

Striding ahead



Above: Gerard Donovan, managing director, TANT Laboratories

Moving with the times is a key focus for many independent labs in Europe, who, to remain successful in a competitive market, continue to invest in the latest technology to ensure they are fully equipped to produce superior or more complex product.

European Lenses & Technology interviewed Gerard Donovan, managing director of TANT Laboratories, an independent lab based in Bishop's Stortford, England which has recently invested a quarter of a million pounds in new technology and equipment.

TANT Laboratories is a medium-sized independent lab in Bishop's Stortford, England. Please could you explain the type of work you currently do and who your key customers are.

The lab is set up for surfacing and glazing. We contract out the AR coating work. Our key customers are independents and small groups from all over the UK. Most of our new customers come to us by recommendation and word-of-mouth.

Have there been dramatic changes over the last years in terms of the type of work being requested?

Yes there have been great changes. I came into the business six years ago. At that time, there was more work available on commodity single vision and bifocal lenses. That has been replaced over time with higher value branded product. With more and more presbyopes, there is more of a need for progressive lenses, and a greater demand for higher quality progressives and free-form lenses. So the work has become more complex. We work with a range of new-generation

materials – in the UK, glass is very low volume, representing less than two percent of what we do. We are seeing a greater demand for quality products such as Polycarbonates, Trivex lenses, PNx from Hoya and the latest generation lenses from Essilor (Physio), Hoya (Hoyalux iD) and Shamir (Autograph) in all materials, for example, Essilor Airwear. We are also seeing a greater demand for sunglasses, although in the UK this tends to be weather-driven. The independent optician needs to focus more on this area as an opportunity. Rimless remains popular too, although we have seen a substantial increase in the demand for supra glazing which may be a reflection of how fashionable these styles are at the moment.

What are now your clients' key requirements in terms of ordering, quality of service and speed? What are the essentials for producing quality lenses in your opinion?

For an independent laboratory, without a doubt, the quality of the service and the quality of the jobs we do is absolutely crucial. Our customers need to be able to depend on us for more specialised or complex jobs. We have a customer care team who offer a very personal, supportive service; most of our customers will know members of our team by name. We are proud of the fact that the customer care team and many of our other key technical staff have been with us for at least 10 years. Regarding the speed of our services, we aim to offer a fast turn-around for the most popular lenses, say with a 1.5 index material. Higher value products generally require more time as these are specialised products that require a different level of expertise.

Can you comment on your experience of working with independent opticians. Do you think there are new opportunities coming along for independents?

My experience of working with independent opticians has been extremely good. They are highly professional. The market is stagnant, and they are under pressure from so much competition, yet they are focused on quality, service and delivery in order to provide a high value added service to their patients. There do seem to be new opportunities coming along with free-form and bespoke lens products.

Your background is in accountancy. Please explain how you have become involved in an optical lab?

I worked as an accountant with a number of companies including GE Capital. I was working as an accountant for Nelson Hawkes when he approached me about working at TANT. I worked alongside Hawkes for four years before becoming managing director in February 2006. Hawkes has now taken a step back and acts as the chairman.

TANT Laboratories has undergone a number of changes in the last year or two – please explain.

Yes, we have gone through a major development phase. We have introduced new computerised systems, electronic ordering using EDI (electronic data interchange), and new machinery and robotics in our glazing labs. We have introduced a new job tracking system which allows our customers to track their orders online, making their appointment scheduling all the more efficient. We have also improved the cleanliness at the lab, and introduced uniforms and specialised air conditioning, as well as ultrasonic cleaning.

Can you comment on any experience you have of labs outside the UK in other parts of Europe.

I visited a lab in Germany three years ago. What really made an impression on me was the efficiency and cleanliness of that lab. They were producing more than 1000 jobs per day, and yet it was extremely well kept and there was hardly anything out on display – it reminded me of a library rather than a lab! UK labs need to encourage lean manufacturing processes.

What is your perception of the UK market, and how does that affect you as a lab?

In the UK, the market is probably oversupplied, so competition is fierce. Our whole aim is to meet the demands of our customers and make their work as easy as possible. The investment we have made has increased our capacity as a lab, but also, even more importantly, it has allowed us greater efficiency. I believe because we have embraced new technology, we will see new opportunities in the years to come. ●