

# Competing in a New Environment

## ECP Alliances and Buying Groups Pivot By Developing New Programs and Resources



Image Credit: Getty Images

BY MARK TOSH / SENIOR EDITOR

Like other business groups within eyecare, ECP alliances and buying groups have had to evolve and develop new programs and resources to support their members. This perhaps was never more apparent than during the past 18 months when practitioners were desperately in need of the support that comes with being part of a larger organization and the sense of community that alliances are known for providing.

As a result, most alliances and buying groups saw a pickup in interest and involvement by members over the past 18 months. And a number of new organizations, sensing this desire for community and supporting resources, have jumped into the fray and launched fresh business models. Indeed, alliances have always been a major part of the eyecare sector, with one-third of doctors belonging to either two or three different groups, Jobson Research has found.

The increasing importance of alliances was demonstrated late in July when Healthy Eyes Advantage announced its move to acquire PECAA, boosting its membership to 12,000 independent eyecare professionals. (For more details, see Page 22.)

What these groups offer ECPs are benefits such as purchasing discounts, practice management advice and marketing assistance. And now, in response to an even more challenging environment, they have evolved to provide an array of different tools and services. Their services have expanded to include practice-building education and other support tailored to the private practitioner.

“We rapidly identified needs and resources because, one, our people genuinely care about the success of every member and, two, as an independent business ourselves we faced the same uncertainties

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and we constantly shared successful company actions with our members,” IDOC president and CEO Dave Brown said. He added, “We were unafraid to invest in our members’ needs, for example, waiving dues for two months, and we had faith the recovery would occur. Simply put, IDOC is an independent business partnering and helping other independent businesses/practices. We believe, and the recovery by our members demonstrates, that we are uniquely positioned to help independent practices manifest a bright future.”

“This year has seen not only a rebound but also growth as compared to pre-pandemic levels,” Health Eyes Advantage chairman and chief executive officer Jim McGrann added. “While COVID-19 was and continues to be a sobering experience for all, the HEA community persevered.

“We’ve heard from many of our members that HEA’s resources and

support were key to their ability to withstand the challenging COVID business climate so they could not only recover from the pandemic but also find new ways to thrive in 2021 and beyond. We’re actively at work every day continuing to enhance the value and support we deliver to our members to ensure our mutual success as we move through the next phases of market evolution.”

CECOP North America CEO Ignacio Macias likened the place independent ECPs are in today with that of “a master orchestra conductor for a 1,000-piece band.” He added, “They need support to make their lives easier and simplify what is needed to drive profits. They need trusted partners they can rely on to bring solutions to their challenges.”

Added Amir Khoshnevis, OD, chief medical officer at Vision Source, “Thirty years ago, Vision Source was founded by optometrists who were dedicated to the vision of strengthening private practice optometry and raising the bar with patient care. By nurturing a community of like-minded professionals intent on rallying behind these goals, Vision Source has grown into the nation’s premier network of private practice optometrists, helping to shape the industry and advance private optometry for the next 30 years and beyond.”

Changes in health care delivery, patient demographics and clinical technology all offer tremendous growth opportunities for independent ECPs, noted PECAA general manager and SVP Jamie Hughes and Lance Anderson, OD, vice president of strategic initiatives. “We expect growing and successful practices will be adding new retail and clinical services to their offerings as technologies continue to emerge to allow independent ECP’s to better connect with their patients in the ever-growing e-commerce environment,” Hughes said.

Providing a sense of community and partnership are just two of the many roles that buying groups and ECP alliance groups see themselves playing today, as they work to develop new tools and resources to support their members. Over the next few pages, VM’s editorial team presents a top-line review of these organizations and their philosophies and business strategies. ■

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### Experienced Acquios Team Focuses on Success of Private Practices

The business group Acquios Advisors came about in 2015 when the founders Rick Guinotte and Kirk Kastens sensed a need in the eyecare market for doing things a little differently. Guinotte has been in the optical industry since 1989, having begun his career with a frame company, and Kastens has optical experience going back to 1998, holding positions in private care practice as an office coordinator and advisor, among other roles.

Another partner, co-owner and advisor, Tim Merrigan, has worked in the optical industry since 1992. He has held positions in both the corporate and private sectors, and has been responsible for managing as many as 29 offices. He also has overseen the development and implementation of a variety of operational processes and procedures.

Following the successful launch of the advisory business, and with requests from clients for additional services, the partners established Acquios Alliance in 2020 as a way to connect private practice optometry with trusted vendors and expert support. Acquios Alliance is now a developing membership program aimed at mitigating the unique challenges private practice optometrists face and helping them thrive independently, the organization noted.

At the time the Alliance began, “there were a lot of changes happening and a lot of mergers and acquisitions taking place that had doctors getting nervous,” Guinotte told *Vision Monday* in an interview. “They were asking, ‘Where is this going to leave private practice?’ and ‘We need to know where this is going.’” This led to an alignment with vendor partners with an inclination to support private practice optometry. Among the early partners with the Alliance were Ovvo Optics and Bank of the West.

Alliance members—and there are more than 250 doctor-owners representing more than 300 office locations in the group—receive access to a curated list of vendors, and the content in engaging webinars, workshops, newsletters and podcasts on the latest trends. “Our tagline for Acquios Alliance is, ‘Empowering your Independence,’” Guinotte said.



(L to R) The Acquios partners Rick Guinotte, Tim Merrigan and Kirk Kastens.

“We noticed there was a void in the industry for a true advocate for private practice and that’s what we wanted to do. That’s what we’ve always been as Advisors and that’s what we wanted to be as an alliance, as well.”

“We partner with top vendors across the country in order to connect our clients with the premium services they need, while providing our vendor partners with valuable business opportunities,” he added.

On the advisory side of the house, Acquios Advisors is made up of a team of industry veterans in optometry known for a supportive approach and dedication to helping eyecare businesses gain their footing in the marketplace, grow, find new patients, manage staff and inventory, and increase efficiencies and revenue, among other services. Guinotte said the advisory business has had a string of positive comparable growth quarter after quarter and has grown to five full-time advisor staff members.

“When Acquios Advisors started, the idea was that to be ‘right’ for private practice we had to here to collaborate and we are here to listen to our clients’ and our doctors’ needs,” Guinotte said. “What we do differently, and we pride ourselves on this, is that we don’t have people sign long-term contracts with us. You can work with us as long as you need us, or as short as you need us. We built a model that is right for practices of all sizes at a great value.”

Once a practice joins the Advisory group, it automatically becomes a member of the Acquios Alliance, as well.

The advisory group’s knowledge runs deep, amounting to more than nine decades of collective experience advising eyecare practices and working within the industry. “We’re committed to embodying what our name represents: we help practices acquire more insight, more confidence, more growth, and more opportunity,” he added. The advisory service can help ODs with a cold-start practice by conducting a market analysis, site selection studies and lease reviews, among other services.

The advisors also are prepared to help ODs who are looking to acquire existing practices from other independent ODs. “We are seeing more and more doctors getting ready to sell their practices, in part because of the changes happening,” he said. “So, we can help the doctors who are looking to buy practices with an analysis and to make sure it’s going to be a good investment,” he said.

In addition, providing advice on practice differentiation, whether it’s adding medical specialties or other recommendations, is another service of the advisory group. “Our mission is to listen to our clients with compassion and collaborate to implement a customized plan,” he said. “No matter where you are on your professional journey, we deliver insight that inspires.” ■

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### CECOP USA Connects Members With a Global Community of ECPs, Business Leaders

**C**ECOP, a leading global association of independent opticians and optometrists, has begun to make inroads in the U.S. market with its recent deals and additions to its executive team at CECOP USA. In June, CECOP USA named Brent H. Alvord as chief development officer with a mandate to further accelerate the company's growth trajectory. He has oversight of marketing, sales, strategic alliances and new services development. In addition, Alvord, a former ABB executive, leads the effort to acquire optometry locations that will help CECOP USA expand into practice management.

"We anticipate acquiring five to 10 locations within the next year," he said at the time. "In Spain, CECOP has successfully leveraged this model by owning about 150 practices that it can then test out technology and processes and then share knowledge and experience with its members."

Ignacio Macias, CEO, CECOP North America, said he believes independent optometry is challenged on all fronts and requires partners that think differently about how to overcome those challenges. "CECOP USA is the first independent membership group that is part of a global community of business leaders, optometrists, opticians and visionaries collaborating to transform business models and programs for the sustainable success of independent optometry," he added. "Thinking beyond traditional cost savings programs, we're redefining how to market, operate and manage a successful practice and have fun along the way."

Alvord's appointment followed the January move by CECOP to acquire The Alliance Buying Group from Surgery Partners Inc. (which had acquired The Alliance via its 2011 purchase of NovaMed). This was CECOP's second acquisition in the U.S. market and followed closely upon the May 2020 deal to take over Combine Buying Group. The latter marked European-focused CECOP's entry into the North American market.

CECOP works to deliver collective buying power, operational best practices, strategic solutions and



Brent H. Alvord

other services to 7,000-plus members and more than 120 brand partners across Europe and Latin America. In his first few months on the job, Alvord has worked to negotiate vendor discounts and incentives, and to coordinate practice-enhancing services that members can use their "rewards points" to purchase.

"I'm thrilled to be part of an organization that has been genuinely caring about the success of the optometrist for over 25 years and has over 7,000 member practices around the world," he said. "Our focus in the USA is to leverage our proven processes and experience to truly drive bottom-line profit growth as well as the quality of life for optometrists—both of which are desperately needed if we want independents to continue to succeed in the midst of all the industry threats."

CECOP USA, he added, is passionate about helping practices boost buying power, leverage data and technology and add other services that "reduce their stress, decrease daily hassles, and make more money."

During the pandemic, CECOP USA membership grew, and even more importantly "bounced back with speed," Macias said.

"We certainly learned that communication is paramount, between our group to members and our members to their patients," he added. "While communication isn't 'new' as a concept, it was especially critical for us since we acquired the Combine Buying Group and the Alliance Buying group last year and we are transforming those groups to bring exponential value for our members."

This focus on communication led to another

realization: cash is important to members. "We worked very hard to renegotiate major vendor deals, leveraging our global volume buying power ... to bring some of the best discounts and promotions to help our members," Macias added.

"We also are focused on consulting, training, programs, and services to help our members boost their cash flow. We learned of the incredible spirit of perseverance of our members. That spirit of perseverance is the very thing that inspires CECOP USA's mission to support independent optometry in this time of business transformation necessary to compete in today's marketplace."

Alvord noted that CECOP wants to see ECPs improve their quality of life by leveraging technology and services that remove "the hassle factors of running their practices," while enhancing the bottom line. In addition to embracing such specialties as Dry Eye therapy and Myopia control, the group also wants practices to have an opportunity to embrace service partners and programs that move the needle on profitability, he added.

One of its new programs is aimed at the acute need to address cash-flow issues. This new program allows practices to skip two monthly payments for lab and frame bills they bring to CECOP USA, thus basically receiving an extra 60 days of payment terms through the end of 2022.

"So effectively, if a practice is spending \$15,000 per month on lab and frames, it could get \$30,000 in extra cash to use interest-free through the end of next year," Alvord said, noting that another program to analyze accounts receivables and medical billing helps a practice optimize cash flow. ■

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## Healthy Eyes Advantage (HEA) Expands With Deal for PECAA

BOCA RATON, Fla.—With the operating landscape in eyecare in the midst of significant transformation, two of the leading alliance groups for ECPs said late last month they are combining. Healthy Eyes Advantage (HEA) will acquire Professional Eye Care Associates of America (PECAA) in a move that expands its commitment to the independent eyecare channel and increases the size of the community it serves to 12,000 independent eyecare professionals across all 50 states. The terms of the acquisition, completed July 27, were not disclosed.

PECAA was founded in Portland, Oregon, in 2006 by three independent ODs, and over the past 15 years has grown from a small, Northwest-based organization to one of the nation's premier doctor alliance groups serving nearly 2,000 independent ECP members. It was

a portfolio company of Rev360.

Jim McGrann, HEA's chairman and CEO, said, "The role of the independent eyecare professional has never been more essential, and we're incredibly excited to bring together the two leading purchasing and business solutions partners dedicated to supporting the success of the independents we serve and the quality eyecare they deliver. I applaud PECAA's strong legacy of building a collaborative IECF community and developing numerous tools and resources to help its members grow their practices."

PECAA's Jamie Hughes, senior vice president and general manager, and Lance Anderson, OD, vice president of strategic initiatives and one of PECAA's founders, will continue in their current roles with the new organization, as will all members of PECAA's leadership team. ■

## HEA Builds Upon the Power of Communication and Collaboration

**H**ealthy Eyes Advantage (HEA), the largest community of independent optometrists, opticians and ophthalmologists, has emerged from the pandemic in a strong position. With the power of more than 10,000 independent ECP members and the strength of the resources HEA had in place prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the organization said it was uniquely positioned to support members in myriad ways, including sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE); offering free legal consultation for navigating the PPP and

CARES Act; troubleshooting with vendors; and conducting live, virtual CE events that were attended by thousands.

"Even when many IECF offices were forced to close or maintain minimal schedules, the HEA team was hard at work assisting our members with the unique complexities they faced running their practices amidst an unprecedented interruption of patient care," chairman and CEO Jim McGrann said.



Jim McGrann



Justin Manning,  
OD

One HEA event drew more than 1,100 participants from 48 states, with military optometrists participating from a variety of locations worldwide. HEA also introduced resources and tools to help members not only successfully reopen but to reimagine new potential for their practices through diversification of service offerings that enhance the patient experience and

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## PECAA's 'Optical Success Initiative' Offers New Approach for Member Practices

**T**he key principles that PECAA was founded upon in 2006—including the idea of being a collaborative community of like-minded, independent eyecare professionals committed to growing their practices together—have remained a constant through the past 15 years. And as the group moves into a new phase of growth and evolution, the organization will continue to help members stay focused



Jamie Hughes



Lance Anderson,  
OD

and thrive in all kinds of conditions.

"The word that we've used often during the pandemic is 'resilient'—and independent optometrists are just that," PECAA senior vice president and general manager Jamie Hughes noted. "There's no question that it's been a challenging 15 months, but in talking and connecting with PECAA members, we see that they have fared well, all things considered."

Many members have even taken the time to make fundamental improvements within their practice, such as adding new services, equipment or processes that may yield dividends for years to come, noted Lance Anderson, OD, vice president of strategic initiatives.

Hughes added, "We've also seen record numbers of new (cold start) practices join the membership—an incredibly positive sign that the profession of independent optometry will continue to thrive de-

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## HEA Builds Upon the Power of Communication and Collaboration

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introduce new revenue streams, McGrann noted.

At the core of these efforts was the affirmation of the power of communication, collaboration and innovation to an organization such as HEA. Like most in the eyecare industry, HEA never shut down. The group was in constant contact with members and its strategic vendor partners to make available unique benefits, such as flexible payment arrangements, medical billing and coding assistance, and other resources.

Emerging from the collaboration and communication were “two notable tools specifically geared toward helping members emerge from the pandemic,” according to Justin Manning, OD, MPH, FAAO, executive vice president of professional strategies. They are the Recovery Reboot and Practice Booster programs.

Recovery Reboot was a six-part series of guidelines and checklists to help members with their



reopening process. Each installment was geared toward a specific time period relative to reopening for comprehensive patient care, Manning said.

The Practice Boosters are designed to help members adopt a simplified approach to leveraging new technology, new services and new methods for growing their practices. Each Practice Booster combined unique vendor partners that created new revenue opportunities through a broader service scope and through the development of subspecialties within a practice.

To date, HEA has introduced two Practice Boosters: one focused on age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and one centered around innovative technology, including services such as cognitive screening, contoured prism, telehealth, tele-audiology, digital try-on and check-in efficiency. A third Practice Booster, Medical Software, is planned for this year, and more are planned.

In addition to working to continue improving its group purchasing offering, HEA recently launched HEA PracticeAdvantage, a custom consulting program offered in partnership with Williams Group. The program is designed to help members gain greater clarity around their goals and by helping to develop customized actions plans to accelerate goal attainment. This includes monthly strategy sessions with a personal PracticeAdvantage coach, as well as unlimited access to on-demand consulting with the coach to work on specific practice areas. ■

## PECAA's 'Optical Success Initiative' Offers New Approach for Member Practices

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spite the pandemic and other market forces currently playing out.” PECAA has grown to just over 2,500 member practice locations with over 3,800 practice doctors. It has members in 47 states.

Anderson, who is a co-founding PECAA member, said the organization “certainly hasn’t lost any of its passion to help members. “We’re much better at Zoom than we ever thought we’d be, but we’ve really missed connecting with members at the PECAA Annual Meeting and other live events.” The live events will return beginning with the annual PECAA member reception at Vision Expo West.

PECAA executives note that managing through the pandemic provided an opportunity for ECPs to evaluate and recalibrate their practice models, while reinforcing some of the old standards around managing a business. “The pandemic lessons are plentiful, however, the one that stands out is that good habits lead to good outcomes,” Hughes said.

“This is true in normal times, but the impact of

good habits really stand out during times of crisis. Practices with a plan, competent leadership, strong internal relationships and meaningful connections to their patient base fared better on the whole. The habits and platform needed to successfully navigate the pandemic were built long before COVID arrived.”

Among the key programs recently launched is the Optical Success Initiative, a way for member practices to grow their profit by transforming their optical approach. Roughly half of a practice’s revenue is generated in the optical, yet it remains one of the few profit centers (or areas) where practices can still reduce their expenses while growing their profit.

The Optical Success Initiative involves the introduction of a PECAA exclusive frame line that features cost-of-goods that are 70 percent to 80 percent below branded frames through a direct-from-factory relationship. It also provides supporting optical management education for practice team members and a community of peers to share best-practices and selling strategies.



PECAA members attending a peer-to-peer event in Bellingham, Wash., earlier this year.

PECAA also relaunched its 90 Days to Dry Eye Program, an all-encompassing, comprehensive learning experience that walks participants through the process of building a dry eye profit center in three months. Another key initiative under way is that PECAA is in the process of expanding the offerings under the Cold Start Practice Program, which will provide dedicated vendor discounts and specialized services to new practices. “We’re also expanding our efforts to help practices promote a high-performance culture through enhanced staff education, billing and coding support, marketing insights and human resource solutions,” Hughes said. ■

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### IDOC Set to Expand Services and Support as it Looks to Drive Growth

**W**ith a member base exceeding 3,000 independent optometrists, IDOC is a well-established organization working to provide independent eyecare professionals a competitive advantage through industry-leading vendor savings programs, expert guidance from admired consultants and unique networking opportunities with peers and thought leaders. With IDOC as an ally, independent optometric practice owners can “discover their full potential and build the practice of their dreams,” the organization noted.

These ideas resonated with independent ODS during the past 15 to 18 months of COVID-19 challenges. During this time, IDOC welcomed more than 300 new independent practices to its alliance, which Dave Brown, president and CEO, attributes to IDOC’s ability to provide members a tremendous value, No. 1 member satisfaction ratings, data-driven insights, strong vendor relationships and new innovative offerings.

“Our members came through the pandemic well, by and large, and rebounded quickly, too, but of course there were many difficult moments,” he noted. “IDOC took a ‘people-first’ approach in the pandemic. We waived membership dues in April and May, 2020, during the darkest days for independent owners. We provided ongoing resources and information to all optometrists—and not just our members.”

He added, “We provided in-depth knowledge on government policies and HR information helping members make informed decisions.”

During the pandemic, IDOC found that frequent and clear communication with members and others was critical. Indeed, the organization was named a certified “Great Place to Work.” The communication efforts were built around the idea of keeping top of mind the needs of the customer and delivering in ways to assist them with those needs.

IDOC had, and still has, “an unwavering belief that eyecare—and independent ODS—will come through the challenges and rebound quickly,” Brown said. The goal is to be ready to take advan-



Dave Brown



tage of the new behaviors and adjoining opportunities that the pandemic caused, including telemedicine or e-commerce/direct ship to patients’ homes.

Earlier this year, the group’s annual national conference, IDOC Connection, took place for the first time via a virtual platform that featured general sessions, exhibitor booths, nightly entertainment, and networking opportunities for the more than 1,100 attendees. The three-day online event included continuing education and a roster of noteworthy keynote speakers, among other features.

Looking ahead, IDOC believes that doctors will need assistance with a variety of business functions in order to continue their recovery from the depths of the pandemic. Brown said, “What we’ve seen over the past year is that doctors continue to need help running the business of their practice. We’ve been a leader in expert consulting for years, but now more than ever owners need help doing the work as well.

That’s why we have launched services like IDOC Social Media, IDOC HR Now and IDOC Insider—to help practices free up time and get the support they need to focus on patient care and growing their business. And we will continue to offer new services to meet the needs of independent practices,” Brown said.

Another key focus of the organization will be innovation. The alliance expects to announce several new services coming online in the next few months. And for ECPs thinking of opening a new independent practice, IDOC has a tailored program called

“IDOC Kickstart” in which it will share internally developed expertise to better position the start-up ECP for success.

“Independent practices need help running their [offices]—from optical to marketing to HR and beyond,” Brown said. “That is why IDOC has launched services to help them grow their business by taking on the execution of certain necessary elements for the practice. IDOC will do this for the practice.”

Among the recent enhancements and new services IDOC has launched for its members are: a major update to IDOC Insider, the advanced data and analytics tool introduced as an IDOC membership benefit in 2019; and IDOC HR Now, a comprehensive HR management service.

IDOC HR Now, powered by ThinkHR, offers unlimited on-demand access to legal forms, standardized templates and HR experts fully qualified to address topics that include FMLA, COVID-19, investigations, wages, workers comp, employee handbooks, and legal and state-specific compliance requirements.

All of these innovations, communication services and enhanced services roll up under the umbrella of driving growth, the key priority moving forward for the organization. “IDOC continues to grow, and we have healthy plans for the long term,” Brown said. “We will be expanding our service offerings, providing even more support to independent optometrists. And we expect to continue to welcome growth-oriented independent OD owners to IDOC membership at a rapid rate.” ■

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### Opti-Port Thrives by Helping Members Find a Sense of ‘Community’

Opti-Port, since its founding 20 years ago, has always been focused on the community aspect of eyecare and optical businesses, and that interest and commitment to collaboration was one of the key elements members called on over the past 18 months to help steer through the challenges of the pandemic. As the only national alliance of leading multi-office eyecare providers, Opti-Port is set up to leverage the combined strength of member companies in a way that helps provide revenue-growing ideas, cost savings, and market-expanding opportunities.

“Leaning into these ideas and the community aspect was particularly helpful at Opti-Port,” Dr. Jason Lake, the group’s general manager, said in a recent interview with *Vision Monday*. “At Opti-Port, we leaned in with a lot of webinars and things like that to get information out [during the pandemic]. ... It was a real shining moment for community, and I think we did a great job with that.”

Lake, who took on his new role at Opti-Port about a year ago, operates a five-office practice in the Kansas City area with his wife, Susan Lake, OD. He’s also the general manager of the PERC alliance, which like Opti-Port is under the Essilor Alliance group. (This group also includes Vision Source.)

Whether it was via the community-orientation or other benefits provided to members, Opti-Port was able to grow significantly during the pandemic, Lake said. “We have grown at a very nice clip throughout all this. I think a part of that is that people want community and they want to be able to engage. That’s been a real plus for us,” he added, noting that Opti-Port has almost doubled in size in membership since the start of the pandemic.

The group includes several of the leading independently owned regional eyecare groups, with 10 of the members being ranked in Vision Monday’s 2021 Top 50 U.S. Optical Retailers. The 10 are: Henry Ford OptimEyes, Rosin Eyecare, Northeastern Eye Institute, Dr. Tavel Optical Group, Standard Optical, Bard Optical, True Eye Experts, Midwest Vision Cen-



Opti-Port member Aaron Schubach (l) and general manager Jason Lake, OD, at the recent SPARK event for members, held during Vision Expo East in Orlando.

ters, Optyx, and Virginia Eye Institute.

Another reason for Opti-Port’s growth is that ODs are looking for “customer-based solutions that resonate,” which Lake said Opti-Port is able to provide. The group is working on a number of new offerings this year, including integrated systems that tie into practice management (which is in a pilot phase) and other services that are intended to be “industry unique.”

Looking ahead, Lake said he believes the pandemic has brought important changes to the eyecare and optical businesses that are going to be around for the long term. For example, both doctors and patients have become more knowledgeable about online ordering and other facets of digital media. This is where Opti-Port’s CLX cloud-based ordering for contact lenses was a critical tool for Opti-Port members during the pandemic. (CLX also offers practices management and marketing tools designed to help grow their contact lens business.)

“People are much more savvy with online [services] now,” Lake said. “And one of the biggest things we learned [during the pandemic] was the importance of the CLX program. It really saved a lot of practices’ bacon, so to speak, because it was a way to provide a little bit of cash flow. It also was a way that we could get our customers contact lenses.”



The SPARK meeting drew a strong turnout of members and guest speakers at the recent Vision Expo East in Orlando.

He added, “I think with CLX it’s a tremendous opportunity to realize that whether we like it or not this is a web-based business now and you’ve got to have an interface there. That’s important.”

Another important development coming out of the pandemic is the acknowledgement of the importance of supply chain solutions. Opti-Port is addressing this area (it also offers members a version of the PERC Advantage program with a static frame board solution). This is an area where affiliation with EssilorLuxottica can help with fulfillment solutions.

The question is how does Opti-Port leverage those resources to “make sure our customers have things that they need as quickly as possible.” While the connection with EssilorLuxottica provides a benefit to members, the alliance also provides members the option of working with other vendor partners, also. “Our job is to provide a value proposition and it is the members’ job to choose what they want,” Lake said. “It’s my job to make sure that we have a value proposition [in which] our members see true value.”

He added, “It’s a bit of a cliché, but as much as we were all isolated, I think community now is more important than ever. That’s the thing I see people leaning into.” ■





## PERC Built Upon the ‘Fiercely Independent’ Practices Seeking Community and Growth

Since its founding in 2008, the ECP group PERC has gone through a few iterations in structure and ownership, but yet maintained a way of operating and thinking that rests upon the philosophy of being fiercely independent. This is still the central idea that PERC general manager Dr. Jason Lake, OD, brings to his role with the organization.

Lake, together with his wife, Dr. Susan Lake, are the principals of a five-location practice in the Kansas City, Mo., area. He was named to this GM role in August 2020, and he’s now settling into overseeing one of the larger independent ECP business groups with its more than 6,500 participating members. (Lake also in the past year was named general manager of the Opti-Port alliance, which includes ECP practices with four or more locations, and both groups are under the Essilor Alliance umbrella.)

“I was a PERC member for a very long time,” Lake said in a recent interview with *Vision Monday*, noting that his own eyecare business began as a one-location practice and that PERC provided “a foundation” and the community support that helped it grow to its present size. While some PERC members do operate large-volume practices, they are typically under four locations overall.

“PERC is kind of a different model, where these are the independent practices that [founder David Golden] used to say are the ones that he thought defined PERC as being fiercely independent. I’ve always held on to that. I thought that was a really cool way to say that if we can provide services for our customers at the PERC level—and we are the only no-cost model—we know that if they all lean in and grow, we’re all going to win together.”

One of the strengths of the PERC organization is the negotiations it conducts on behalf of its members so they can focus on patient care, and other elements of an eyecare practice. In addition, the PERC Advantage program provides access to a members-only inventory of top frame brands, including Ray-Ban, Oakley, Coach, Michael Kors, Prada and Tory Burch, with free shipping. There’s



Jason Lake, OD



PERC members are attracted by having an opportunity to join a like-minded community of professionals, who enjoy participating in live events, seminars, webinars and panel discussions, among other get-together events.

also a centralized warehouse to prevent delays or backorders and PERC-exclusive, high-margin brands that help practices compete in a managed care environment, the group noted.

During the height of the COVID pandemic, the PERC Advantage program was helpful to practices that may have run into delivery and fulfillment issues. “One of my big pushes for the team was to [help] our members in need of core competencies. What do we do well? We’ve got the world’s largest and best lab network,” Lake said.

“When everyone else can’t get lenses, [our goal was] to make sure that our team members were getting the product to take care of their customers. ... The same goes for frames, where we can leverage heavily on our Luxottica relationship to make sure that our people are getting the things that they need.”

PERC members also value the opportunity to pick the services and other offerings provided to members on an “a la carte” basis. “That’s been a real win for PERC,” Lake said, noting that the organization historically has had a good eye for aligning with the right vendor partners.

“We try to figure out—as Wayne Gretzky used to say about the puck—where the industry is going so

we can be ahead of it, and pick the right vendors so our [members] don’t have to go out and look around.”

Looking ahead, Lake said he is enthusiastic about the opportunities the upcoming PERC Elevate meeting will provide to members. The meeting, scheduled for the weekend of Aug. 15, in Dana Point, Calif., has a new format for the organization and will be larger than the regional events PERC typically holds.

It also will bring in more top-level speakers. There is no COPE-approved education planned on the Saturday of the event, but rather speakers who were chosen to provide insights on how to “elevate” one’s thinking and how to approach things differently. Sunday will be more typical of PERC’s past events.

The new format part of Elevate is “more of a TED Talk format in that we are hoping to bring about discussion, and thinking that allows our members to elevate the way they think about their practices,” Lake said.

He added, “It’s going to be a lot of fun. I have a real penchant for fun. ... My big thing is to infuse a ton of energy into the Elevate meeting and make it a very coveted invitation.” ■

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# Competing in a New Environment



## The Eye Consortium Sees Opportunity in Helping Independents Differentiate

The Eye Consortium (TEC), a new, fast-growing alliance for independent-minded eyecare and optical practices, was launched in early 2019 with a philosophy centered around creating a community of like-minded business people on the provider side paired with a curated, specialized group of vendors who want to see independent eyecare continue to grow and thrive. The founders—Matt Alpert, OD, and Robert Chu, OD—have experience working in various roles across the eyecare industry and came up with the idea for their new alliance out of a small study group they had initiated.

The goal of The Eye Consortium, in part, is to help practices maintain a unique environment for their patients, while increasing profitability. The founders note that after years of watching profits erode and dispensaries become commoditized, “a novel approach is imperative. Practice differentiation and the patient experience are keys to an independent and profitable practice.”

To support this effort, The Eye Consortium said it has aggregated a group of the best-in-class, independent players in the industry, with membership currently at roughly 1,000 providers, which includes, ODs, ophthalmologists and dispensary-only optical offices.

The Eye Consortium has created “a comprehensive suite of products and services” for practices to use to increase profitability and yet remain independent. “We aim to ease the pain points that make running a practice difficult and time-consuming,” Alpert and Chu noted. “Creating a community of like-minded business people allows us to curate a specialized group of vendors, focus on maintaining your unique environment, and increasing your profitability.”

One of the elements that make The Eye Consortium unique is that it has established “a totally independent, non-competitive relationship for the vendor partners,” Alpert said. As a result, there is only one vendor per category, which permits the vendor partner to feel “really secure in the relation-



Matt Alpert, OD



Robert Chu, OD



ship” with the group. This factor, he noted, is one of the reasons for the group’s fast growth. Some of the initial core vendor partners are: Zeiss, LaFont, Modo, Capri and EdgePro by GPN. Additional partners and new categories are expected to be announced soon.

The new group’s entry comes as many independent practices faced shutdowns and reduction in hours and patient visits during the height of the pandemic, but it also was a time of increased evaluation of business processes and procedures.

In the midst of the pandemic, many doctors were “looking for different or fresh options, and working smarter-not-harder options,” Chu told *Vision Monday* in a recent interview. “We feel that our suite of solutions enables that. With fewer patients coming through the door, doctors had to make the most of every opportunity as practitioners.”

“Everybody kind of dug in and looked introspectively at their practice and how they ran their business,” Alpert added. “But when you’re busy, it’s really hard to implement things. I think [the pandemic] gave us the opportunity to really look at what was important and to get into the implementation of some of the things we had on the back burner, such as patient experience.” He noted, too that elevating the patient experience is one of the areas The Eye Consortium is addressing with its members.

Alpert attributes the group’s success to the experience the founders have working in different organizations across the industry, including their roles as practitioners. “We were practicing optometrists

for many years, and we had had membership in other alliance groups.” What seemed clear and what presented an opportunity, he said, was to create an organization where both sides [providers and partners] were in a position to benefit.

“The vendors who were participating in these groups were really not playing offense and growing, they were playing defense to keep the business they already had. Having been on the vendor side, I didn’t like the feel of that,” he explained.

Other elements that make The Eye Consortium different is its focus on “creating a basket” of services and products that cover all the categories an office might need, and its effort to refrain from partnering with companies that compete against independent optometry. “There is so much homogenization in practices today and their appearance,” Alpert said. “So we created a basket of services for those people who really want to be independent and who want to differentiate from the other groups.”

The group’s messaging around loyalty to vendor partners has resonated and supports the “win-win” philosophy that is at the core of the partnerships, Chu said, which contributed to the group’s tripling in size in a short time.

The “cherry on top of the sundae,” Alpert noted, is that because The Eye Consortium offers its vendor partners exclusivity, it can negotiate better terms. “If we’re going to give you the right to be our premium-tier frame vendor, that deal has to be better than you are offering anybody else,” he noted. ■

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## Competing in a New Environment



### Vision Source Marks 30 Years of Helping ECPs Overcome Market Challenges

Since its founding in 1991, Vision Source has followed a fairly straightforward and simple philosophy. The organization strives to be an alliance or community for independent optometrists who desire to be a part of a unique, premium group of extraordinary eyecare professionals and to take part in preserving the heritage of independent eyecare. And the goals include helping to enhance doctors' practices through "cost savings, collegiality, services and programs so [the ECPs] can focus on what makes them extraordinary—clinical excellence, unmatched patient care and business success."

"I believe that Vision Source is even more relevant for practices today than 30 years ago when it was founded," noted Glenn D. Ellisor, OD, a founder of the organization. "We created Vision Source to help private practices address the challenges and opportunities brought about by changes in our profession and today, our profession is more dynamic than ever. There is no other group in the world that has the ability to harness the brain trust of 4,700 of the best optometrists in the country or the resources to provide them with the right tools and support to insure their practices success."

This formula—built upon the ideas of community and collaboration—was one of the factors that helped Vision Source, with its 3,150 franchisee members, persevere and prosper through the COVID-19 pandemic (Vision Source is under the Ellisor Alliance organization, along with the alliances Opti-Port and PERC.)

"Thanks to the incredible efforts of our member doctors to lock arms as a collaborative community, Vision Source practices have fared very well over the last 15 months," general manager Jeff Duncan explained. "Vision Source practices well outpaced the industry going through and coming out of the pandemic."

The organization marked its fifth consecutive year atop the Vision Monday Top 50 Optical Retailers report at the No. 1 ranking, "a testament to Vision Source and our members rallying together



Amir Khoshnevis, OD



Jeff Duncan



once again," Duncan noted. (Vision Source is a franchisor, and its members are franchisees who own their respective practices. Its members' aggregate revenue totaled more than \$2.6 billion in 2020.)

Another key element of Vision Source's recent success is the confirmation of the importance of the "community" aspect among its members. "What Vision Source experienced above all else was a lesson confirmed," Duncan said. "At its very core, Vision Source is a collaborative community of like-minded professionals who strive to provide our patients the best care available. Because community, collaboration and a common goal are so central to us, it was natural that during a time of great challenge, our members locked arms around our common purpose which not only helped the community overcome the effects of the pandemic on their practices, but allowed us to thrive in spite of the challenges."

According to executives, one of the biggest opportunities for Vision Source—and also for independent private practice optometry overall—is to expand by perpetuating the Vision Source model organically. "Whether a practitioner is just finishing school and looking to get started within an established practice, or an already successful practitioner is looking to expand through added capacity or open additional locations, Vision Source has programs, resources and a community of colleagues who generously share their best ideas and advice to help private practitioners reach their full potential," said chief medical of-

ficer Amir Khoshnevis, OD.

He noted that Vision Source has new programs coming on stream and, as always, they are "laser focused on the success of our members' practices." These programs will build upon already proven resources in key areas like staff effectiveness, clinical patient protocols, managed vision care, ophthalmic lens, contact lens and frame management.

Duncan and Khoshnevis noted that over the past 18 months most private practice optometrist owners and their teams have navigated more unplanned change than they will likely ever face in their careers. What they need most right now are proven, easy-to-implement solutions that help them serve their patients more effectively, efficiently and profitably.

The executives also noted that they are "extremely optimistic" about the outlook for both private practice optometry and Vision Source members for the balance of 2021 and into 2022. "We are thrilled with what our collective membership has accomplished together while being physically separated," Khoshnevis said.

"However, we know the incredible positive impact we are able to make when we are together in person. We are thrilled to be together for our 2021 Exchange in early August and The Exchange 2022 next April and all the regular local member meetings and practice building education events that will happen in between. We expect our already strong momentum to only get stronger as these key rallying events fire back up." ■