively sharing our year over year growth," said Bonin.

RSP+ incentivizes Co-op members to utilize the ICC each month, according to Bonin. "We then share our 'profit' with participating members; in doing so, our collective buying power increases, allowing us to continuously work for very competitive and exclusive ICC programs and benefits."



Tim Bonin

There are no annual or monthly fees with ICC, and Bonin said his members are looking ahead to meeting the challenges ahead in 2023.

"2023, as the years before, will have its challenges," Bonin predicted. "We will meet them as we have in years past. Optometrists always do!" ■

Acquios Alliance Aims to 'Empower Private Practices' With New Programs

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about hiring the right people for the right position, developing that person to be the success they and the office needs and so much more. Setting up and implementing tools to educate and invest in practices' most important asset, the employees/team, is what makes the great practices stand above," Guinotte said.

One program the alliance is excited to be introducing this year is a new management development program, which will kick off in June of 2023.

"We are thrilled to announce our new 45-hour management development program, which we

will deliver starting in June," said Guinotte. "The program will begin with a 15-hour in-person presentation, followed by multiple online meetings to help teach managers of offices, many of them with little to no management/leadership experience, to implement and become the leaders they want to be and take their practices and businesses to the next level. The workshop will feature and be led by people with proven multi-unit management experience. We are confident the participants of this event will walk away with newfound confidence, balance in their professional and personal careers, while enjoying their successes into the future."

Over the past year, Acquios Alliance added a couple of positions to its team to add efficiencies to the organization and help with event planning, support, while allowing it to keep availability accessible to those seeking services and improvements in their daily workload at their practices.

"Acquios Alliance is about empowering private practices," Guinotte said. "We welcome optometrists seeking to differentiate themselves through likeminded vendors to contact us. For only \$50 a month, they can join our organization and work to be different by offering great products and services not available in commercial settings." ■

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IDOC: Helping Independents Succeed By Meeting Market Challenges

The past year has been a busy one at the IDOC <https://idoc.net/> organization, including the recent merger with Three Rivers Optical laboratory and a continued effort toward helping independent ODs grow their practices by being a full service provider that offers much more than an alliance/buying group, its leaders stated.

“At IDOC, we continuously challenge ourselves to innovate and maximize the value we can bring the entire optometry industry,” said Dave Brown, IDOC president and chief executive officer. “In 2022 we launched a full suite of services—taking over critical areas in a practice that will greatly help the independent OD succeed. When we say ‘Let IDOC Do It’, the practice actually outsources the work to our employees.

“And we still offer best-in-class vendor programs and peer-to-peer networking. Our adoption rate for services has been very strong, as has the satisfaction with the services, and we expect many ODs to use our unique financial, optical, HR and marketing services that enhance practice efficiency and profitability in 2023.”



In January, IDOC announced a merger with Three Rivers Optical, which brought together two renowned industry leaders, IDOC, the largest independent optometric alliance, and Three Rivers Optical, a leading independent optical laboratory. The companies have combined to bring a suite of



Dave Brown



Oliver Spandow

practice enhancement and lab services to eyecare professionals. Three Rivers Optical’s benefits include quality products, leading customer service, industry-leading turnaround times and American-made manufacturing.

Also in January, IDOC announced new partnerships for 2023 with over 15-plus additional vendors to add to its portfolio, while maintaining valued existing partnerships. IDOC partners with more than 55 vendors to provide exclusive pricing discounts, rebate programs and resources to IDOC members.

In its merger with Three Rivers Optical lab, IDOC launched its newest service: Lab Services. “We also remind our members, and any independent OD, to learn about IDOC Services—which include taking over critical elements of running a practice: bookkeeping, website and digital marketing, inventory management and HR support,” said Oliver Spandow, IDOC’s chief operating officer.

“In 2022, IDOC launched first-of-its-kind comprehensive practice management services to better serve our members and independent owners across the U.S. These services include finance Bookkeeping and Benchmarks, Marketing Social Media and Web & Search, Optical Inventory Management and HR services,” Spandow said.

“These solutions support independent practices helping owners get time back, outsourcing finance, marketing, and optical tasks to be run profession-

ally by industry experts, and grow their businesses. In 2022, IDOC continued to grow these services and enhance the capabilities across each offering.”

While IDOC doesn’t share membership data, IDOC has grown its membership results year after year. “Our membership plans are open to all independent practices, with no lock-in contracts and a 100 percent satisfaction guaranteed or we refund your dues,” said Brown.

Looking ahead in 2023, Spandow noted that independent ODs will face economic challenges and ongoing staffing opportunities but “are as strong as ever” and that “those who join IDOC and utilize our program’s services will be very well positioned for continued growth to meet any market changes.”

“One change we see accelerating in 2023 is an increase in cold starts and new practices opening across the country; many of these are joining the IDOC Kickstart Program,” Spandow noted. “We also see a continued return to live events—our Connection national meeting was our largest ever in attendance. 2023 will bring new technologies, economic challenges, and ongoing staffing opportunities to independent practices.

“With staffing challenges continuing to accelerate, outsourcing to the industry experts at IDOC through our service offerings will be more important than ever. IDOC stands as a beacon for independents—providing hands-on support, practice management solutions, strong vendor partnerships and a peer community to lean on and learn from, to grow independent practices,” Spandow said.

IDOC continues to grow and meet the market demands for its services, hiring more than 40 new staff members over the past two years. The addition of Three Rivers Optical takes its employment over 100 dedicated people.

“When we say ‘Let IDOC Do It’ we mean our employees are doing the work—the services work is not outsourced,” said Brown. “And we now own a lab through the merger with Three Rivers Optical. We have a wealth of expertise about independent optometry.” ■



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Opti-Port: Driving Profitability and Growth for Its Members

Founded over 20 years ago, Opti-Port <https://www.optiport.com/> is a national alliance of leading multi-office eyecare providers which leverages the combined strength of its member practices to create revenue-enhancing, cost-saving and market-expanding opportunities. Opti-Port is the only eyecare alliance dedicated solely to supporting large, regional multi-office practice groups, according to the group.

The alliance has grown to include more than 60 multi-location practice groups that represent over 860 practice locations. Solutions offered include group purchasing for frames, lenses, contact lenses and lab services.



The alliance also offers technology solutions, including its CLX System, a cloud-based ordering, managing and marketing system that gives users the tools needed to grow their contact lens business. Opti-Port also offers members an educational conference series, as well as marketing solutions that include direct marketing, an in-depth marketing workshop and website optimization analysis.

“While the industry at large has experienced economic and market challenges for several years now, Opti-Port has faced these same challenges on a large scale. Opti-Port is a network for large regional multi-location eyecare providers, which means our members experienced challenges like price compression, rising costs and staff turnover in multiple offices at once,” said Jason Lake, OD, Opti-Port general manager.

“Our Opti-Port study groups gave members a unique peer support system to help navigate and solve for these mounting pressures. To combat the erosion on profit, Opti-Port offered members proprietary software for improved reporting and analytics, providing valuable business insights for

better decision making and maximizing their business potential.”

Moving forward in 2023, Lake expects these challenges to continue for members and the industry as a whole, but points toward efficiency as the key.

“Economic challenges continue to be a concern for our members, particularly as they experience those challenges across multiple locations,” said Dr. Lake. “To address these challenges, we see a return to pre-pandemic systems and protocol to recapture the staff training and camaraderie which established our successful

members as practices of choice for their patients and communities. Members are finding areas of efficiency to enhance patient experience and gain back lost margin.”

“Over the years, we have successfully scaled our member-driven study groups and leveraged

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- Jason Lake, OD, Opti-Port general manager



Jason Lake, OD

them as a superpower to unlock insight and key learnings leveraged broadly by our members to drive profitability and growth,” Dr. Lake added. “Some 50 percent of members are now involved in the study groups, and with increased demand for additional groups we are forming the fifth study group under Opti-Port in 2023. They will have their first meeting at the Opti-Port Summit, our annual national meeting, in November in Denver.

“The data is clear that members that engage in our groups show far greater growth and

profitability than the industry and we expect this next group to further illustrate this pattern. We will only allow one additional group in 2023 and expect demand to outpace our available openings.”

Opti-Port is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■

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PECAA Expands ECP Services With VSP Vision Support

When VSP Vision <https://www.vspvision.com/> announced the acquisition of Professional Eyecare Associates of America <https://www.pecaa-max.com/> (PECAA) last fall, it was independent eyecare professionals that benefitted the most, according to Johnathan Worrall, who took over as president of PECAA in January of this year. PECAA continues to operate independently from VSP Vision and, executives noted, from VSP Vision's Premier Program.

"When PECAA and VSP Vision joined forces last year, it was a strategic opportunity to unite the industry's two largest supporters of independent eyecare professionals," Worrall told *Vision Monday*. "PECAA now has the support of VSP Vision which allows us to expand the services and resources we provide to independent eyecare professionals in a way that we could not have done on our own."

PECAA was founded in 2006 by three independent ODs in the Pacific Northwest looking for ways to better serve the independent eyecare community. Over the years, PECAA has become a leading alliance organization in vision care, hosting hundreds of local/regional networking opportunities nationwide. In 2021, PECAA and Healthy Eyes Advantage (HEA), a leading buying group, joined forces to create the nation's largest community of independent ECPs. PECAA now serves more than 12,000 members and provides a comprehensive array of services and solutions in one, simple membership called PECAA Max.

"Last year we introduced PECAA Max, featuring an expanded suite of practice advisory services and educational programs aimed at supporting our members' practice growth and professional development," said Justin Manning, OD, MPH, FAAD and chief member experience officer at PECAA. "The Max program allows independent eyecare professionals to take advantage of our



Johnathan Worrall



Justin Manning, OD



industry-leading discount and IncentivEYES rebate programs and the streamlined efficiency of PECAA's consolidated billing service at no additional cost. Our focus is on helping PECAA members maximize profitability, grow their practices, and access all the tools and resources PECAA Max membership encompasses."

PECAA Max members have access to more than 250 vendor partners, nationwide peer-to-peer communities, the PECAA annual meeting, and business advisory services, focused on finance, staff training, optical management, operations, billing and coding, and marketing, according to Dr. Manning.

"Over the past year, PECAA's Member Business Advisor (MBA) team added two new members, specializing in optical management and business

"Practices will continue to face significant pressure in 2023. Staffing, training, revenue and cost of goods are challenges independent practices have faced since the pandemic and continue into 2023."

**- Johnathan Worrall,
president of PECAA**

operations," said Dr. Manning. "We launched the Optometric Billing and Coding Certification Program by PECAA in late 2022, and the sold-out inaugural class will graduate in 2023. To support our members in attracting and retaining patients, we also launched PECAA Ads, giving independent eyecare professionals the ability to compete with the biggest players in the industry through digital display ads, remarketing and targeted marketing driven by AI."

Looking ahead in 2023, Worrall predicts that practices will continue to face significant pressures as they attempt to move their practice forward in challenging economic times. The good news, according to Worrall, is that PECAA will be with them every step of the way with needed support and services.

"Practices will continue to face significant pressure in 2023. Staffing, training, revenue and cost of goods are challenges independent practices have faced since the pandemic and continue into 2023," Worrall noted. "In addition, the current state of the economy contributes to additional



pressure as economists debate the reality and potential severity of a recession. The good news is private practice is still the preferred patient choice, and PECAA is continuing in its mission to support independents by creating community, growth and economic value for our members.”

In 2023, PECAA will launch a white-labeled, dehydrated amniotic membrane priced below the competition with additional savings for members through the IncentivEYES program, according to Dr. Manning. They also hosted the first marketing training camp for members in February and are “putting the finishing touches” on an optical training course that will be introduced later this year. ■



Nearly 1,000 highly engaged ECPs participated in the PECAA 2022 Annual Meeting general session.

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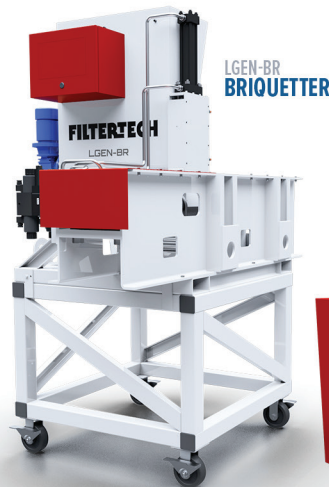
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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

PERC: Harnessing Buying Power to Improve Independents' Bottom Line

Founded in 2008, PERC <https://www.percalliance.com/> is a doctor alliance designed to ensure member practices improve their bottom line by harnessing collective buying power to negotiate advantageous terms with vendors. The group's no charge, risk-free membership model is open to all private practices. A low-burden to entry setup has unlocked rapid growth for PERC Alliance, with more than 600 member locations added in just the last year. The PERC Alliance community now consists of almost 7,500 member locations, according to the alliance's executives.

"From prolonged labor market challenges to inflationary pressure to supply chain issues, our members have faced many challenges over these past years, all of which create difficulty in normal operation of a business and the related profitability," said Jason Lake, OD, PERC general manager.



"To ensure our members succeeded in spite of the challenges, PERC Alliance made it a priority to enhance member engagement and provide valuable opportunities for learning and growth. To achieve this goal, the organization committed to reinvigorating peer-to-peer education and laid the groundwork for soon-to-launch study groups and our new Accelerator Program. These groups will provide a platform for members to come together and tackle emerging challenges and knowledge sharing.

"With lingering supply chain issues, PERC Frame Advantage was a critical asset for PERC Alliance members in 2022," Dr. Lake said. "The program effectively addressed the challenges faced by the industry by improving board management and product inventory. The result was a decrease in back orders and an efficient and streamlined management process, ensuring our participating members



Jason Lake, OD



Cristin Sullivan



Jeffrey Gerson, OD

experienced a stable supply chain with enhanced profitability."

A challenging economic environment may be looming on the horizon in 2023 and PERC members will again be looking to the alliance to help navigate them through potentially unsettled waters.

"More difficult economic conditions could reshape the market in 2023, with practices across the industry finding ways to navigate with tighter margins due to inflation and increased staff wages," said Dr. Lake. "Our members are looking to build upon the cultures of excellence they established ahead of the pandemic and know that staff training, excellent customer service and practice culture will set them apart from their competition and enable their continued growth despite what could be challenging conditions."

According to Cristin Sullivan, director of business development at PERC Alliance, "our number one goal is to give members a competitive advantage by helping maximize their bottom line and securing for them the best cost of goods on the best products in the industry that can be obtained in a no or low cost alliance. In addition to savings advantages, we are launching and enhancing three other key programs."

Those programs include PERC's Accelerator Program, which is designed to help members maxi-

mize growth and sustainability in their offices. Also on tap is PERC Advantage, a static frame board system. In 2023, the alliance will launch PERC Advantage+. The program offers the same profitability-increasing board management system, with expanded frame assortments including high-end luxury frames and profitable premium fashion frames. Also coming is the PERC Pinnacle Practices program.

Jeffrey Gerson, OD, PERC medical director and key advisor leader, said, "To ensure we continue exchanging best practices that can help set our members apart, we are building our PERC Pinnacle Practices program (P3 program). Within this program, we are forming peer study groups for select members who desire to collaborate and tackle the toughest challenges and offer insights into driving success that can be leveraged and shared with our entire member base."

Member engagement is also a key area for PERC in 2023. "Clear in our agenda this year is a growing focus on driving member engagement to create member wide success," said Dr. Lake. "To that end, we have added senior marketing manager Cassidy Johns to lead our marketing team to enhance member experience and PERC Alliance engagement."

PERC is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■

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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

The Eye Consortium Supports Large-Scale Membership Growth Among Independent ECPs

Founded in 2019, The Eye Consortium <https://www.eyec consortium.com/> (TEC) has prided itself on being a “high-level strategy” that can be incorporated to accelerate any practice in any business environment with a focus on independent practices. In 2022, the group experienced large-scale membership growth and took on the challenge of making sure its members continued to be fully supported in order to continue to meet their practice goals.

“In 2022, our biggest challenge was to scale the organization to support and manage our phenomenal membership growth,” said Robert Chu, OD, one of the founders of TEC along with Matt Alpert, OD, both of whom are practicing optometrists. “We met the challenge by reorganizing and scaling up our operational teams. We added key staff with core competencies in business development, vendor relations, marketing and doctor communications. We are now in a prime position to support our growing member base.”

TEC believes that practice differentiation and the patient experience are keys to an independent and profitable practice. Thus, creating a community of like-minded business people allows the group to curate a specialized group of vendors, focus on maintaining a unique environment, while increasing profitability.

In 2022, TEC built upon their partnership with Carl Zeiss, adding Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc. as an exclusive medical technology vendor partner. “The relationship with Zeiss Meditec allows TEC members to receive an exclusive special offer,” said Dr. Chu. “Additionally, with the ONE ZEISS program, practices can earn credits through the use of Zeiss lenses to help offset the costs of Zeiss Meditec’s industry leading advanced equipment.”

TEC, which has approximately 2,200 members in the U.S., also partnered with Alcon in 2002 as its



Robert Chu, OD



Matt Alpert, OD

exclusive contact lens consortium partner. Together, TEC and Alcon launched the SHARE+ program at events nationwide to help practitioners achieve increased profitability while featuring innovative new technologies.

At the same time, the past year also presented TEC with its share of challenges besides keeping pace with a growing membership base, including continued consolidation and supply chain issues.

“In 2022, the doctor alliance/buying group landscape again changed forever. We witnessed industry changing consolidation,” said Dr. Alpert. “Previously independent doctor-focused alliance groups were acquired by large vertically integrated companies. Several other doctor alliance groups invested in their own optical laboratories and will be presumably steering their members to use their owned supply chain,” Alpert said.

TEC is free to join with no membership or administrative fees. Practices may opt-in to one or all special offers from the group’s comprehensive suite-of-solutions from consortium vendor partners. The only membership requirements, according to Dr. Alpert, are to subscribe to TEC’s high level philosophy of practice differentiation and the



premium patient experience being keys to an independent and profitable practice.

Current vendor partners include Zeiss Vision and Zeiss Meditec, Alcon, MODO Eyewear, Lafont, Capri Optics, OCUSOFT and EyeCarePro.

“TEC’s unwavering focus has always been supporting independents,” said Dr. Alpert. “And 2023 will be no different. TEC’s consortium partners are curated independent companies who never compete directly against independent practices or doctors. We are committed to the future of independent eyecare. Where we spend our money matters.”

Moving forward in 2023, TEC has plans and new programs in place to further enhance its offerings to its membership base, including the announcement of expanded eyewear consortium partners Kering and Bellinger House. “Both Kering and Bellinger represent leading-class offerings to truly differentiate practices,” said Dr. Chu.

Also new in 2023 is a shared services platform, which Chu describes as “a platform to help take away the pain points of running an eyecare business and keep practitioners focused on profitability.” Initial shared services consortium partners include PCS—Practice Compliance solutions and Eye Deal Solutions. TEC is also continuing to expand its key opinion leaders (KOL) network. ■



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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

Alfred J. Villavecchia Buying Group Has Been Supporting Independents for 43 Years

Family-owned and operated since 1980, the New Jersey-based Alfred J. Villavecchia Buying Group <https://www.villavecchia.com/VBG> was established over 43 years ago with the primary purpose of supporting independent optical retailers to stay competitive by providing larger volume-based discounts. As one of the first buying groups in the optical industry, the company has dedicated itself to providing members with accurate, detailed, and prompt monthly statements along with the highest levels of personalized customer service.

“Thankfully, we’ve been able to maintain the same core staff for the better part of two decades,” said Brian Villavecchia, president of Alfred J. Villavecchia Buying Group. “This creates a nice familiarity with our members on a personal level but also in their comfortability that we are knowledgeable and capable of dealing with any issues that may arise.”



Brian Villavecchia

The buying group currently services 500 accounts across 28 states and operates exclusively in the U.S. Membership is free, with no administrative fees or monthly membership dues. Interested parties can apply on the company’s website.

Increased membership and vendor partnerships were both a hallmark in 2022 for the buying group, which continues to invest time in developing special offerings in both areas.

“Last year was one of our biggest years of growth in terms of new member additions as well as vendor partnerships, so we certainly experienced an increase in our administrative workload,” said Villavecchia. “We invest a lot of time in vendor onboarding, specifically in testing the exchange of invoice data to make sure all information is imported into our system accurately. The more time we dedi-

cate upfront allows for a much smoother reconciliation at the end of each month.”

The buying group continues to offer member discounts and special group pricing and recently added consolidated billing, a tool it feels will be a key component for its members moving forward. In addition, members are provided a year-end summary of purchases, subtotaled by month, to assist with budgeting and planning.

“Discounts and special group pricing will always remain at the core of our member programs but the added benefit of consolidated billing truly is a great tool,” said Villavecchia. “All of your vendor activity on one statement reduces reconciliation time and frees up your staff to focus their efforts elsewhere. Applying merchandise credits from one vendor against the entire statement total helps to improve monthly cash flow.”

The buying group recently launched a new website to complement its complete database upgrade in 2020. The two platforms now communicate seamlessly to provide added automation in monthly procedures as well as improved reporting for its members.

Vendor additions were a big part of 2022 for the buying group, which continued to add a variety of partnerships to its portfolio.

“We welcomed a number of wonderful vendor partners that have added a lot of variety to our already strong portfolio,” said Villavecchia. “Orgreen Optics and Laibach & York provide fashionable frames from two independent, European manufacturers that emphasize high-quality craftsmanship.

“Optify provides a virtual try-on and pre-shop platform to save our practices time while helping to keep their consumer purchases in-store rather than online. Azul Optics & Vision Elements create a partnership duo where practices can perform a quick measurement of macular pigment density and then offer their patients the early defense supplement to support their eye health.



“In addition to building new partnerships, we continuously work with existing vendors to strengthen our member programs. Recent highlights include rebate programs for Design Eyewear Group, Kering, Lafont, and Modo that provide tremendous savings on top of their already valuable base discounts.”

Looking ahead in 2023, Villavecchia identifies continued supply chain issues that began with the pandemic as an obstacle that will need to be addressed.

“Frame inventory has improved recently but contact lens supply has definitely diminished,” said Villavecchia. “The continued increase in contact lens wearers has driven up the demand on an already stressed supply chain. My hope is that production and staffing issues begin to improve so our customers can fill their patients’ needs. Consolidation has also been a factor in recent years and I would expect to see more of it in 2023.” ■

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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

Vision Source Next Program Reaches a Milestone

Despite the ongoing challenge of consolidation of private practice in the optometry world, Vision Source <https://insight.visionsource.com/VSNext/home>, North America's most extensive network of independent optometrists consisting of over 3,150 locally owned optometric practice locations with 4,500 doctors, celebrated a landmark event in 2022 for its Vision Source Next program, which provides resources to students and members who are looking to start, acquire, sell or work in private practice with exclusive guidance and programs to support their success.

"Consolidation of private practice is a concern not only for our community of practice owners and practitioners, but for the industry as a whole," said Jeff Duncan, general manager of Vision Source. "In spite of this mounting pressure, Vision Source celebrated a milestone achievement for our Vision Source Next program—since the program's inception in 2018, we have helped 200 ODs fulfill their dreams to open their first private practice. Our unwavering commitment to protecting and perpetuating private practice optometry will serve as our North Star as we work with doctors in every phase of their practice life cycle."

Vision Source

Founded in 1991, Vision Source is dedicated to preserving the elite business of independent eyecare and providing highly personalized services delivered through a unique heritage of shared expertise, according to the organization.

"At Vision Source, we are steadfast in our focus on supporting members through whatever challenges they face," said Donna Mikulecky, Vision Source chief operating officer. "In 2021, our team recognized oncoming inflationary pressures on private practices and quickly deployed resources to ready our members through education on the



Jeff Duncan



Donna Mikulecky



Amir Khoshnevis, OD

topic and exclusive savings opportunities for their businesses.

"Despite economic conditions, our members continued to grow at a rate faster than the industry in 2022 thanks to their dedication to providing excellent patient care, the culture of collaboration within our community and our readiness efforts," she said.

Vision Source offers programs such as Frame Dream, Vision Source Next and its annual Vision Source Exchange event, along with relationships with key vendors to help members move forward in their practice.

"Vision Source has a 30-plus year history of delivering on our promise to provide our members access to the best resources and savings opportunities to help our community thrive as private practice owners," said Mikulecky. "Our unparalleled programs and platforms—such as Frame Dream, Vision Source Next, and our annual Vision Source Exchange event—and relationships with key vendors allow us to provide comprehensive support to members in all areas of their practice."

"Our members can expect to see Vision Source continue to commit resources and energy to advance Vision Source Next to support private practice optometrists at any stage of their journey,"

added Amir Khoshnevis, OD, chief medical officer of Vision Source. "Whether we are working with students who want to learn more about private practice, optometrists looking to open their first private practice, existing owners looking to expand or helping members plan for the transition of their practice to the next private owner, Vision Source Next is a critical enabler of our commitment to perpetuating private practice."

In 2023, Vision Source is updating its myopia management protocol in an ongoing support for practices against the "epidemic" of progressive myopia. The company is also creating resources members can use to better ready their practices in case of economic downturn in the coming months.

"There is an increasing need to equip private practice to combat the rising, sight-threatening epidemic of progressive myopia," said Dr. Khoshnevis. "In 2023, we will continue our focus on enabling member practices to expand their myopia management and medical vision care services to ensure they can create positive patient outcomes which will enhance their patients' quality of life. We will continue evolving our suite of clinical protocols with an updated myopia protocol and the introduction of new protocols for other diseases."

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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

Vision Trends: Supporting Independent ECPs and Their Patients

Identifying as a “fiercely independent, solutions-driven and truly transparent optometric alliance,” Vision Trends <https://www.vtrends.us/> was established in 2007 by co-founders Douglas Inns, OD, and Michael Toups, OD, “to protect the success of independent optometry, first and foremost.” The group currently serves 360 optometric practice offices located in 32 states.

Drs. Inns and Toups practice in the North Houston metro area, serving vision care patients and doctors alike. Because they are both still practicing optometric physicians, they said they stay attuned to the ever changing needs of their eyecare patients and the challenges facing independent optometry.

“Year in and year out, we have seen the same two major pain points affecting independent optometric practices—stagnant insurance reimbursements resulting in lower profit, and the challenge of hiring and retaining quality staff,” said Dr. Toups, co-founder and president of Vision Trends.

VISION TRENDS

Over the last several years, Vision Trends leadership set out to confront these challenges with a two-pronged approach: maximize insurance reimbursements and cash pay profits through lab services, and by taking a holistic approach to retaining staff through education and training.

The company launched Vision Trends Lab Solutions to provide Vision Trends member practices with an opportunity to own a stake in a private ophthalmic lab to optimize insurance reimbursements and maximize practice profits from cash pay patients without raising patient lens prices and still providing superior lens technology, lab quality and service.



Douglas Inns, OD



Michael Toups, OD



Troy Hall

The company has also invested heavily in building educational programs for every level of the practice. Last year, Vision Trends offered accredited CE for doctors, hands-on workshops on high value topics, an online staff training program designed to cross-train all employees to deliver consistent, high-quality care to patients, and initiated a new online forum to offer practice management advice to owners.

While Vision Trends has always understood the challenges facing independent practice, the pandemic forced companies to take a deeper look at business operations as a means of survival, and independent practice owners were looking to their doctor alliance for support, executives said.

“At the height of the pandemic, the Vision Trends team found itself supporting our members in a completely different manner,” said Dr. Inns. “We restructured our membership fees and worked with vendor partners to help members manage cash flow, translated federal legislation and public health advisories into step-by-step to do lists, and established a proactive multi-channel communications protocol to disseminate information to our members so they could make informed business decisions, and take care of their employees and patients.”

Vision Trends offers practice memberships to independent optometrists, opticians and ophthalmologists throughout the U.S. Vision Trends offers its members two distinct programs to choose from. With the VT Affiliate Program, member fee is 1 percent of adjusted revenue capped at \$20,000 per year per practice plus a \$500 start-up fee per practice.

Members sign a 5-year agreement and can cancel membership with a 60-day written notice. With the VT Profit+ Program, the member fee is \$199 per month; additional practices owned by the same owner are \$99 per month. There are no contracts and members can cancel at any time.

Vision Trends negotiates vendor programs designed to lower their costs with more than 120 vendor partners, offers free accredited online and in-person continuing education events, invitations to member meetings throughout the year and a variety of subsidized products and services to improve practice performance as part of its membership dues.

In addition, Vision Trends listens to its members and built new programs to address the critical pain points for independent optometric practices.

Among these programs is VT Lab Solutions,

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Alliances & Buying Groups Step Up Their Game

Vision Trends: Supporting Independent ECPs and Their Patients

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where Vision Trends Affiliate members who choose to become a VT Lab Solutions shareholder have access to full service, superior lab services, exceptional lens technology, and dedicated customer service at a lower cost. In spring 2023, Vision Trends will launch the first in a series of Management Training Courses designed to build and enhance the skills of the employee practice manager as part of its VT Learning Solutions platform.

And with VT Insurance Solutions, Vision Trends members can choose to outsource a variety of insurance-related functions required to become an in-network provider for their patients. Throughout 2023, Vision Trends will continue to explore opportunities to partner with insurance carriers to increase the financial value of an insurance patient.

As for the challenges ahead in 2023, the team at Vision Trends noted, “industry consolidation will continue to impact how the vision care industry delivers exam services and ophthalmic eyewear to the vision care consumer. These changes will likely impact the industry’s most important player... the independent optometrist.”

At one end, the industry’s largest corporations are buying up smaller competitors, and at the other end, private equity firms are buying up independent optometric practices at inflated multiples, according to Vision Trends.



“While independent practices are still navigating the uncertainties of a post-pandemic economy, cash-rich corporations are expanding their footprint in the market and increasing shareholder value,” said Troy Hall, chief operating officer at Vision Trends. “Unless the independent practice owner owns stock in these companies, they aren’t seeing the financial advantages of market consolidation. They are likely paying higher prices for the same products and services.”

“We can’t change what’s happening in the industry, but we can advocate for the important role independent optometry plays in the eye health and vision wellness of the vision care consumer,” said Dr. Touns. “We remain committed to developing and delivering programs that support profitable growth for our Vision Trends members, and we will continue to be an independent voice that champions their continued success for years to come.” ■

Vision Source Next Program Reaches a Milestone

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“Similar to our proactive approach to inflation, we are creating and deploying resources to help our members ready their practices for potential market disruptions or economic downturns in 2023,” added Duncan. “This will occur through our ongoing Business of Optometry education series as well as focused member webinars and podcasts.”

Continued member growth is also something

Vision Source continues to experience firsthand, with a key addition also made to its own team in the last year.

“Over the past years, our members have grown at rates that outpace the industry—in good times and in bad. That growth begets need for increased support from Vision Source, both in their existing practice and in securing opportunities to expand,” said Dr. Khoshnevis.

“We have recently grown our OD consultation

team with the appointment of Dr. Mike Rothschild, practice expansion advisor. In his role, Dr. Rothschild will join Dr. Mick Kling to serve our members who want to leverage their deep knowledge and experiences in the areas of starting or acquiring new locations, adding associate ODs or breaking through rapid growth ceilings,” he said.

Vision Source is a part of Essilor of America, which is a division of EssilorLuxottica. ■