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THE 'SPECIALS' LAB NICHE

Specials' labs handle jobs that are out of the ordinary. **Jesse Arndt** talks about how Epic Labs sought partnerships with wholesale labs and became successful doing this kind of work.

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The scenario happens time and time again in the optical laboratory. That clunker of a job that just won't go through the lab has broken again. Although the thought of tossing an old job like this out the window seems appealing, the reality is that that job needs to go out like all the others. Inevitably there is a patient at the end of the line relying on you to make this one work and you simply have to get it done.

The Problem

Lab managers across the country in labs both big and small have been battling this for years. What's the best way to handle the jobs that simply don't go with the flow? How can you satisfy one account without delaying jobs for another? With more emphasis being placed on efficiency and streamlined production, the dilemma seems to be getting more complex all the time.

The Solution

An increasingly popular option for wholesale lab managers is to subcontract difficult or specialty work to labs which are specifically designed for handling these kinds of jobs. Allowing a "specials" lab to focus on the 1% to 2% of the most difficult work enables the wholesale lab to run at maximum efficiency and puts the difficult orders squarely in the hands of those who do it best.

An Example

One such lab is Epic Labs, Inc. in Waite Park, MN. Founders Ron Stene and Jim Josephs recognized that as wholesale labs were focusing more and more on high speed production and efficiency, specialty work often became the "clog in the drain."

They set out to build partnerships with labs looking to outsource this type of work and opened Epic Labs in 1992. In addition, their idea was to hire the most skilled technicians available to ensure quality, specialty work and to operate as a non-competitive, non-affiliated entity. Stene and Josephs' vision also was to establish a place where creative thinking and experimentation by employees was encouraged.

Processing Unconventional Jobs

For Stene and Josephs, trying new surfacing techniques or using non-conventional supplies was the best means of finding the correct way to process jobs that were very unconventional. Providing customers with technical advice was also a top priority. The vision was not only to be a place where special jobs were processed but also where special jobs were discussed and thought through with direct input from the customer.

The response was underwhelming at best at the beginning. A brand new, start-up lab doing nothing but the most difficult work was a tough sell. However, as time passed and as more and more labs saw the benefits of the partnership, Epic grew and the general idea of subcontracting work to outside sources became more popular. Wholesale labs saw the direct value in reduced breakage, increased efficiency, and an expanded product base. Epic has maintained its original philosophies and operates today as it did in 1992.

Interesting Jobs

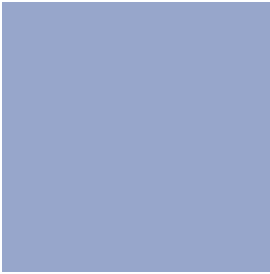
During its 15 years of operation, Epic has seen some of the most interesting Rx's the industry has to offer. Some of the most intriguing include -48.00 double myodiscs, 18.00D of cylinder, and trifocal slab-offs with lines on both the intermediate and near segments.

But perhaps the most exciting jobs that come through Epic's doors are the increasingly popular multicomponent laminate jobs. Epic gets frequent requests, for example, to put prism in the bifocal area only of a flat-top segment.

By custom-making small flat-top segments with three or more diopters of prism and laminating them to a single vision lens with no prism, it's now possible to create a lens that has zero prism in the distance and base in prism at near. The same techniques can be used to make add powers that are not readily available from a lens manufacturer. Producing a custommade flat-top 28 with a +12.00D add power, for instance, is suddenly doable.

In the end, that job that was once destined for the window does have a place in the industry. So before that job ends up on the sidewalk below, consider a specials lab. It may be exactly what the doctor ordered.

Jesse Arndt is Sales and Marketing Manager at Epic Labs.



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