

# Growing Into Sustainability

## Optical Responds to Consumer Sentiment With Eco-Friendly Solutions



Image Credit: Getty Images/ Richard Drury

BY GWENDOLYN PLUMMER / SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITOR

NEW YORK—There is no avoiding the fact that concern for the environment impacts every aspect of our daily lives. From decisions on how people commute to work, to what they eat, to who they vote for and, of course, how they shop—there is a sustainable choice in every decision we make. Retail is often at the forefront of these conversations about sustainability and everyday life, and for many people, changing the things they buy and the frequency with which they buy them is an easy first step toward a more sustainable lifestyle.

Taking a more sustainable approach to shopping and retail can mean different things for everyone. For consumers, it can mean paying closer attention to the realities behind the making of their favorite products. For retailers, it can mean paying closer attention to what they stock and, crucially, how they communicate the sustainable stories behind

the brands they stock to customers. For brands and creators, it can mean redoubling sustainable efforts, breaking new ground and truly committing to an eco-friendly business model.

When it comes to consumers, the data is pretty clear—people want to buy sustainably more than ever before. A September 2023 report from *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) stated, <https://hbr.org/2023/09/research-consumers-sustainability-demands-are-rising> “For most consumers, sustainability has been considered a ‘nice-to-have’ in the brands they buy, but it’s rarely been table stakes. That’s about to change. Our research suggests we’re on the brink of a major shift in consumption patterns, where truly sustainable brands—those that make good on their promises to people and the planet—will seize the advantage from brands that make flimsy claims or that have not invested sufficiently in sustainability.”

The core of HBR’s research is that consumers value trust, and a commitment to sustainability from a brand drives trust. Of the more than 350,000 U.S. consumers aged 18 to 98 that HBR surveyed, it was Gen Z and Millennials who truly valued this commitment. HBR reported, “When Gen Z and Millennial customers believe a brand cares about its impact on people and the planet, they are 27 percent more likely to purchase it than older generations are—a clear measure of sustainability’s power to drive buying decisions in this group.”

Of course, these younger generations will soon have more purchasing power in the U.S. as wealth transfers (HBR reported, “Forecasting experts calculate that the purchasing power of Millennials and Gen Z will surpass that of Boomers around the year 2030.”), so establishing these trustworthy relationships with these two generations now, as their

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## As Consumers Seek Sustainability, Optical Responds With Eco-Friendly Business Models

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purchasing power grows, is critical for a brand's survival.

Research from the NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business (CSB) and Edelman, as reported by *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annefield/2023/06/27/consumers-respond-to-sustainability-claims-about-better-health-cost-savings/?sh=581b9f0340e2>, found similar results: “Adding claims around sustainability significantly boosted the product’s appeal and audience size—an increase of anywhere from 25 percent to 33 percent.” The most effective claims were ones that “pertained to benefiting consumers’ daily lives,” as opposed to nebulous claims about helping the planet.

Most effective were claims about basic human needs, *Forbes* reported—and these resonated with Gen Z above all. “Gen Z consumers were more likely to respond to more-abstract messages—perhaps because the potentially catastrophic impact of climate change on their lives is a more personal matter for them... They also were more likely to consider a brand’s environmental record when making purchasing decisions than other generations.”

It’s not just Gen Z, though, who cares about the future of the planet. November 2023 research from Bain & Company <https://www.bain.com/about/media-center/press-releases/2023/consumers-say-their-environmental-concerns-are-increasing-due-to-extreme-weather-study-shows-theyre-willing-to-change-behavior-pay-12-more-for-sustainable-products/#> found that “72 percent of Gen Z consumers and 68 percent of Boomers globally are very or extremely concerned about the environment.” Perhaps most surprisingly, the researchers also found that this isn’t completely divided along party lines.

“In the U.S., 96 percent of consumers agree that the climate is changing. Among those concerned about the environment in the U.S., 85 percent of self-described liberal voters are very or extremely concerned about climate change, compared with



Image Credit: Getty Images/ Richard Drury

39 percent of conservative voters. Yet conservatives say they worry more about specific issues such as water, biodiversity loss and air pollution.”

In the U.K., Deloitte <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/sustainable-consumer.html> research also found an increased interest in sustainable purchasing, in part driven by the rising cost of living. Deloitte reported, “In a sign that the cost of living crisis is having an impact, behaviors with the largest increase in adoption this year include buying more second-hand items, paying more for longer-lasting products, repairing more and using the car less.” This has a direct impact on the eyewear industry: understanding what frames are made to last, and are able to be repaired, could be a major decision-making factor for consumers.

With that in mind, pricing and affordability remain important. In November 2023, Bain & Company published its findings after speaking to thousands of company executives about sustainability; the research found that “consumers in the U.S. are willing to pay an average premium of 11 percent for products with a minimized environmental impact. However, 28 percent is the average premium for products marketed as sustainable in the U.S.” Consumers are willing to pay more when they feel a product is responsible—but most still have monetary concerns and a hard cutoff when it comes to

what they’ll spend.

It’s possible that this gap could be bridged with better communication. Bain & Company reported, “Worldwide, 48 percent of consumers consider how products are used when thinking about sustainability. These consumers are more concerned about how a product can be reused, its durability and how it will minimize waste. In contrast, most companies sell sustainable goods based on factors such as how they are made, their natural ingredients and the farming practices deployed. These factors cause many consumers to conflate ‘sustainable’ with ‘premium.’”

Because of this, the research found that “nearly half of all developed-market consumers believe that living sustainably is too expensive.” For retailers, this seems to come in part from a communication breakdown, or a misunderstanding of what consumers are looking for. It’s possible that with better in-store and POS talking-points and communication, the conversation around sustainability in eyewear and eyecare can become much more productive.

The road to sustainability is built on small steps here and there, and there is truly no such thing as perfection. But the data and real-world situations make it clear that it’s a road we all must travel together. With communication, collaboration and community, a more sustainable industry is not just possible but inevitable. ■

## Frames: Front-Facing Sustainability

BY GWENDOLYN PLUMMER / SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**E**yewear is perhaps the most outward-facing aspect of our business—it’s the product that customers interact with most often, the physical representation of the work we do. With that in mind, it’s also one of the most important fronts for our industry’s sustainability efforts, almost like a billboard showcasing all the ways in which eyewear and eyecare can evolve with and support our planet and our future.

Sustainable adaptations in eyewear are everywhere we look. From bio-acetates to brand new, innovative materials made from cigarette butts, there is seemingly no shortage of ways to make eyewear green-

er. In addition, reminding consumers that eyewear is designed to last and offering a lifetime of repairs, characteristics that make eyewear inherently sustainable, are crucial when it comes to the conversation around eyewear’s impact on our environment.

Eyewear companies are committing to sustainable initiatives and adaptations now more than ever—and we are seeing overwhelmingly positive responses from both ECPs and end-of-the-line consumers. Equally, many are looking at how they can better tell their sustainability stories to consumers at every step of the process. Here, we take a look at how some frame companies are tackling responsible eyewear production. ■

### Bajío Brings Sustainability to the Flats

From its founding in 2021, Bajío has had a focus on sustainability. Since the start, all Bajío frames have been made with castor plants, lenses from glass, cases from cactus, and boxes and bags from recycled paper, all with the goal of creating eyewear for fishing communities that protects saltwater flats and waterways. The company also ensures that its manufacturing processes are sustainable, and, founder and CEO Al Perkinson told *VM*, “We make sustainability a priority in all we do.”

In-store, Bajío only offers paper-based hang tags. There is no plastic at all in the brand’s packaging, and only paper tape is used to seal boxes. In production, Renato Cappuccitti, Bajío’s VP of optical/Rx, explained, “Our investment in developing the first-ever water reclamation centrifuge allows us to cut thousands of glass lenses with only 50 gallons of recirculating clean water while separating the solids and chemical waste that can be recycled and properly disposed of.”

In addition to sustainable materials and production processes, Bajío and its community stay actively involved with a variety of initiatives to help renew and protect the flats. These include beach clean-up programs, a Sargassum removal project, coral reef planting, mangrove planting, oyster planting, trial building, fish tagging and more.

Bajío is a line specifically designed for the fish-



*Bajío eyewear is sustainably made, and the team works alongside local communities to protect and preserve water environments.*

ing and outdoor water communities—one Perkinson was not sure would respond to a sustainable story. He explained, “We were not sure if our fishing customers would respond favorably or not. Fishermen are usually big supporters of conservation, but not always believers in climate change and environmental causes.

“We were very happy when our first customer research results revealed that the fact that our products are made sustainably was the number one reason people liked Bajío. It is tied to lens quality and clarity. It shows that most people who love the outdoors are on board with doing the right thing for our environment.”

In ECPs’ offices, the response has also been

“overwhelmingly positive,” said Cappuccitti, Bajío’s VP of optical/Rx. They’ve found ECPs to be exceptionally receptive, “especially when we tell the whole story of how deep our sustainability initiatives go or showcase our eco-friendly manufacturing in Florida... We invested in doing what was right from day one and have not looked back. While it may entail higher costs initially, the long-term benefits to the environment, society and our reputation are invaluable.”

### Eco Eyewear Doubles Down on Sustainable Practices

It’s all in a name for Eco Eyewear, which has been synonymous with sustainability in the eyewear industry since its founding in 2009. The brand has seen the growth of sustainable practices firsthand, and Rebecca Giefer, CEO, Modo Americas, has undoubtedly noticed an increase in interest in recent years. She told *VM*, “There has been an increase in appetite for sustainable products and we have been committed to being category leaders in our channel.”

To meet this demand, Eco has continued to focus its efforts on sustainable eyewear production, as well as tree planting and actively combatting climate change. Giefer told *VM*, “As global concerns about climate change continue to rise, we recognize the urgent need to mitigate greenhouse

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## Responsible Materials Set Sustainable Frames Apart

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gas concentrations and implement adaptive measures. By releasing our Eco Eyewear 2023 Carbon Footprint Report, our team remains committed to actively combating climate change and setting the standard for environmental responsibility within the eyewear industry.”

On the product side, Eco launched ONE:1 this year, a new brand offering blue light and reading glasses designed to be sold by ECPs. The products are made using refined plastic water bottles—taking more plastic out of landfills and waterways and repurposing them. A tree is planted for each frame sold as well, ensuring zero CO<sub>2</sub> impact for the products. Eco itself has also expanded, notably with the launch of Eco Active, which offers sustainable sport eyewear.



*Eco Eyewear ensures carbon zero carbon impact for its products.*

These expansions allow Eco to keep up with the consumer demand for sustainable eyewear, while also continuing to repurpose existing waste and plant more trees. Said Giefer, “This brand extension has been well-received by our customers, as it provides them with a wider range of options to offer their patients. To date, our product selection includes options made from recycled metal, biobased materials, ocean waste plastic and even used plastic water bottles.”

And consumers are responding well, including both ECPs and their patients. Giefer told *VM*, “In terms of ongoing sustainability initiatives, it’s re-

ally about the product and storytelling support we offer to the ECPs. We are continuing to drive product innovation, pursue new materials and expand the offering to meet customers’ needs throughout their lifestyle. Our customers are buying more Eco as the brand is growing within the channel, we think the reason is threefold: design, sustainability and competitive costing.”

### EssilorLuxottica’s Sustainable Ecosystem

With an eyewear portfolio as expansive as EssilorLuxottica’s, the opportunities for sustainable innovation are limitless. The company as a whole launched Eyes on the Planet, its group sustainability program, in 2021, with the goal of embracing sustainability “across our entire ecosystem, including our employees, suppliers, partners and customers,” Elena DiMichino, chief corporate sustainability officer, EssilorLuxottica, told *VM*.

In addition to overall corporate strategies including achieving carbon neutrality in the Group’s direct activities in Europe, use of renewable energy and more, EssilorLuxottica has strengthened its use of responsible materials in its eyewear collections. The recently launched Ray-Ban Reverse collection uses a wide range of responsible materials: bio-nylon lenses with a 41 percent bio-based carbon content, bio-acetate frames with a 67 percent bio-based carbon content and 100 percent recycled polyester cleansing cloths and packaging. DiMichino said, “The switch toward bio-based and recycled materials is now becoming the new standard for us—new brands joining the EssilorLuxottica portfolio adopt them by default in their collections.”

For lenses, the new Varilux XR series uses 19 percent less plastic compared to the previous Varilux X series, due to EssilorLuxottica’s proprietary design. And in store, at EssilorLuxottica’s Salmoiragi & Viganò optical chain in Italy, a pilot program encouraging consumers to bring back used eyewear to be reused or recycled is taking off.

In addition to adopting these materials,



*EssilorLuxottica channels its sustainable efforts through many of its brands, including Ray-Ban and Arnette.*

DiMichino said, “we’ve been able to recycle over 90 tons of recycled nylon in Italy, China and Brazil thanks to the process that we created to recycle and compound nylon plastic scraps derived from the injection manufacturing of frames into black raw nylon. This process is ISCC Plus certified for Circular Economy.”

On all levels, EssilorLuxottica has seen a positive response to the company’s sustainability efforts—and this shows particularly in the educational space. DiMichino said, “We have seen an extremely favorable response to our sustainability efforts, particularly among customers. Leonardo, our digital learning platform, is a key channel we use to engage ECPs on our Eyes on the Planet program. In 2023, 2.7 million hours of education were delivered via Leonardo, including live sessions to celebrate Eyes on the Planet



*Elena DiMichino*

related moments, such as Earth Day. More than 250,000 of those hours were spent on sustainability content, which is so encouraging. We have just closed the third edition of our ‘Sustainability Week,’ featuring live virtual classes on Leonardo along with climate workshops to engage our employee and customer communities on the official global Earth Day 2024 theme ‘Planet vs Plastics.’”

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## Innovation and Change in Frame Production

### Europa Eyewear's Sustainable Journey

Europa Eyewear focuses its environmental efforts through a number of its collections, including INVU and its popular children's brand DB4K. Designed to appeal to kids, parents and ECPs, DB4K offers frames made from eco-friendly, hypoallergenic, PBA-free Pebax Renew, which is made from castor beans. Sustainability can be more difficult when working with childrenswear because of their rate of growth and change, so adapting sustainable materials into children's eyewear allows Europa to offer a solution that works for kids and the planet.

In 2022, Europa debuted INVU Renew in North America, a series of polarized sun styles crafted from 100 percent post-consumer, recycled plastic bottles. To make the frames, plastic bottles are



INVU Eyewear offers sun styles made from recycled water bottles, with accompanying POP to tell the story of the brand.

mechanically recycled into PET flakes, which are then purified and transformed into R-PET certified pellets. INVU frames are accompanied by POP that helps tell the story of these frames' lifecycle, ensuring that end consumers understand the positive impact their purchase can make on the planet.

Europa is also dedicated to making a number of its collections in the United States—State and AO are both handcrafted by skilled artisans in Europa's Illinois factory from global materials, lowering the company's overall carbon footprint by eliminating the need to ship or fly frames overseas. In the U.S. factory, the Europa team has been dedicated to recycling metal and acetate scraps, and cleaning water used in manufacturing processes so it can be reused and not wasted. With a commitment to adopting green practices wherever possible in production, Europa is able to keep its high standards and offer the added benefits of eyewear consumers can feel good about.

### Karün Combines Sustainability With Disruptive Innovation

In recent years, the team behind Karün, a sustainable eyewear brand based in Patagonia, has noticed "a marked increase in consumers' pursuit of sustainability, especially in the demand for products that not only promise change but truly embody disruptive innovation from design inception to the final product," strategic communications and social media director, María José Torrealba, told VM. Customers are becoming savvier to marketing-speak, said Torrealba, and "increasingly are rejecting 'greenwashing' and superficial claims." Instead, "they seek and demand transformations that redefine our industry."

In March of this year, Karün broke new ground when it debuted the world's first eyewear frames made from Celion, a new material developed from cellulose acetate recovered from cigarette butts.

Employing technology from Imeko, a Chilean cleantech company, the cigarette butts are collected, cleaned and processed to recover the cellulose acetate. The material offers a 40 percent reduction in carbon footprint compared to virgin acetate, is formulated with no toxic additives, is able to be molded in a conventional industrial plastic process and is infinitely recyclable. The launch of Celion is a concrete example of Karün's commitment to practices that are not only sustainable, but also innovative.

It's not just Celion; Karün's 2023 Impact Report details its sustainable practices across the board. These include the Karün Regeneration Model, collecting tons of raw material from coasts, working with local communities and ECPs, compensation efforts and more. Torrealba said, "It's not only a tool for transparency and recordkeeping but also serves to initiate discussions, seek potential collaborative solutions to our challenges, pull back the curtain of production processes, and encourage inquiries."



Karün's new material, Celion, is derived from cigarette butts.

On the ECP side, Karün has seen steady interest in learning more about the company's sustainability practices and initiatives—but, again, this interest is only growing. Torrealba said, "Our ECPs have always demonstrated interest in our work with local communities from Patagonia, where we

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# Frame Companies Take Steps Toward a Greener Future

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work together with our Impact Leaders who are in charge of collecting the discarded materials from the coasts of Patagonia; and in how we transform these discarded materials in the raw material for our eyewear. Over time, this interest has only intensified, with an increasing number of ECPs eager to include our sustainable eyewear in their offerings.”

Torrealba finds that ECPs are generally enthusiastic about conveying Karün’s sustainability story to patients, so they lean in and provide as much support as possible to tell the full story. She explained, “They not only share our marketing materials regarding our eyewear but also request videos and images showcasing our material collection process to share across their social media platforms and in their offices. To support them further, we provide trade marketing materials and training that help sales teams effectively communicate the inspiring storytelling behind our eyewear. The response from ECPs to these resources has been overwhelmingly positive.”

### Kenmark Sets Its Sustainable Sights

Laura Howard, eyewear designer at Kenmark Eyewear, has seen a slow but steady increase in demand for sustainable eyewear from consumers—but her goal, along with that of the entire Kenmark team, is to be a step ahead of that demand. She told *VM*, “It’s been a little bit of a slow burn for fashion in general to embrace sustainability, but like anything, when consumer sentiments shift, so do buying habits. Our goal is to not just meet the requests when they happen but be ready with the right product even before those shifts occur.”

For “most brands,” Kenmark is opting to use more sustainable materials, Howard said, no matter how that fits into the brand’s story or marketing. She explained, “Even if it’s not a big part of the marketing story for the brand, we feel that it’s the responsible thing to do.” Looking ahead, this will both continue and increase—Kenmark is launching a new Italian-made collection, Valdo, this summer, which exclusively uses ISCC-certified Acetate Renew.



*Kenmark Eyewear aims to not just meet demand for sustainable product, but be ready before these shifts occur.*



As a whole, Kenmark has noticed positive consumer and ECP reactions to their sustainable commitments—especially because many ECPs are looking to enact more sustainable initiatives in their storefronts too. This is an opportunity for partnership, said Howard: “We’ve had a great response so far and most people are eager to learn more and to participate in tightening up their own sustainability initiatives. We try to be true partners with ECPs and provide not only more sustainable product, but also the right tools they may need to make it a success in their shops.”

### Marchon and Altair, Sustainability All the Way Through

As part of VSP, Marchon and Altair are part of the same “strong commitment” to sustainable practices, Thomas Burkhardt, president of Marchon Eyewear, told *VM*. This commitment is at the very core of the company as a whole, and reflects in all of its



*Marchon and Altair include sustainable practices and materials across their portfolio of brands.*



aspects—including frame design and production. All of Marchon and Altair’s brands use sustainable materials where possible—Burkhardt explained, “Marchon and Altair have been one of the leaders

### Informed and Conscious Consumers

**“I’ve noticed that patients are becoming more informed and conscious consumers, and they are starting to prioritize sustainability when making decisions about their eyecare products and even providers.”**

**- Jennifer Tsai, OD, owner and founder,  
Line of Sight in New York City**

in the eyewear industry to utilize innovative sustainable materials wherever possible. They are now available across our portfolio of brands, and we are on the right track to have more than 50 percent of all our frames made from more sustainable materials and methods by 2025.”

Using these materials allows Marchon and Altair to protect our planet—and to meet customer demand. Said Burkhardt, “We are definitely seeing that consumers will choose sustainable products when they get presented with that choice. Over the years, Marchon has not only seen an increased demand for our sustainable eyewear, but also for more sustainable Point of Purchase items, using QR codes, and sustainable packaging materials.” In response, Marchon and Altair have implemented sustainability at every touchpoint, from frame material to polybags, demo lenses and shipping boxes.

The response to Marchon and Altair’s environmental commitments has been positive at all levels, and the company will only continue moving forward. Burkhardt said, “We have seen positive feedback from ECPs, sales force, customers, and, last but not least, our own employees regarding our commitment and advances around sustainability. Our accounts say that more and more customers are selecting sustainable frames when given the choice, which is great to hear and helps us meet Marchon’s goal to be 50 percent sustainable by 2025.”

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## Frame Manufacturers Step Into Sustainability

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### Mykita's Sustainable Spirit Is on Display

For Mykita, transparency and sustainability has long been a brand-defining practice. The company's CSR director, Xenia Glutz Von Blotzheim, told VM, "When looking at statistics on this topic, consumer demands on sustainability aspects tend to fluctuate according to current events and economic developments. However, for Mykita, transparency on how and where our products are produced defines our brand and company culture."

Rather than look at sustainable initiatives through a sales and marketing lens, Von Blotzheim said, "We regard being a more sustainable company as paramount for the future, independently of momentary ups and downs of consumers' demands. To us, it is imperative for the business to reduce our impact on the environment and to be a force for good to our customers, our team, and the communities where we operate. We believe this is the only way to secure the spirit and future success of the brand."



Mykita prioritizes transparency when it comes to conversations around sustainability.

All Mykita eyewear is handmade in Berlin and the EU in Mykita's fully owned and operated manufacturing facilities under transparent and fair conditions. Ninety percent of the company's purchased frame materials are recycled, and circular stainless steel is used in a closed loop with MYKITA's Swedish supplier. For acetate, Mykita only uses Eastman Acetate Renew, made with 27 percent recycled content.

Up next, the team is looking at how to switch to a recycled material for demo lenses. Mykita also offers its complimentary MYCARE service, which provides dedicated maintenance and product aftercare to help extend the lives of Mykita frames and

ensure the products are anything but fast fashion. The company won the first ever Silmo CSR prize in 2023, which acknowledges the sum of all its efforts in present and future plants.

In the ECP landscape, said Von Blotzheim, communication about sustainable efforts are becoming more important than ever. She explained, "Some opticians are using sustainability as a focus of their business, selecting sustainable brands as a point of differentiation of their practice from the competition, catering to the needs and demands of their customers. We are seeing more opticians and clients asking for specific sustainability credentials and information from us as we strive to be a good partner in those aspects. We will continue to advance and strengthen our transparency efforts and formalize accordingly."

### Modstyle's Sustainable Collection, Project Green, Launches at Full Force

In September 2023, independent eyewear supplier Modstyle International debuted Project Green, its sustainable collection specifically designed for environmentally conscious individuals and practices. The collection showcases a mix of bio-acetates, compostable demo lenses and an initiative with One Tree Planted to plant a tree for every frame purchased. In addition, manufacturers that work on Project Green specialize in zero waste manufacturing; one of the first steps in this process is ensuring that all acetate

cutoffs are reused, no matter their size.

This year, Project Green won the Sustainability category in the ODMA (Optical Distributors and Manufacturers Association) Awards of Excellence 2023 at O=MEGA23 in Melbourne, Australia, underscoring the brand's commitment and impact. Through Project Green, over 3,500 trees have been planted across the Amazon rainforest and areas of Canada that have been affected by recent wildfires since 2023.



Modstyle launched Project Green in 2023 and has already planted over 3,500 trees in partnership with One Tree Planted.

Launching Project Green was a logical next step for Modstyle International, as it allowed for the union of sustainability and style. Global brands manager Lisa Wymond told VM, "As consumers increasingly prioritize environmental responsibility, we recognized a growing demand for sustainable eyewear that doesn't compromise on quality or style... we're empowering individuals to make a positive impact on the planet while expressing their personal style."

Moving forward, Project Green will redouble its efforts. Said Wymond, "With a commitment to eco-conscious practices, the brand aims to continue its exploration of sustainable materials, including bio-acetates and recycled materials. Expansion of the design range is on the horizon, with plans to introduce new styles, shapes and colors. Project Green also envisions integrating innovative features and technologies into its designs to enhance functionality and user experience, such as advancements in hinge designs, acetates and manufacturing techniques."

On the ECP front, Wymond said Project Green has faced a "high level of enthusiasm." Customers have

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### Climate Change and Eye Health

**"There are many ways that climate changes affect eye health. Increased UV rays (from loss of ozone) can increase conditions like cataracts, pterygium and possible retinal issues. Extreme weather events such as wildfires can put harmful irritants in the atmosphere."**

- Frances Bynum, OD, owner, Northwest Tennessee Eye Clinic in Martin and Greenfield, Tenn.



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## Eyewear Manufactures Embrace Eco-Conscious Production

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not only embraced the brand instore, but are “actively sharing their excitement on social media platforms and championing it within their own practices. Seeing this kind of organic promotion is incredibly fulfilling and serves as a testament to the genuine value they see in what Project Green is doing.

“What’s even more encouraging is that we’re seeing the brand continue to grow in sales week after week. This super positive response from practices and the general public is very rewarding and inspiring. It fuels our determination for Project Green to continue exceeding expectations and making a meaningful impact.”

### SeazSee’s All Around Impact on the Environment

SeazSee was founded in 2016 with a clear goal of recycling marine waste into functional eyewear. The company has collected 500,000 pounds of raw material each year since then; that translates into 100 times more material than what is needed for SeazSee’s production, so the material is passed on and used in other industries as well. The SeazSee Foundation, which works with local communities to preserve coastal and marine environments, and supports initiatives to protect children from slavery in the fishing industry, is the backbone of everything SeazSee does, ensuring the company is taking a holistic approach to environmental protection that goes beyond collecting marine plastic.



*SeazSee puts protecting waterways at the forefront of all decisions.*

Founder François van den Abeele explained to *VM*, “Knowing how light frames are, using recycled material is not enough in terms of tangible impact. Our foundation is growing, and expanding to other

countries such as Senegal, Togo, Nigeria, Uganda, and hence increasing greatly our social and environmental impact.”

The call for sustainable and ecologically minded eyewear has grown, said van den Abeele, but that customer demand doesn’t change what SeazSee does. He told *VM*, “We have not evolved with the tendency of the market; we existed before the market showed interest for sustainable products... Since the creation of our brand in 2016 we have seen an evolution in consumers’ attitude: slow beginnings and surely more since 2022.”

When it comes to ECPs’ response, van den Abeele has found that the response to offering more than just a frame is overwhelmingly positive. He told *VM*, “They feel that we provide them with a great way to be involved in what we do. Each frame sold goes further than the product, and it motivates them to do more. We don’t sell frames, we sell eco disruption of the optical sector with products that [have] a tangible, sustainable and social impact, and they love to be part of it.”

### Silhouette’s Sustainable Values Remain Consistent

Silhouette has always seen responsibility to people and planet as a central part of its DNA, president of Silhouette Optical US Hartmut Kraft told *Vision Monday*. The global company has been completely carbon-neutral since 2022, including its production facilities in Austria. The production site is exclusively powered by CO<sub>2</sub>-free green electricity and has its own on-site rooftop solar power plant producing 1.3 M. kWh of green energy each year; 100 percent of that energy is then used in eyewear production.

Silhouette also takes its water consumption into account, as the production site is in an Austrian water conservation area. Kraft explained, “We therefore recycle our production water in our two in-house water treatment plants several times. This enables us to reduce by half the amount of fresh water required per pair of eyewear, as we can cover the remaining 50 percent with purified production water.” Some 27,000 gallons of water are recycled



*Silhouette’s production facility in Austria is completely carbon neutral.*

at Silhouette’s production facility on a daily basis.

And, of course, the essence of the eyewear Silhouette produces is sustainable: high quality eyewear designed to last for years, rather than be replaced. Kraft told *VM*, “Instead of simply consuming resources, we strive to preserve their value as much as possible and extend their life cycle. We also offer a high-quality repair service to avoid unnecessary waste. For each model of eyewear, we continue to stock spare parts for up to three years following discontinuation. Our partner opticians can even order spare parts for up to six years after a collection is discontinued.”

Silhouette is an independent family business owned by the third generation of that same family, allowing the company’s core values to remain consistent over the decades—this includes that commitment to sustainability, which Kraft said are not driven by consumer demand but by Silhouette’s tenets. That said, Kraft told *VM*, “In certain U.S. demographics, we are seeing more and more consumers gravitating toward sustainable products and supporting brands that are committed to reducing their carbon footprint.”

This move makes communication critical for Silhouette. Environmental action is already there—but customers need to know about it and be able to explain it to patients. Kraft noted, “An important part of national corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns is communication. Through dedicated webinars, we create a direct and very personal ap-



## Eco-Friendly Initiatives in Eyewear

proach for our partner opticians on the subject of CSR. We need to meet the demand for transparency from consumers, and we want to bring our long-standing optician partners on board to improve our overall competitiveness. CMO Michael Schmied and COO Thomas Windischbauer, will present relevant information on sustainability, environmental protection and social responsibility.”

He concluded, “Our customers appreciate partnering with an eyewear manufacturer that takes their commitment to the environment seriously and does so as a matter of course not to create a marketing storyline. They are always interested in learning more about our sustainable production methods, materials, and how Silhouette is working to shape the future of eyewear.”

### Thema Is Concentrating on Only What We Need

Thema, an Italian eyewear company with a factory in Miami, Fla., focuses on sustainable production through its commitment to working on-demand. Since 2017, the company has been invested in on-demand production, which decreases waste and produces only what is needed when it is needed. In addition, Thema eyewear is made with Advanced Bio-Circular (ABC) and biobased materials in place of a fossil fuel-based alternative.



*Thema's on-demand production allows the company to be eco-forward.*

Giulia Valmassoi, CEO of Thema North America, told *VM*, “Sustainability is part of our business model, in fact instead of mass-producing, we prioritize producing only what our market needs. This principle has earned us the Sustainability Award

for three consecutive years. Our commitment to sustainability permeates every aspect of our operations, from manufacturing practices to material sourcing and recycling initiatives.”

Although Thema has been committed to sustainable production since its inception, Valmassoi has noticed increased interest in the details in the past few years. She told *VM*, “Over the past year, we’ve noticed a significant shift in consumer attitudes toward eco-friendly businesses. There’s been a marked increase in customers asking questions like, ‘What makes you truly eco-friendly?’”

Being able to answer the question of sustainability with concrete examples is what can set a company apart. Valmassoi said, “It’s crucial to provide them with compelling reasons that are truly impactful. This awareness has led us to broaden our offerings, particularly with our customizable iGreen and Giorgio Valmassoi lines. Our customers really appreciate our unique approach, especially our efforts to combat overproduction in the industry.”

### WestGroupe Knows Consumers Value Eco-Friendly Eyewear

In 2023, WestGroupe debuted OTP in the United States after a successful launch in Canada and Europe. This proprietary brand is focused specifically on unique and environmentally friendly eyewear. WestGroupe’s VP of product development and creative director Beverly Suliteanu has noticed an increased demand for eco-conscious eyewear. She told *VM*, “Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of how their purchasing decisions impact the environment and our world, and eyewear is no exception.

“There is a growing segment of consumers seeking out eyewear with a sustainability component, from the materials used in frame fabrication to the production processes employed. Consumers and retailers alike are asking more questions about the sustainability of products, including packaging and promotional materials, as we collectively strive to reduce unnecessary waste.”

The OTP collection was WestGroupe’s initial foray into sustainable initiatives, but as demand



*WestGroupe vice president of product development and creative director, Beverly Suliteanu.*



*WestGroupe's eco-friendly OTP is growing, and the company is beginning to implement these initiatives into its other brands.*

has grown, so has WestGroupe’s plans. Suliteanu explained, “The OTP collection was WestGroupe’s initial focus on eco-friendly initiatives, utilizing primarily recycled or biodegradable materials for frames, packaging, marketing and merchandising materials. We are now beginning to implement these initiatives across many WestGroupe brands.”

The company has just finalized an agreement with Eastman and will begin using Acetate Renew across its premium collections, Fysh, Kliik and Evatik. Recycled metals have been introduced to OTP, too. Packaging across all the WestGroupe brands, including demo lenses and polybags, has been and will remain biodegradable, and all marketing and merchandising assets are created from recycled materials too.

When it comes to sustainability initiatives, Suliteanu has found WestGroupe customers to be “incredibly supportive” and “proud to stock WestGroupe products,” further underscoring the now widespread support for eco-conscious eyewear. ■

### Recycled Plastic in Contact Lenses

**“What I tell patients is that most contact lens companies are now making sure the plastic they use is recyclable. I also tell them that if they were in a monthly contact lens that they would still need plastic contact lens cases and at least two bottles of contact lens solution per month. The amount of plastic that it takes to make those products also adds up to nearly the same as the amount of daily contact lens package waste.”**

**- Rasika Whitesell, OD, owner, Port City Optometry in Wilmington, N.C.**



## Does Climate Change Affect Ocular Health? Eyecare Experts Weigh In

BY DANIEL BREEMAN / SENIOR EDITOR

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) <https://www.who.int/>, climate change presents a “fundamental threat to human health,” affecting the physical environment as well as all aspects of both natural and human systems—including social and economic conditions and the functioning of health systems. All aspects of health are affected by climate change, WHO noted, from clean air, water and soil to food systems and livelihoods. In fact, research shows that 3.6 billion people already live in areas highly susceptible to climate change.

In addition, by 2050, climate change will place an immense strain on global health care systems, causing \$12.5 trillion in economic losses and over 2 billion healthy life years lost. This was the warning from the Quantifying the Impact of Climate Change on Human Health <https://www.weforum.org/publications/quantifying-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-human-health/> report published in January 2024 by the World Economic Forum.

But is climate change a threat to eye health? The answer may depend on who you ask and to what degree climate change can be directly attributed to eye disease.

For example, according to an article <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/climate-change-eye-health-threat/#:~:text=Because%20of%20the%20loss%20of,and%20age%2Drelated%20macular%20degeneration> from the World Economic Forum and the Centre for Health and Healthcare, because of the loss of the ozone layer and increased UV rays that affect the eye, global warming can contribute to the onset and acceleration of cataracts. Furthermore, it noted, traffic-related air pollution is linked to severe allergic eye diseases, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration.

Environmental factors, including climate change, have a strong influence on both human well-being and the stability of health systems, the article noted. Finally, the predicted rise in eye diseases and disruption of ocular health services may increase

the number of people who are suffering from vision impairment.

But is climate change directly responsible for changes in eye health and eyecare services or is it part of a bigger problem?

“Climate change refers to a long-term shift in temperatures and weather patterns. In this respect, climate change per se does not impact ocular health,” Dr. Louis Pasquale, chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at The Mount Sinai Hospital and the director of the Eye and Vision Research Institute of New York Eye & Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai, <https://www.nyee.edu/>, told *Vision Monday*. “It is reasonable to ask, ‘What factors contribute to climate change and how do they impact ocular health?’ Accumulating carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane—the so-called gasses in the atmosphere—contribute to climate change. Again, none of these greenhouse gasses impact ocular health directly to the best of my knowledge. So, the effects of climate change on ocular health are indirect and difficult to quantify.”

He further explained, “Extreme climate conditions can affect ocular health. For example, excess ocular UV exposure has been linked to pterygium formation, photokeratitis, cataracts and exfoliation glaucoma. Sunglasses that afford UV protection help maintain good ocular health.”

“Aside from increases in dry eye from a hotter, harsher climate, the main concern would be conditions that arise from overexposure to UV rays,” said Viola Kanevsky, OD.

“A loss of the ozone layer increases exposure, and areas of the planet where the ozone is thinnest certainly show higher rates of comorbidities such as skin cancer, pterygium, macular degeneration and cataracts.”

To better understand eye health care needs of the future, the National Eye Institute <https://www.nei.nih.gov/> (NEI) convened a panel of experts last

April to discuss the potential effects of a changing climate on eye health and vision. The session described estimates for future eye disease burden and population changes, gaps in health care resiliency and the ability to provide care in diverse regions, and the need for more research into environmental drivers of eye disease.

Speakers at the event included Hugh Taylor, MD, University of Melbourne; Nisha Acharya, MD, University of California, San Francisco; Cassandra Thiel, Ph.D., New York University; and Serge Resnikoff, MD, Ph.D., University of New South Wales. The session was moderated by Gyan Prakash, Ph.D., NEI associate director for International Research.

Dr. Taylor noted that aging populations around the globe will lead to more blinding eye disease, including cataract, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Rising temperatures will drive populations away from the equator, according to Dr. Resnikoff, increasing the eye health care burden in other areas.

Dr. Acharya noted that there is a poor understanding of how particulate air pollutants, like those emitted by wildfires, drive chronic eye inflammation and contribute to diseases like uveitis, cataract and AMD. In addition, she said, most programs exploring the impacts of climate change on health don’t cover eye health.

Of course, prevention plays a huge role in maintaining ocular health, regardless of the environment or other contributing factors.

“Periodic eye exams and sunglass wear are good strategies to maintain ocular health, regardless of the changing climate,” said Dr. Pasquale. “Don’t underestimate how much sun your eyes are exposed to when you are at the beach, on a boat, or even out in the snow on a sunny day. It is not hat wear that will protect your eyes, it will be a good pair of sunglasses.”

“UV protective eyewear, headwear and skin lotions should be used when outdoors. Also, outdoor activity during periods when the sun is high over the horizon should be limited,” added Dr. Kanevsky. ■



Dr. Louis Pasquale



Viola Kanevsky, OD

## Sustainable Practices Drive Product Development for Labs and Lens Makers

BY SARAH MCGOLDRICK / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**W**ith more than four million pairs of eyeglasses thrown away each year, efforts to reduce the environmental impact and create more cost-efficiencies have prompted optical industry leaders and innovators to reevaluate how products are made and delivered to consumers.

The materials that go into creating a pair of glasses can have a significant impact on the environment, and this affects the ability of manufacturers to maintain a high level of production sustainability. Frame materials such as acetate are molded and trimmed to create a wearable pair of frames, resulting in a staggering amount of waste.

According to Common Objective in a feature titled, The Market Opportunity for Ethical Eyewear, <https://www.commonobjective.co/article/the-market-opportunity-for-ethical-eyewear> nearly 75 percent of acetate goes to waste during the manufacturing process. Meanwhile, during lens production, lens pucks are ground down into a thin and usable pair of lenses, generating thousands of tons of residual waste, known as swarf, on a yearly basis.

To combat the more than 250 metric tons of waste created through the disposal of eyeglasses in landfills, frame and lens manufacturers and suppliers have developed sustainable protocols that help reduce the carbon footprint of the optical industry.

Eyewear supplier Eastman has put their resources into research and product development to help create sustainable eyewear solutions. The company offers specialty plastics solutions for both frames and lenses, with products that utilize molecular recycling technologies composed of certified, recycled and bio-based content.

“According to Eastman’s U.S. and European Sunglasses Study, consumers are hungry for sustainable eyewear solutions offering sustainable materials that are called out in product information as well as education to help them find these options,” said Rachel Oakley, eyewear segment market manager at Eastman. “While this is driven by luxury consumers, customers across all eyewear price points are seek-

ing sustainable materials like Eastman Acetate Renew and Tritan Renew.”

Oakley added that Eastman’s sustainability initiatives have centered around working with renowned eyewear brands and value-priced retailers to ensure that sustainable materials are widely available to consumers.

“This includes our fashion sunglasses crafted from Tritan Renew, a product derived from our newly established Kingsport molecular recycling facility. Since its launch earlier this year, our Kingsport facility is on track to recycle more than 100,000 tons of plastic waste every year into high-quality plastics suitable for frames, sun lenses and other applications. This enables us to offer industry-leading plastic with a remarkable 50 percent recycled content, providing a scalable solution for high-quality sustainable eyewear,” she said.

At the recent Eyes on Sustainability Conference in November 2023, Oakley said she engaged with numerous eyecare providers to discuss sustainability practices. She said that ECPs have expressed their awareness of the various methods available to reduce their environmental impact, such as energy-efficient lighting and low-emission vehicles.

“They particularly appreciated sustainable materials as a simple way to enhance circularity within the industry. With Eastman’s Renew products, ECPs were pleased that they didn’t have to compromise on quality or performance,” she said. “However, we have seen a bit of scepticism about the sustainability claims since the Renew products look and feel identical to their non-sustainable counterparts.”

Technology designed to give wearers the same look and feel as traditional eyeglasses continues to evolve thanks to new research and innovative design ideas. To help build a culture of innovation that will bring these new products to market, companies are building sustainable practices into their day-to-day operations, attracting like-minded employees who view this as a workplace benefit.



Rachel Oakley

Evidence shows a culture of sustainability within a company is one of the key decision factors for potential employees. A 2022 IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) study <https://www.esgtoday.com/ibm-survey-employees-more-likely-to-accept-jobs-from-sustainable-companies/#:~:text=The%20survey%20found%20a%20growing,accept%20positions%20from%20such%20companies> found 67 percent of the respondents reported that they were more willing to apply for jobs within companies that demonstrated sustainable practices, and 68 percent were more willing to accept positions from such companies.

National Vision’s sustainability efforts are grounded in the company’s mission to provide access to low-cost, quality eyecare and eyewear. Jared Brandman, general counsel and secretary, who leads National Vision’s Environmental, Social and Governance strategy, said the company structures and prioritizes sustainability endeavors through its SEE+G framework, which encompasses Social, Employees, Environment and Governance aspects.

“This framework helps ensure we focus on the areas where we have the greatest opportunity to create positive impacts on the world while we grow a resilient business. Sustainable merchandising is one focus within this framework,” said Brandman. “Our customers are interested in purchasing products that are environmentally and socially responsible, so we’re continuing to seek out opportunities to provide products that meet our standards of quality and affordability while also making a positive contribution to our world.”

Brandman said National Vision looks beyond merchandise efforts when developing a sustainable strategy and focus. He noted consumers are savvy and recognize that a commitment to sustainability is more than just carrying products with green credentials, adding they care about a company being purpose-driven.



Jared Brandman

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# Growing Into Sustainability



## Labs and Lens Makers Focus on Recycling and Waste Reduction Programs

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“As we continue to mature our sustainability framework, we’re focusing on more deeply integrating sustainable approaches throughout National Vision’s operations and value chain. This includes continuing to explore eco-friendly merchandise lines, like our Green Love frame line, and 100 percent net plastic neutral contact lenses through our partnership with CooperVision, as well as products that make positive societal impacts—including the See Inside frame capsule highlighting mental health awareness and our collaboration with women- and Black-owned eyewear company, Vonté Eyewear, in celebration of Black History Month,” Brandman said.

Sustainable practices are also embedded into National Vision labs and distribution centers. The result, he said, is increased efficiency and reduction in waste in the company operations, allowing National Vision to create a more value-conscious and streamlined experience for customers.

“Throughout our sustainability efforts, environmental stewardship is a key pillar. It goes hand-in-hand with our ability to meet our other core pillars of contributing to societal good, impacting the well-being of associates and doctors, and earning stakeholder trust by meeting high standards in our governance,” he said.

Consumers understand the importance of sustainability when it comes to making purchasing choices. According to a report <https://theroundup.org/environmentally-conscious-consumer-statistics/> from The Roundup, customers are willing to pay more for eco-friendly brands. This means companies need to make smarter manufacturing and packaging choices. The Roundup report found that 84 percent of customers say that poor environmental practices alienate them from brands or companies.

ABB Optical Group is developing sustainable practices and protocols in-house to ensure they are manufacturing and selling a product that hits these consumer benchmarks. The organization considers environmental, health and safety in all operations. Audley Brown, senior facilities manager, said ABB Optical Group recognizes the value of sustainability



Audley Brown

and is driven at the operations level with efforts to both recycle and minimize waste such as segregation and recycling cardboard, light bulbs, wooden pallets, ink cartridges and batteries at all locations.

Brown said low-flow equipment technology is also used to reduce both water consumption and discharge. He said that waste minimization success has included recent changes in chemical usage, resulting in a lower quantity of chemical waste.

“Over the past year, the ABB Labs teams have been focused on reducing water and energy consumption, minimizing waste production, and increasing recycling across its entire laboratory network. Teams across the laboratories looked at everything that contributed to water consumption and then installed advanced water-cooling systems and filtration in closed-loop water systems,” he said.

Creating a sustainable production environment has encompassed other areas of the building, including the improvement of heating and air conditioning consumption through mechanisms such as tinting windows, adding blinds, and installing more energy-efficient air conditioning systems. Additionally, all overhead lighting in the building and at each workstation was updated from fluorescent and halogen to LED.

All non-office type locations within the facilities, such as bathrooms and conference rooms, have automated on/off lighting switches. Brown said the company reviewed opportunities to innovate packaging to reduce waste. This included reviewing bubble wrap consumption.

“Instead of buying pre-made giant rolls of bubble wrap, we now make our bubble wrap using 50 percent recycled material, which helps us use 28 percent less of it. We have also implemented healthier food choices in our vending machines. Options include fresh, lower-sodium, microwavable and affordable selections,” he said. To ensure this is done accurately and effectively, each facility monitors

what’s popular and then will add or expand for a better variety for company employees.

“In our laboratories, employees are also offered an ABB spill proof bottle to help reduce paper cup usage and water waste. These are ongoing initiatives across all ABB laboratories and facilities. Our teams take pride in our sustainability efforts, and we are always looking for the next improvements to continually make greener decisions,” Brown said.

One of the greatest environmental issues of lens manufacturing is the disposal of swarf. As noted earlier, swarf is the residual waste from lens pucks as they are ground into shape. For years, this waste simply ended up in landfills, but today, companies are taking steps to reduce the impact of swarf on the environment through the development of recycling programs.

In 2020, Cherry Optical Lab installed a Filtertech swarf management machine that would allow the company to recycle excess material. By the following year, Cherry Optical Lab had partnered with DEVCO to begin by-product collection.

Once the program was up and running, in just two weeks, the company filled 40 Gaylord boxes measuring 48 inches by 40 inches by 36 inches of compact swarf.



Cherry Optical redirects thousands of tons of waste from landfills each year.

“Our partnership with Filtertech and NXTsolve allows us to divert massive volumes of waste from the landfill. While this process will not save the planet, it certainly feels like the right thing to do,” said Adam Cherry, president of Cherry Optical Lab.

Today, the company fills three to four Gaylords a week and redirects thousands of tons of waste from landfills a year. “Finding a purpose for the swarf produced in the processing of optical lenses has been

something optical laboratories have looked at for decades,” he said.

Cherry Optical Lab has also added recycling protocols to help address the thousands of empty lens boxes that are created during the production process. Each lens comes in a small box, which in the past would be discarded after the lens was put on the production line.

The lab now utilizes a compactor for lens boxes, rechargeable batteries, reusable utensils, and dinnerware, and participates in recycling programs for their coffee pouches and has created designated stations with distinct bin types to ensure products are directed to the proper recycling channel.

Making customers part of the sustainability journey has been a challenge for some companies. For Plastic Plus, Canada’s largest independent optical lab, customers were ready to get on board with new sustainable practices.

In 2022, Plastic Plus launched the Green Send Back Program designed to recycle materials used for packing and shipping. The program invites customers to return packing materials such as pillow packs, bubble wrap, cardboard wrap, and lens sleeves for reuse or proper recycling. Since implementing the program, the lab has been able to divert 25 percent of packing materials from the landfill.

“In the past, sustainability in the optical lab space was a challenge. We have worked with our suppliers and customers to help develop successful ways to reduce our environmental impact,” said Plastic Plus vice president Jason Faibish. “Our customers appreciate our efforts and have been quick to come onboard, reducing the carbon footprint of the optical industry.”

One of the first steps to successfully achieving sustainability is understanding the consumer market. Zeiss has been collecting information from consumers, and their findings offer strong insight into buying trends and expectations. Matt Woelbern, head of marketing, US Channels at Zeiss Vision



Matt Woelbern

Care U.S., noted that the company has discovered through research that sustainability isn’t the only factor that is influencing consumer buying patterns, however, it can be a deciding factor.

“Consumers aren’t making demands or major decisions based on sustainability, but they are expecting it from their brands and might use it as a tiebreaker. At Zeiss, we are pursuing sustainability because it is the right thing to do, and much of the work isn’t consumer-facing and may be behind the scenes,” he said.

The company has made sustainability a part of the overall corporate strategy. Between 2018 and 2019, Zeiss reduced Co2 emissions by 79 percent at Zeiss Group globally. The company also saw a 26 percent reduction in energy consumption and a 34 percent reduction in water consumption. Targets for 2025 include a continued 10 percent reduction in waste reduction and a 15 percent reduction in water consumption.

Zeiss has partnered with their ECPs to implement sustainability strategies. Woelbern said even though their customers aren’t choosing Zeiss products based on sustainability initiatives, the company still keeps technology and quality top-of-mind.

“Customers are expecting it from us and all of their suppliers. They understand that as a foundation-owned company, Zeiss has additional resources to pursue sustainability since we don’t distribute profits to any shareholders,” he said.

Building workplace and product sustainability has been a core objective at VSP Vision. Through the establishment of the Global Innovation Center (GIC), the company has been able to reimagine the way eyecare and eyewear are delivered to the world. The GIC is focused on three key areas: patient experience, health access equity and sustainability. Additionally, it serves to incorporate sustainability into how VSP does business by exploring new technologies and making strategic connections within the innovation ecosystem.

“There is a strong commitment from teams across the VSP Vision enterprise to pursue sustainable business practices, and we’re working together to ensure there is integration wherever possible to meet the growing demand in this important space,” said Thomas Burkhardt, president of Marchon Eyewear, a VSP Vision company.

The company has made strides toward sustainability through its innovative packaging and product designs.

“We recently made the switch to 100 percent Global Recycled Standard (GRS)-certified post-consumer polyethylene shipping poly bags for frames and GRS-certified 100 percent post-consumer recycled demo lenses in all Marchon and Altair produced frames. Eyeconic, VSP Vision’s online eyewear store, ships frames in boxes made from 100 percent recyclable materials,” Burkhardt said.

Internally, VSP Vision has also instituted numerous protocols and programs to help reduce their environmental impact. The VSP Vision headquarters campus provides bike lockers and EV charging stations for employees, uses LED lighting, and purchases energy from renewable sources.

Additionally, the company has implemented digital billing, saving more than one million sheets of paper per year. Recycling programs for paper, cardboard, batteries, lightbulbs, air filters, and e-waste have also contributed to more sustainable operations while the VSP Vision employee Green Guardian Team hosts regular e-waste events.

Employee participation in green initiatives is one of the best ways to improve workplace satisfaction. A 2023 report <https://www.sevencleanseas.com/post/employee-engagement-and-sustainability> from Seven Clean Seas found engaging and communicating with employees regarding sustainability ambitions results in higher productivity, better employee retention and 21 percent more profitability for the company. ■



Thomas Burkhardt



Jason Faibish

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# Growing Into Sustainability



## Contact Lens Companies Continue to Make Sustainability Strides

BY DANIEL BREEMAN / SENIOR EDITOR

While sustainability in the optical industry continues to make strides, major contact lens companies are doing more than their share in promoting initiatives and keeping an ear tuned to the sustainability requests and concerns of ECPs and consumers alike. Contact lens companies realize just how important it is to have support for these initiatives up and down the line, from their own employees, to ECPs and their patients, and they are developing many of their sustainability initiatives with these thoughts in mind.

Tackling climate change remains a growing priority in contact lens companies' environmental, social, and government (ESG) initiatives, as well as protecting natural resources. Among the sustainability initiatives taken by Bausch + Lomb, Alcon, CooperVision, and Johnson

and Johnson Vision are major recycling efforts for contact lenses, which benefit manufacturers, eyecare professionals and ultimately patients who are buying contact lens products.

Contact lens companies are also taking a closer look at their manufacturing processes to reduce their carbon footprint. And it appears that consumers are sitting up and taking notice of these efforts. A 2024 study <https://media.blueyonder.com/blue-yonder-survey-consumers-willing-to-prioritize-sustainability-over-price-convenience/> by Blue Yonder showed that 47 percent of consumers reported that their interest in shopping sustainably has slightly or greatly increased in the last year.

The survey also demonstrated that consumers were willing to spend more for sustainable products, with 40 percent of respondents saying they would pay up to 5 percent more, and 25 percent saying they would pay an additional 10 percent or more for eco-conscious products. ■

### Alcon Combines Social Impact With Environmental Initiatives

With the goal of improving lives and strengthening communities through innovative eyecare, Alcon has developed a social impact and sustainability strategy platform that contains both specific social impact goals and sustainability goals reaching into 2030.

By 2030, Alcon stated it will become carbon neutral across global operations (Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions) and will divert 100 percent of non-hazardous waste generated at its manufacturing sites and distribution centers from landfill.

On the social impact side, by 2025 Alcon says it will work with its partners through philanthropic support and training programs to help improve vision for 5 million people afflicted with untreated cataracts in low- and middle-income countries, including 1 million people who are considered cataract blind. Also, by 2025, the company is aiming to help improve vision and enhance academic success by providing 150,000 vision screenings to children and ensuring comprehensive care for those in need.

Since 2022, Alcon and Plastic Bank have partnered for clear vision and clean oceans, a partnership that was recently extended to help support sustainability efforts. Last year, Alcon broadened



the partnership with Vision Care products to reach more than 90 countries. Thus far, Alcon has helped prevent over 125 million plastic bottles from entering the oceans, streams, rivers and lakes that human and animal life depend on, the company reported. So far, more than 5,000 collectors are improving their financial stability and contributing to a cleaner, clearer world.

According to Alcon, its Global Environmental Sustainability Strategy focuses on four top priorities: sustainable products and services; energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction; operational waste reduction; and water stewardship. Its Environmental Sustainability Scorecard (ESS) allows the company to operationalize sustainable product development. The ESS evaluates new and existing products against sustainability key performance indicators, such as water and energy use, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and waste generated to identify product and process design efficiencies.

In 2022, Alcon set a goal to be carbon neutral for Scope 1 and Scope 2 across its global operations by 2030. The company is working to reduce its Scope 1 and 2 emissions through energy improvement and efficiency projects and procurement of renewable energy.

Alcon reduced its total Scope 1 and 2 GHG emis-

sions by 17 percent in 2022 and also reduced its purchased energy GHG emissions intensity ratio by 27 percent. The company also stated that it has taken the initiative to protect its business from both the physical and transitional risks of climate change.

Alcon evaluates the potential vulnerability of its operations and assets to climate events that are projected to take place through the mid-century under lower-emissions and higher-emissions scenarios, it stated. The company also assesses the potential impact of emerging policy and legal requirements, technology changes and market shifts such as consumer expectations through the mid-century under these same scenarios.

### Bausch + Lomb Recycling Programs Reach a Milestone

In April of this year, Bausch + Lomb announced its One by One and Biotrue Eye Care recycling programs had collected 84,343,540 units, or 510,116 pounds, of used contact lenses, eyecare and lens care materials in the U.S. These initiatives have been embraced by eyecare professionals, patients, and consumers alike, according to Amy Butler, vice president, global environment, health, safety and sustainability, Bausch + Lomb.

"Eyecare practitioners are highly supportive of



(L to R) Bausch + Lomb's Amy Butler; the company's solar array in Rochester, N.Y.; and its One on One on One recycling program.

our sustainability initiatives. Many also appreciate being able to be part of our efforts by serving as official recycling centers of our One by One recycling program—the first and only contact lens recycling program in the United States,” Butler said. “Each recycling center receives complimentary Bausch + Lomb recycling bins that allow their practice to easily collect used contact lenses, blister packs and top foils. The bins serve as a great visual reminder for patients as well.

“We also offer the Biotrue eyecare recycling program, the first and only eyecare and lens care packaging recycling program in the United States. This program properly recycles all brands of eye drop single dose units, lens cases and lens solution caps, as well as all Biotrue-branded eye drop bottles.”

Butler noted that used contact lens, eyecare and lens care packaging materials are typically not properly processed in standard recycling facilities due to the small size and the type of plastic used. As a result, they can end up in landfills or waterways. “All eye health materials collected in our recycling programs are shipped to TerraCycle, where they are processed into pellets and given new life as recycled products,” she said.

According to Butler, consumers are also becoming more aware of the impact their purchasing decisions have on the environment and are seeking more sustainable products with less packaging material.

“To meet these sustainability requests, we continue to implement and improve upon our sustainable practices across our global operations, including reducing waste and conserving natural resources. We

also continue to seek ways to develop our products and packaging to be as sustainable as possible. Because the sustainability landscape is dynamic and constantly changing, each of our global operations have annualized sustainability goals that provide us the opportunity to improve and share learnings throughout our Global Product Supply organization.”

The company's sustainability initiatives are focused on the FEWW metrics—fuel, energy, water and waste. “It's how we identify upcoming projects, measure our effectiveness and continue to improve year after year,” Butler said.

The company noted that it recently completed the construction of a cryogenic plant for production of high purity nitrogen gas at its contact lens manufacturing facility in Waterford, Ireland. This plant eliminated the need for roughly 50 tanker truck deliveries of nitrogen to the Bausch + Lomb campus each month. That's roughly 110 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions savings each year.

“Our Waterford facility recently installed a second combined heat and power unit that provides more than 60 percent of the 800,000-square-foot building's electricity needs and 90 percent of its heating needs,” Butler said. “Our Rochester, N.Y. facility is home to a large solar array, which produces 1.1 gigawatts of energy and eliminates approximately 8,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually. Our Aubenas, France facility also has a solar array, which was expanded last year to produce an additional 200-megawatt hours of solar energy—generating about 30 percent of the facility's total energy needs today.”

Butler concluded, “We are constantly evolving and finding better, more efficient ways to reduce our environmental impact, conserve resources and promote sustainable business practices as part of our comprehensive sustainability program to help build a more sustainable future for generations to come.”

### CooperVision Moves Forward With Renewal of Plastic Bank Initiative

In October of last year, CooperVision's contact lens manufacturing facility in Juana Díaz, Puerto Rico was elevated to the prestigious LEED Gold certifi-



CooperVision's Michele Andrews, OD, talks about the company's net plastic neutrality partnership with Plastic Bank.

cation. The 540,000-square-foot site—which first earned LEED Silver certification in 2020 for its environmentally conscious design and operation—produces the company's MyDay and Biofinity brands. It was the second CooperVision manufacturing facility to achieve LEED Gold certification, joining the company's Costa Rica plant, which earned this recognition in 2022, the company stated.

“At CooperVision, we are very proud of our leadership in sustainability within the contact lens industry. It is an area in which we have been focused for years, starting with the development of best-in-class facilities and manufacturing processes,” said CooperVision's Michele Andrews, OD, vice president, professional and government affairs, Americas. “These efforts have resulted in award-winning conservation efforts in Puerto Rico, as well as prestigious sustainability certifications—including LEED and BREEAM—in Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Spain, the U.K. and the U.S.

“We began with manufacturing because it was the area in which we could make the greatest impact. However, those efforts tend to be less visible to eyecare professionals and their patients. So, in 2021, CooperVision pioneered the world's first net plastic neutral contact lens with clariti 1 day in the U.S., allowing ECPs and patients to make a difference just by prescribing and wearing the lens.

“Since then, we have continued to expand the scope of this global initiative, which funds Plastic Bank's collection, processing, and reuse of general ocean-bound plastic waste that is equal to the

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## Growing Into Sustainability



# Companies Hone in on Recycling Programs for Contact Lenses

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weight of plastic contained in designated products in 27 countries around the world. In the U.S., all of our most popular contact lenses are now net plastic neutral, including clariti 1 day, MyDay, MiSight 1 day and Biofinity.”

In April of this year, CooperVision announced the extension of its partnership with Plastic Bank, making CooperVision contact lenses net plastic neutral through 2026.

“To add even more excitement, we have expanded the partnership to include a vision care program to provide vision screenings and vouchers for eye exams and glasses for eligible Plastic Bank collection members in Indonesia, who are absolutely essential to our initiative,” Andrews said. “Now ECPs and wearers alike can feel even better about choosing CooperVision lenses, knowing they are making an even greater impact on both people and the planet.

Andrews said, “What we really love most about the net plastic neutral initiative is that it is so easy for ECPs and their patients to participate. In the first three years of the initiative, thousands of eyecare professionals and millions of wearers have already contributed to the cause, which to date has prevented the equivalent of more than 305 million plastic bottles from entering our world’s oceans. Feedback on the net plastic neutral initiative has been overwhelmingly positive, as it gives practices a great way to connect with and provide more sustainable options to their environmentally conscious patients.”

Andrews noted that in terms of consumer preference for sustainable brands, “everything we have seen continues to trend upward.” She pointed to a 2024 study by Blue Yonder, which showed that 47 percent of consumers reported that their interest in shopping sustainably has slightly or greatly increased in the last year. The survey also demonstrated that consumers were willing to spend more for sustainable products, with 40 percent of respondents saying they would pay up to 5 percent more, and 25 percent saying they would pay an additional 10 percent or more for eco-conscious products.

“CooperVision is committed to making a positive impact on the environment and operating more sus-

tainably because it is the right thing to do—for our employees, customers, our business and the planet. Our approach is evolutionary, so we are always evaluating, looking for additional areas in which we can innovate and improve to make a greater impact today and in the future,” Andrews said.

### Johnson & Johnson Vision Focuses on Consumers’ Sustainability Demands

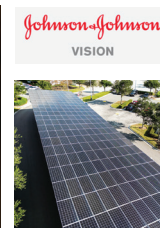
In order to help meet the growing demands of consumers, Johnson & Johnson Vision has focused its environmental sustainability efforts in three areas: climate, waste reduction, and natural resources, according to Lori Tierney, president of the Americas for Johnson & Johnson Vision.

Tierney stated that there has been a growing awareness of sustainability in recent years across various industries, including the eyecare industry, helping to propel these efforts. “There is a general trend toward increased interest in sustainability and many individuals, whether they are an ophthalmologist or contact lens wearers, are becoming more conscious of the environmental impact of their choices,” she said.

“At Johnson & Johnson, we’re committed to creating a healthier world. We’re passionate about creating a sustainable future and recognize our responsibility to help protect the planet. This means finding sustainable solutions to existing challenges, as well as tackling key issues that affect us all.

“Our sustainability efforts are focused in three key areas: limiting our use of natural resources and finding solutions to protect the environment; reducing our carbon footprint and increasing the use of renewable energy; and reducing waste, optimizing our packaging, and helping our customers and patients recycle more.”

Over the past 10 years, J&J has significantly reduced the carbon footprint and is on track to help the Vision business of Johnson & Johnson meet its carbon neutrality goal by 2030, according to Tierney. Additionally, as of 2022, all Acuvue contact lenses are made using 100 percent renewable energy, helping the business achieve its global climate goal of sourcing 100 percent of its electricity needs



(L to R) J&J Vision’s Lori Tierney; the company’s solar panels at its Jacksonville distribution center; and windmill power at its plant in Ireland.

from renewable sources three years early.

Tierney said, “As a health care company in J&J, we recognize that environmental health impacts human health, and we have been setting public environmental performance goals for nearly 30 years. Our climate goals include transitioning to 100 percent renewable electricity and reducing carbon emissions in our global operations while also engaging our suppliers to reduce upstream value chain emissions.

“To reach our goals we will continue to advance energy and process efficiencies and increase our use of renewable electricity within our global operations while also engaging key suppliers to develop decarbonization strategies and set science-based goals. We are committed to advancing sustainable products and packaging and introducing more circular solutions within our business sectors.”

Having ECPs, providers, and employees all buying into the company’s sustainability initiatives is critical to achieving these goals, Tierney noted.

“Our eyecare professionals, providers and employees engage in these important initiatives and believe in our mantra that it takes a healthy planet to have healthy people and communities. We have seen an increased interest and active involvement in the younger generations of surgeons, as well as continued encouragement and support from our tenured providers.

“As a global manufacturer, we recognize our responsibility to help protect the planet. From finding sustainable solutions to existing challenges, to tackling key issues that affect us all—we’re passionate about creating a more sustainable future.” ■

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