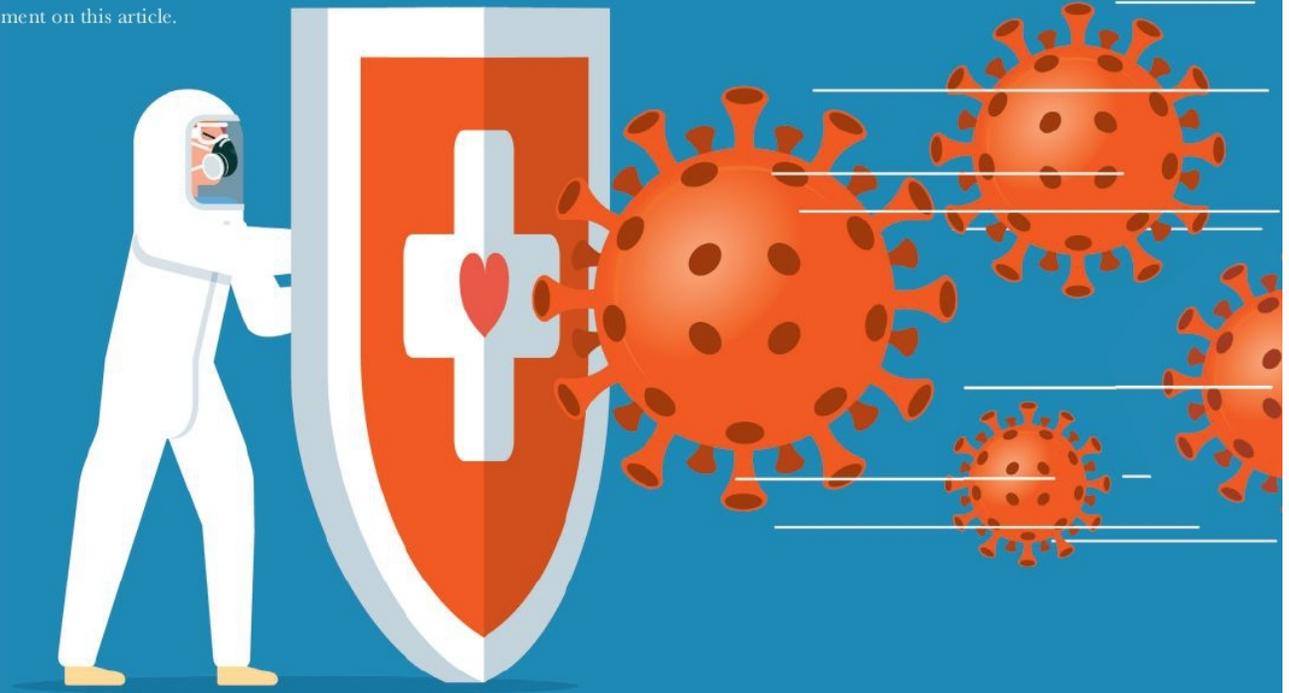


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Making Difficult Decisions in the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Two Labs Share Their Insights on
Staying Open, Staying Positive and
Preparing for Recovery*

BY JULIE BOS

2020: "THE YEAR OF CLEAR VISION." HAS THERE EVER BEEN A MORE PERFECT METAPHOR FOR WHAT SO MANY PEOPLE HOPED THIS YEAR WOULD BRING? IT CERTAINLY RESONATED WITH OPTICAL LABS, WHO COULD APPRECIATE THE CATCHY YEAR-LONG FOCUS ON THE EYECARE INDUSTRY.

Then, less than two months into the year, the COVID-19 pandemic began, disrupting business—and the world—as we know it. Every business was hit in one way or another. And,

for many, "normal" will never be the same.

But how, exactly, has the COVID-19 pandemic affected optical labs across the nation? How are they coping—and what's changed? More importantly, how do they view the future, and what steps are they taking today to plan for business recovery?

To shed some light, we connected with two optical labs—Classic Optical and Precision Optical Group—to learn what's happening now and what's ahead. Their leaders share insights that may provide helpful guidance for your lab going forward.

**CLASSIC OPTICAL, YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO—
DAWN FRIEDKIN, PRESIDENT**

How is your lab coping with the pandemic?

The Classic Optical team has rallied together to support each other at this difficult time. Our priority remains taking the necessary precautions at the facility to ensure the safety of our

team. Then we try to stay positive, keeping sight of the big picture by focusing on our long-term goals for 2020 and 2021, and what we need to do to ensure the success of our customers.

Fortunately, we were deemed “essential” by the Ohio governor’s office early on because we supply eyeglasses to more than 30 state Medicaid programs and several online eyeglass companies. Without us, most of these programs would be shut down.



Early implementation of business continuity plans, fast deployment of technology needed for remote work and procurement of essential sanitation and safety supplies enabled us to maintain our operations with no interruption.

How did COVID-19 impact lens processing at your lab?

We have remained fully operational, running a scaled-down operation, at about 25 percent of our normal volume, to ensure we can meet the needs of our customers. In addition to manufacturing 1,500 to 2,000 pairs of eyeglasses a day, during this time we

have dedicated our lab resources to focusing on training, 5S, Lean and continuous improvement projects, preventative maintenance, and deep cleaning.

Our customer-facing team has been hard at work on several new large customer launches, supported by our IT team. Our finance and HR teams pivoted to support our new COVID-19 world with all the new and unexpected changes and constraints.

What business decisions have you made?

Given our direct relationship with partners in first-affected countries, we had an inside view of the pandemic’s impact on business operations as far back as January. These insights allowed us to prepare and take actions well ahead of domestic government mandates.

By the end of February, we banned non-essential travel, developed a plan to employ physical distancing at the facility, and began working on acquiring thermometers, additional cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) for the safety of our team as well as the necessary technology to enable remote working.

Starting in March, we quickly employed enhanced sanitation measures throughout our 40,000-square-foot facility, implemented temperature checks for all onsite workers and essential visiting vendors, provided masks and gloves to onsite employees and began producing our own hand-sanitizer to augment the limited supply available commercially.

Most of our non-manufacturing personnel began to work remotely, enabling us to reduce the number of team members on site. As order volume decreased, we made the difficult decision to furlough some of our Classic team, offering two weeks of emergency paid time off and a continuation of benefits for three months. We look forward to welcoming our entire team back soon.

Our customer experience team continues to staff phones from morning to night and we use e-mail, our website and social media to reach our broader audience. As a government contractor and direct supplier to many health plans, we’re in constant contact with these partners. They are grateful that we have maintained our ability to continue to manufacture and deliver eyeglasses to their members.



Dawn Friedkin, President of Classic Optical in Youngstown, Ohio.

How are you managing staff?

We are blessed with a great team and their safety is our first priority. As long as we can keep a safe work environment, our approach is to work for as long as we have orders coming in or have critical projects to implement.

Classic's senior team meets multiple times a week to check in and plan. Some of us are remote and others on site, but we always meet virtually to ensure physical distancing. These regular check-ins help us stay focused and calm. We also try to employ some levity, when possible—always looking for one of the team members to make us laugh. Together, we have developed strategies that balance the needs of our customers with the safety of our team.

PRECISION OPTICAL GROUP, CRESTON, IOWA—MIKE TAMERIUS, CEO

How is your lab coping with the pandemic?

We've been fortunate to have remained open during this difficult period. The State of Iowa Workforce Development Department quickly developed a partial unemployment option that has allowed us to maintain our workforce while we reduced hours by nearly 50 percent. Our employees are being made whole by the State of Iowa, and we are able to work them the required hours to continue to service our remaining customers. Our locations in Chicago and Texas have been forced to just lay off workers, as neither Texas nor Illinois allow for partial unemployment during this outbreak. We have also split up the workday to allow us to operate with as few employees as possible in the buildings at one time. The last and most important element of our plan has been to keep the workplace clean and the atmosphere upbeat and positive. It would be very easy to fall into a dark spot during these times, but we want to be a bright spot for our customers and workers.

How did COVID-19 impact lens processing at your lab?

We are running at around 25% of our

normal volume, which seems to be in line with the reported 75 to 80 percent of ECP locations that are closed. We have been able to add a few customers, temporarily, as other labs around the country shut down completely. It's very hard to do, but we are encouraging those customers to return to their previous supplier once they open back up.

What business decisions have you made?

We are fortunate to have worked with the same group of bankers for over 25 years, so it didn't take long to develop a financial strategy to maintain our businesses during this period. There are many advantages to small-town Iowa living and none more than being able to work with people you know and trust. All of our sales force is currently working with their customers that have remained open to ensure that we have the best plan to help them remain open and safe. It's really amazing to see everyone just "roll up their sleeves" and work through the current reality. Yes, everyone is worried about many things, but the conversations I'm having with customers around the country are upbeat and positive.

How are you managing your staff?

This is a very stressful time for all of us, but our team members have been exceptional. We have asked our team for suggestions about safety measures they would like to see, and have made certain that they feel



Mike Tamerius, CEO of Precision Optical Group in Creston, Iowa.

comfortable being at work and not feeling like they are exposed to danger.

Are you still receiving orders?

Yes, we have been receiving orders and producing them daily. We have many accounts that are open for limited hours, so we have modified shipping methods and days, but for the most part, it's business as usual.

What's your general "game plan" for recovery?

We plan to bring our lab back up gradually as order volume starts to increase. Again, we are very fortunate that the State of Iowa has a system in place that will allow us to raise the number of work hours from 20 to 40 on a gradual basis while each employee's total compensation remains whole. Our Chicago and Texas locations will be brought back up by returning a portion of the furloughed employees each day and/or week as needed.

How are you remaining optimistic?

This has been a struggle—with a lot of sleepless nights—but just like any challenge in life, we are committed to meeting it head-on. I really believe that any successful business owner thrives on challenge and overcoming problems. This is a big one, for sure, but we've taken the attitude that now is the time to develop those new processes and procedures and to find ways to make improvements and stay focused on the core values of our business. We're focused on what we can do today to improve the quality of the product, the delivery of that product to our customers and how we can drive costs from our process. Our team members work here because they enjoy the challenge of getting better every day. Our management team has been focused on keeping the same attitude, while focusing on our mission statement, as we always do. We are planning for an exceptionally busy third and fourth quarter, so that's our daily focus right now.

Editor's Note: This article was written before many states had lifted stay-at-home restrictions. Some content may have changed, based on labs returning to work.