

Lab Operations - November / December 2006

Last Resort Lab, the cure for indigestion

Posted:

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Remember the old TV commercial that posed the question "How do you spell relief?" For optical laboratories doing business in the new millennium, R-O-L-A-I-D-S is no longer the correct answer. Instead, finding a "lab of last resort" is the way to relieve your indigestion — and improve your bottom line.

Today's labs face a lot of pressures that didn't exist in the days when just popping a Roloids would do the trick. Nowadays, everyone is in a time and a money crunch — eye care practitioners want their jobs delivered yesterday, and they expect marvelous work at bargain-basement prices. But labs face the problems of trying to keep breakage levels down, even as "plain-Jane" lenses become more sophisticated — and more expensive — every day. Then, when an ECP requests a job that's a little out of the norm, taking the time to do it right can slow down the lab's entire production schedule. Not to mention that some oddball jobs can't even be done in regular laboratories — or can be processed with only the greatest difficulty.

So what's a lab manager to do? Since an antacid won't solve these problems, it's time to call on the optical industry's equivalent of Superman: Epic Labs of St. Cloud, Minn.

Well, okay, Epic isn't faster than a speeding bullet. In fact, according to Jesse Arndt, Epic's sales and marketing manager, the lab, which processes some 110 to 115 jobs a day, actually runs more slowly than most other wholesale laboratories. That's because the equipment used there is older than the machines found in today's average lab.

The use of older equipment is by design, Arndt explains. "We can control the speed and stroke better that way," he says. "New equipment is designed for higher-speed, high-production environments. It's not designed to handle our type of jobs."

A LITTLE INGENUITY REQUIRED

Epic could be described as Slab-Off Central, but the lab also processes a lot of jobs that most ECPs will see perhaps once in an entire career. "About 65 to 70 percent of our work is slab-offs," Arndt says. "The rest is made up of high-minuses, cataract-type Rx's, prism, cylinder in the -17.00D range, front-side cylinder, dive masks, telescope lenses for dentists, and lenses that have to be custom-designed in our lab." Epic takes the work in from other wholesale labs, acting as a sub-contractor for the headache jobs. "Consequently, we may process only one lens for a job, and we may never learn why the special lenses are required," he adds.

The weirdest job the lab has processed were a couple of extremely high-minus lenses: around -48.00D. "We had to get clever to make them work," Arndt recalls. "We ran them as double myodiscs." Each lens was processed on one side, then flipped and processed again as a separate lens on the reverse side to achieve the prescription.

For extremely high prescriptions, Epic often has to make its own base curves, for both the front and the back of the lenses, Arndt says. "We do an awful lot of that type of high minus," he adds. "For example, a -5.00D BC in polycarbonate isn't unusual for us."

The staff has to put on their thinking caps for other types of jobs as well. Some low vision clinics require things such as 15.00D to 20.00D of prism — but on only one part of the lens. (Designs like this one would be used for patients with visual field problems.) The wholesale laboratory that takes the order turns to Epic for help.

"We really need to wrap our brains around some of these jobs," Arndt admits. "We have to figure out, first of all, can it be done, and if so, the best way to do it — and make it look nice," he points out. "We offer a lot of consulting about what's possible, the cosmetics of a given job, plus guidelines and physical limitations."

Cosmetics are important. So is utility. After all, if making a lens is physically possible but the patient can't wear it, producing it is pointless. "From a physical standpoint, for example, we can produce a lens with 60.00D prism, but you wouldn't be able to mount the lens in a frame and have a patient wear it if the prism thickness will hit the patient in the

eye," he says.

For a job with 60.00D of prism in the upper temporal area only, for example, Epic makes a lenticular carrier just for the prism area, with a carrier for the rest of the lens area.

ASSUMING THE BURDEN SO OTHER LABS DON'T HAVE TO

With all these oddball jobs going through the lab, it's no wonder that Epic experiences a breakage rate much higher than other labs do — between 5 and 11 percent. But because Epic assumes this burden, wholesale labs that send their work there come out ahead because they don't have to worry about redoing expensive, tricky jobs that will eat into their profits.

"Some other labs that do specialty jobs also do typical surfacing and finishing work," Arndt says. "But we don't do any 'regular' jobs. They slow us down because we're not set up for them."

He says that Epic gets more breakage when running, say, a pair of -0.50D spheres for an employee than when producing the usual tricky jobs. "We somehow manage to complicate the simple stuff," he says with a laugh.

Part of Epic's secret for success is the fact that it is still a relatively small lab, with only 22 employees, including owners Ron and Brian Stene. The lab opened in 1992, when the original owners, Ron Stene and Jim Josephs, started it in a modest space with just a few employees. The idea was obviously a good one, and Epic has grown over the years, expanding to a larger space and increasing staff. When Josephs, who is a recipient of this year's Optical Pioneers Award, retired, Ron Stene's son Brian stepped in to take his place.

"We've always taken in the stuff that other labs don't want to do or don't have time to handle," Arndt says. He himself has been with the company since 1998, when he was a college student working there part time. After graduation, he stayed on and went full time.

A SECRET STASH

Aside from processing difficult jobs, Epic also is the "lab of last resort" for lenses that have gone out of production. When a manufacturer discontinues certain lenses, Epic stocks up on the remainder of the inventory. So if you're desperate for a SmartSeg or a certain old glass lens style, Epic is likely to have a stash of them in a back storage area.

But when it's not possible to provide the original old lens, Epic can usually make a remarkable stunt double. "We duplicate Overviews," Arndt says, referring to the progressive lenses with upper adds. "We make them by laminating the add and making it in the shape requested by the lab."

Many people are used to old-style lenses and don't want to give them up, so Epic is called on to duplicate the ones that are no longer available from the manufacturer. Of course, when certain lenses aren't available any longer, that's not necessarily a bad thing, Arndt points out. "There's a reason some of that old stuff was discontinued," he says. "But some people are stuck on them. And that's where we come in."

He says that the staff can be extremely clever when it comes to making lenses, but they're also very careful, especially when they're creating glass lenses. "We don't want to endanger someone by putting little pieces of glass together," he stresses. Nonetheless, Epic is the go-to lab for lenses everyone thought were history. If they don't recreate them, they can probably unearth the originals. "I'm sure if I look through some of our old stock, I could find a lens that was discontinued years ago."

Whether they need an old lens or a tricky job, Epic is the lab other wholesale labs turn to.

"We don't have a cookie-cutter mentality," Arndt points out. "We handle the jobs that hold up production in regular wholesale labs — the ones that require special tooling and don't fit into their work flow. We're still a relatively small company compared to other labs, and we like it that way. We don't want to be a big corporate entity," he adds. "We want to be able to maintain control. If we were to adopt a high-speed, high-production mentality, it would defeat the whole purpose of what we do."

And what they do is provide relief for other labs. "We're here when you need us," Arndt says.

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