

MADE IN USA

American Eyewear Faces the Pandemic and Forges a New Path Forward



GWENDOLYN PLUMMER / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

NEW YORK—Each year when we set out to begin our annual Made in USA feature, the American social and political landscape looks a little different—and it's safe to say that 2020 is no exception. It's been a tumultuous year for Americans (and the year's most anticipated moment is still to come) but we continue to chug along, all things considered. The same is true for the U.S.' at-home eyewear companies, old and new.

Regardless of the product, consumers respond to the "Made in USA" story. According to a study conducted by The Reshoring Institute and reported in *Supply Chain Management Review*, (https://www.scmr.com/article/americans_say_they_prefer_products_made_in_usa_and_will_pay_more_for_them) which involved surveying 500 Americans across the country, nearly 70 percent of respondents said they prefer American-made products. And of those sur-

veyed, about 83 percent said they'd be willing to pay up to 20 percent more for those products. Although this is a broad study, focusing on all areas of commerce, ECPs across the country tell *VM* they have experienced a similar sentiment firsthand.

Annie Hicks, LDO at SeePort Optometry in North Port, Florida, makes sure to market the "Made in USA" angle when presenting American made frames. She told *VM* that patients often see the Made in USA story as an added benefit—especially because it comes on the heels of an already fantastic product. When it comes to products Made in USA, Hicks said, "I believe it gives the patient an extra element of interest, keeping their attention longer to evaluate and fall in love with the product because Made in USA is an easy, quick statement that does not need any explanation or education or selling. Patients just know what it means and are instantly more interested because of the statement."

Vladimir Mordukhayev, CEO and optician at Modern Day Optx in New York City, who sells Thema's eGreen, tells a similar story. Mordukhayev stocks frames from all over the world, and separates them in the office so that "clients... see and feel the differences firsthand." He finds that clients who are interested in where frames are made are often also brand-seeking clients. He explained, "I am the one who actually brings up where it's made, how long it takes to make and why they feel so good on the face. And they love it."

It's no question, then, that the Made in USA story adds value. But with the U.S. constantly changing, along with our industry, many American-based eyewear companies have been forced to adapt and grow, from reimagining the work week to changing the way production occurs. In the face of a pandemic and a country in crisis, American eyewear has had to forge a new path forward. ■

ArtCraft Optical: Local Heritage, 100 Years in the Making

Founded in 1918, Rochester, New York-based ArtCraft Optical prides itself on being the oldest family owned and operated frame manufacturer in the U.S. ArtCraft began with the aim of producing frames for the U.S., Canadian and British war efforts, and the company, now in the hands of the third generation of the Eagle family, hasn't slowed down since.

As a supplier of safety frames for the manufacturing workforce and combat frames for U.S. War Plane Program and world militaries, ArtCraft was deemed an essential business early on in the pandemic, and work has not stopped. In fact, vice president Charlie Eagle told *VM*, "Our prescriptive safety frames as well as new DOD products are in higher demand than we saw pre-pandemic."

ArtCraft has also spent the past six months providing PPE to large organizations across the country, including Ace Hardware, Sam's Club, Disney, schools, colleges, universities and the Federal Government, including the U.S. Secret Service, military bases, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Federal Courts. Eagle said, "We have viewed COVID as a time to overcome new challenges, retool, focus on better processes and strengthen our workforce."

Being American made is an essential piece of ArtCraft's DNA. Eagle explained, "For ArtCraft, made in the USA is important to



Based in Rochester, New York, ArtCraft Optical has a more than 100-year history as a Made in USA eyewear brand. The company is now in the hands of the third generation of the Eagle family.

us because we have a legacy of over 102 years in supporting local employees, local businesses and regional vendors. The Rochester community is an extended family and we're committed to helping keep it vibrant and successful." On top of that, because ArtCraft produces eyewear for the U.S. Military, it is important that product remains

American made, due to security cleared U.S.-sourced production.

ArtCraft also has a variety of collections on the consumer market, and Eagle finds that being American made is important there, too. He said, "We absolutely think that 'Made in USA' is a tremendous benefit particularly now that the American consumer is looking for more ways to

support American manufacturing by bringing jobs back from overseas. Consumers seemingly are looking to identify as much with a product as they do with a company mission. Being an established, century plus old American manufacturer that is known for quality craftsmanship has played a large role in our development as a company." ■

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Hilco Vision: Keeping Americans Safe

Hilco Vision's Made in the USA OnGuard safety frame collection grew out of a realization that the Hilco Vision team was brimming with internal expertise regarding safety, and that there are "exceptional materials and manufacturing capabilities located in the U.S.," Debbie Fitzgibbons, Hilco Vision's director of marketing and communications told *VM*. "We felt we had a unique opportunity to build a collection that celebrated these attributes while offering styl-

ish Rx safety frames to our customers to prevent eye injuries while on the job."

Not all of Hilco Vision's collections are made in the U.S., but, Fitzgibbons said, Hilco Vision has found that being American made resonates particularly well "in safety, where the end user of the frames is often working in manufacturing environments that require safety eyewear." With approximately 2,000 eye injuries occurring on the job daily in the U.S., there's surely no shortage of



Hilco Vision's OnGuard safety frame is Made in the USA to tackle the 2,000 eye injuries that occur on the job daily in the U.S.

need for American-made safety gear and, like the team at ArtCraft, Hilco Vision has found that the pandemic

is a uniquely important time for safety eyewear.

Fitzgibbons said, "Our entire optical industry was significantly impacted over these past few months due to COVID, however, one of our main priorities and focus was to continue to carry out our safety mission in keeping workers safe and wearing the proper Rx safety eyewear... We are proud of the role we can play in offering our customers 'Made in USA' products and will continue in this journey." ■

Lowercase: New York at the Center

Lowercase founder Gerard Masci knew from the start that his brand would be built around local production—production in New York City specifically. Together with head of design Brian Vallario, Masci told *VM*, "I brought a passion for acetate frames and Brian brought a passion for local small batch production. At the center of our approach was that we commit to making everything ourselves in NYC."

Of course, COVID-19 hit New York City fast, and it hit New York City hard. The city shut down in mid-March, and has remained at least partially locked down since. This hit New York's small businesses hard—Lowercase, Masci explained, had to close its Brooklyn-based workshop for three to four months.

Thankfully, Masci did not have to lay anyone off, but he and the rest of the Lowercase team have had to find a way to pivot in light of the way the

city and the workplace has changed. He explained, "Even as we returned to work we scheduled the work week around a 7-day work week instead of a 5-day, which allowed us to limit the number of people in the workshop at any one time."

The biggest change, though? Sales. Masci is Lowercase's only salesperson in the U.S., so he's used to constant travel and in-person interaction with potential customers—two things that are pretty much entirely out of the question now. So far, Lowercase has adjusted by sending sample sets to interested accounts and supplemented with Zoom tours of their Brooklyn workshop, but Masci said, "nothing can replace the value of in-person human to human interaction. We certainly long for the days of trade shows and free travel."

Despite these changes and new challenges, though, the Made in



Lowercase's Gerard Masci (l) and Brian Vallario came together to create an eyewear brand that puts New York City at its center.

USA—and Made in New York City—story remains central to Lowercase's brand identity. Masci said, "Local production is a key tenant of our ethos so Lowercase doesn't work if the product is not made in the U.S."

For Lowercase, local production means the ability to invite customers to see the process firsthand, adding another layer to that personal connection. Masci said, "I don't think the average consumer is very knowledgeable about the eyewear supply chain and thus is not always sure what to make of American

made frames but when educated about where most frames are made and how little production is done domestically, I do think it resonates very loudly.

"We've found an even bigger connection comes when someone tours the workshop and walks through the production process. Most people are taken aback at how long and difficult the process is to make a single pair of frames and at the end of the tour is when I really see customers attitudes toward Made in America frames take a decidedly positive turn." ■

Modo: Brooklyn Made, Brooklyn Strong

When Modo was founded in 1990 in New York City, making frames in the U.S. just wasn't common practice. Being American made remained a dream for the team at Modo—one which was actualized in 2016, when Modo opened its M Factory in Brooklyn. Now, Modo Brooklyn Made is one of the brand's most popular collections.

Rebecca Giefer, CEO, Americas for Modo said, "Since March, the various aspects of the organization have all faced surreal challenges. But as an independent company, we were able to execute a pivot to deliver PPE to our customers and help them reopen and stay open. Our organization is made up of incredibly hard workers that adapted month after month whether it's at the factory level or our Soho-based office team.

"I know it's a luxury to be able to invest in innovation, products and people during these times, but we are doing so, with much gratitude. 2021 is just around the corner and we have some momentum," she said.

Modo's Brian Dombrowski, director of ECP sales and marketing told VM, "Made in USA marked a new chapter in Modo's story and continues to set us apart from other lines." Modo's other models are made in Japan, and the company's Brooklyn factory is held to the same levels of detail and craftsmanship as their counterpart on the other side of the planet. When it comes to how customers approach the Made



Modo's Brooklyn Made collection is one of the brand's most popular, and is a dream come true for the company.

in USA story, Dombrowski thinks the label sets American-made frames apart, especially right now.

He explained, "There is some serendipitous timing, as overall customers want products that are made in the U.S.—from large purchases such as cars down to eyewear, apparel and footwear. They know that their pair of glasses is not just another frame made abroad and take pride in being able to tell that story."

Despite COVID-19 shutting

down most of New York City for months, the team at Modo has been working harder than ever, now producing PPE and working from home where possible. Modo both donated PPE to hospitals and schools in the tristate area, and began selling it to ECPs. Dombrowski said, "We wanted to help get offices opened sooner rather than later and as a trusted partner to thousands of ECPs in the U.S., we felt an obligation to be a part

of the solution."

Being up and running in the midst of a pandemic is not without its issues, though. He said, "We are obviously having more virtual discussions and presentations as opposed to meeting at trade shows or flying around the country. We have shifted to this new-normal fairly seamlessly and while we miss those in-person reactions, we continue to press on and be there to support our customers." ■

State and the ‘New’ American Optical: American Value

Europa Eyewear was born in a Chicago garage in 1977. In the beginning, the company was an importer of quality eyewear—but all of that changed in 2014, when the company partnered with Marc Franchi and Jason Stanley of Frieze Frames in order to build a state-of-the-art factory in its Chicago home. From Chicago, the company produces State Optical, Alan J. and, starting just recently, it brought inside to its production facilities, the iconic American brand AO Eyewear.

Europa still does import eyewear from abroad for its collections, geared primarily to independent ECPs, but its American-made collections stand on their own. CEO Scott Shapiro told *VM*, “When we decided to build our own factory in 2014, we wanted to create new brands that were made here, by American craftsmen.” The company employs 60 artisans, with about 50 percent of the work done by hand.

The company’s reasons for beginning production in the U.S. is two-fold. Shapiro explained, “Obviously, we wanted to build our factory here in part because we wanted to bring those jobs back to America. We felt that if we gave American workers a chance, they could make a product as well as anyone else in the world—and I’m happy to say I think we’ve been proven right.”

On top of job creation, though, the State collection wanted to change the conversation around eyewear, how it’s made, what goes



From its Chicago factory, the State Optical team produces State Optical, Alan J., and, most recently, the iconic American brand AO Eyewear, which has a long history with American celebrities, politicians and pop culture.

into the process, and why the price tag for quality eyewear sits where it does.

Shapiro said, “We also wanted to start conversations about what really goes into a quality pair of eyeglasses. We wanted people [especially opticians] to start talking about how they’re made, and why they cost what they do. That’s why we invite both consumers and opticians to come take a tour of our facility. I’m proud to say we’ve given tours to over 1,000 people and not one has ever walked away saying, ‘why are eyeglasses so expensive?’”

Showcasing the true value of eyewear is a fundamental goal for the State and AO Eyewear teams. Most importantly, he said, “is that we make sure [Made in USA] also stands for quality and luxury. When people think of something made in Italy or made in France, they associate that with quality and luxury. So they should associate those terms with ‘Made in USA.’ As one of the few American eyewear manufacturers, we know it’s our duty to help define that. And our dedicated craftsmen know it too,” Shapiro said.

This year’s relaunch of AO has once again shown State’s commitment to American-made eyewear. The collection is relaunching with some of AO’s most famous styles: Original Pilot (originally designed for American military pilots and worn by the Apollo 11 crew), the General (named for General Douglas MacArthur) and the Saratoga (a favorite of President John F. Kennedy). Shapiro told *VM* that the fact that AO is made in America “is remarkably impactful right now as people want to support businesses and brands that are closer to home.” ■

Thema: Italian Know How, American Spirit

Founded in 1993 and based in Italy, Thema now proudly calls Miami, Florida home to its company factory, which produces its brands iGreen Hi-Tech, O-Six, Giorgio Valmassoi 1971 and MIA Private Label Collection.

Giulia Valmassoi, Thema's North American director, brought the company's production to the U.S. from Italy, replicating the manufacturing process that her father taught her. It was a dream come true for Valmassoi—one that she expected would take many years to accomplish. The decision to open an American factory was accompanied by a major change in the way Thema operates as well.

Valmassoi said, "We shifted the traditional concept of buying inventory because our product is usually sold to patients before it's even produced, so in 2017 when we decided to open the factory in the U.S. we did it for two reasons: first, our goal was to become the first company to offer Italian eyewear made in the USA for a 'win win' situation, and then because we know that delivery time is critical for our customers. By making our production in the U.S., we can ship all our orders including custom designs within three to five business days from the order date."

This balance works perfectly for Thema. The brand has been able to embrace its Italian roots and its American dreams at the same time—and keeping production in the U.S. has made connecting with



Thema's Miami-based factory enables the company to embrace its Italian roots and its American dreams.

customers more effective than ever before. Valmassoi said, "In life, we tend to see the finished product and rarely consider the effort and hard work behind it. This is why we share the Thema experience with the customers that come to visit us. We find that each customer that gets the experience leaves understanding the art behind the manufacturing of each frame and loving the product even more."

It also means the opportunity to connect with the local community.

Thema offers education partnerships with Miami Dade College, coordinates events for local vision care students and offers class tours of the factory. For Valmassoi, integration with the local community is crucial. She said, "If you buy your bread from the local family-owned bakery, you are supporting your community. Buying American-made goods doesn't just support the workers who make those goods, it builds a strong community and strong economy."

Like many others, Thema found their business on hold throughout March and April, but sales rose again in May. Valmassoi found the downtime to have at least one silver lining. "I actually had more time to sit down with my team and think of what we wanted to create, without rushing in between shows to design and produce new collections. I am happy to have used this time to come up with new amazing projects that we'll present in October." ■