

Looking thru the Lens at Optometrists



*A closer look at the current world of
Optometry*

Market Highlight Report, Winter 2011

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General Overview

Optometrists, also known as doctors of optometry, or ODs, are the main providers of vision care. They examine people's eyes to diagnose vision problems, such as nearsightedness and farsightedness, and they test patients' depth and color perception and ability to focus and coordinate the eyes. Optometrists may prescribe eyeglasses or contact lenses, or they may provide other treatments, such as vision therapy or low-vision rehabilitation. They also test for glaucoma and other eye diseases and diagnose conditions caused by systemic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, referring patients to other health practitioners as needed.

Although most work in a general practice as a primary care optometrist, some optometrists prefer to specialize in a particular field, such as contact lenses, geriatrics, pediatrics, or vision therapy. As a result, an increasing number of optometrists are forming group practices in which each group member specializes in a specific area while still remaining a full scope practitioner.

Most optometrists are private practitioners who also handle the business aspects of running an office, such as developing a patient base, hiring employees, keeping paper and electronic records, and ordering equipment and supplies. Optometrists who operate franchise optical stores also may have some of these duties.

Education and Training

Optometrists need a Doctor of Optometry degree, which requires the completion of a 4-year program at an accredited school of optometry. Requirements for admission to optometry schools include college courses in English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. Because a strong background in science is important, many applicants to optometry school major in a science, such as biology or chemistry, as undergraduates.

Admission to optometry school is competitive; about 1 in 3 applicants was accepted in 2007. All applicants must take the Optometry Admissions Test (OAT), a standardized exam which measures academic ability and scientific comprehension. The OAT consists of four tests: survey of the natural sciences, such as biology, general chemistry, and organic chemistry; reading comprehension; physics; and quantitative reasoning.

Optometry programs include classroom and laboratory study of health and visual sciences and clinical training in the diagnosis and treatment of eye disorders. Courses in pharmacology, optics, vision science, biochemistry, and systemic diseases are included.

One-year postgraduate clinical residency programs are available for optometrists who wish to obtain advanced clinical competence within a particular area of optometry. Specialty areas for residency programs include family practice optometry, pediatric optometry, geriatric optometry, vision therapy and rehabilitation, low-vision rehabilitation, cornea and contact lenses, refractive and ocular surgery, primary eye care optometry, and ocular disease.

Licensing

All States and the District of Columbia require that optometrists be licensed. Applicants for a license must have a Doctor of Optometry degree from an accredited optometry school and must pass both a written National Board examination and a National, regional, or State clinical examination. The written and clinical examinations of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry usually are taken during the student's academic career. Many States also require applicants to pass an examination on relevant State laws. Licenses must be renewed every 1 to 3 years and, in all States, continuing education credits are needed for renewal.

Job Growth

Employment of optometrists is projected to grow 24 percent between 2008 and 2018. A growing population that recognizes the importance of good eye care will increase demand for optometrists. Also, an increasing number of health insurance plans that include vision care should generate more job growth. As the population ages, there will likely be more visits to optometrists and ophthalmologists because of the onset of vision problems that occur at older ages, such as cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration. In addition, increased incidences of diabetes and hypertension in the general population as well as in the elderly will generate greater demand for optometric services as these diseases often affect eyesight. Employment of optometrists would grow more rapidly if not for productivity gains expected to allow each optometrist to see more patients. These expected gains stem from greater use of optometric assistants and other support personnel, who can reduce the amount of time optometrists need with each patient. The increasing popularity of laser surgery to correct some vision problems was previously thought to have an adverse effect on the demand for optometrists as patients often do not require eyeglasses afterward. However, optometrists will still be needed to provide preoperative and postoperative care for laser surgery patients, therefore laser eye surgery will likely have little to no impact on the employment of optometrists.

Optometrists in Today's Economy

Excellent job opportunities are expected over the next decade because there are only 19 schools of optometry in the United States, resulting in a limited number of graduates—about 1,200—each year. This number is not expected to keep pace with demand. However, admission to optometry school is competitive.

In addition to job growth, the need to replace optometrists who retire will also create many employment opportunities. According to the American Optometric Association, nearly one-quarter of practicing optometrists are approaching retirement age. As they begin to retire, many opportunities will arise, particularly in individual and group practices.

Source: Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 14 November 2010 <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos073.htm>>.

Salaries for Optometrists

1-4 years of experience earn:	\$70K – \$94K
5-9 years of experience earn:	\$80K – \$105K
10-19 years of experience earn:	\$80K - \$119K
20+ years of experience:	\$88K – \$122K

- Optometrists who are self-employed earn approximately \$73K-\$120K annually.
- Optometrists who work in the non-profit sector earn approximately \$84K-\$109K annually.
- Optometrists in New York, California, Ohio and Illinois are generally the highest paid.

Source: Payscale.com. 14 November 2010. Payscale.com. 14 November 2010.
<<http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=optometrist/Salary>>.

Key Issues

Health Care Reform and Optometry

Reform of the American health care system may at once represent both the greatest opportunity and the greatest challenge in the history of optometry.

Designed to guarantee health care access for all Americans, as well as place new emphasis on primary and preventive care, the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) includes numerous American Optometric Association-backed provisions that are intended to facilitate access to a full scope of eye and vision care through optometric practice. Over time, the AOA and its affiliated state optometric associations will be called on to play an active role in shaping the rules and regulations that will guide administrators in implementing the health care reforms.

In addition to authorizing new insurance programs for up to 32 million currently uninsured Americans, the reform legislation incorporates landmark federal provider non-discrimination provisions that will guarantee access to care by optometrists under all federally regulated health insurance programs — including federal employee plans, employer-based plans organized under the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) and a new insurance plan created under the reform bill. ERISA plans alone provide coverage for 73 million Americans, or about 55% of U.S. workers, who receive insurance coverage through their employers. Arbitrary exclusion from ERISA plans has long been a problem for optometrists and it seems, at least in the short term, that now optometrists will benefit from total inclusion.

However, health care reforms will be implemented at both the federal and state level, creating a dual challenge. Many important decisions related to health care reform will effectively be made in state legislatures or by state government administrators around the nation. For example, new health plan options authorized under the reform legislation will be made available through a new system of state-based health insurance exchanges.

So, the good news is there is no national health insurance exchange that might discriminate against optometrists. The bad news is there will be 50 state exchanges that could potentially discriminate against optometrists.

Source: "Reform may pose optometry's greatest opportunity, challenge." [Newsfromaoa.com](http://newsfromaoa.com). 5 August 2010. 22 November 2010. <http://newsfromaoa.org/2010/08/05/reform-may-pose-optometry%E2%80%99s-greatest-opportunity-challenge/>.

How Insurance Professionals Can Support the Market

Find out which optometric associations are most active in your local area and get to know the leaders of the organization. If you are fortunate to live near one of the nation's 19 schools of optometry in the United States, make a point to get to know the faculty and get involved in the activities on campus, such as hosting a congratulatory gathering for graduating optometrists.

Because licensed optometrists need to renew their credentials every 1 – 3 years, there maybe opportunities for sponsoring a coffee/bagel service at a testing site.

There are many non-profits that promote healthy eye care. Find out which ones are active in your area and get involved. One international charity that many optometric professionals are involved in is <http://www.givingsight.org>.

Pay attention to which pharmaceutical companies are serving the market with highly respected products. Identify who some of the leading representatives are for these companies and ask them about their most cost-effective methods for building solid relationships with optometrists.

Networking with Optometrists

A leading networking tool used amongst many optometrists is the Optometrists Network, which began in 1996. It interconnects patient education and optometrists abroad. While it does serve to help those unfamiliar with optometry, there is also a large database that helps patients find local optometrists near their local area. Their automated system has helped them serve millions, and has also serviced more than 1200 free referrals weekly.

For more information, visit: <http://www.optometrists.org/>.

National Associations

In addition to the National-level associations below, most states have active local organizations that are separate all-together or may be an offshoot of a National organization. Check your local internet browser listing for more localized information.

American Optometric Association

<http://www.aoa.org/>

The AOA represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and Para optometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States

Together, the AOA and its affiliates work to provide the public with quality vision and eye care. Through offices in St. Louis, Missouri, and metropolitan Washington, D.C., the AOA:

- Sets professional standards, helping its members conduct patient care efficiently and effectively
- Lobbies government and other organizations on behalf of the optometric profession
- Provides research and education leadership

The website has a wealth of information, including the Optometry Career Center.

To network with the AOA, contact:

American Optometric Association

243 N. Lindbergh Blvd.

St. Louis, MO 63141

(800) 365-2219

National Optometric Association

<http://www.natoptassoc.org/>

The National Optometric Association (NOA) was founded in 1969 in Richmond, Virginia. The recruitment of minority students for the schools and colleges of optometry and their placement into appropriate practice settings upon graduation are two basic concerns of the Association. Coincident with these concerns is the underlying purpose of the NOA -- the delivery of effective and efficient eye and vision care services to the minority community.

The NOA directed much of its early activity to increasing the number of minority optometrists available to deliver eye and vision care services to residents of urban and minority communities. The NOA was assisted through federal grant support and through the establishment of working relationships with the schools and colleges of optometry. As the number of minority students, minority graduates and practicing minority optometrists increased, the NOA started to direct more of its attention towards ways of enhancing the delivery, effectiveness and efficiency of eye and vision care services in communities with little or no eyecare presence.

National Optometric Association

P.O Box 198959

Chicago, Illinois 60619-8959

Toll Free (877) 394-2020

Fax (773) 721-7351

Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO)

www.opted.org

ASCO is committed to achieving excellence in optometric education and to helping its member schools prepare well-qualified graduates for entrance into the profession of optometry. ASCO's membership encompasses the schools and colleges of optometry in the United States and Puerto Rico. A number of foreign optometry schools are affiliate members.

Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry

6110 Executive Blvd, Suite 420, Rockville, MD 20852

Tel: (301) 231-5944

Fax: (301) 770-1828

National Association of VA Optometrists

<http://www.navao.org/>

The National Association of VA Optometrists (NAVAO) is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1977. The objectives of the NAVAO are to encourage and promote the best possible primary eye and vision care for our nation's veterans and to promote the education, training, professional growth, and welfare of optometric staff, residents, and students. Any VA staff, attending, consultant, or resident optometrist, or any other optometrist having an interest in VA optometry is eligible for membership.

For more information on how best to network with the NDAA, please contact:

Membership Questions:

Contact Dr. Katherine Wang, Membership Director, at katherine.wang@navao.org.

All other concerns and general questions:

Please send an email to info@navao.org.

Learn more about Association marketing by reading [About Association Marketing](#) which includes tips for vetting an association, becoming a resource, and surveys for the association leadership and members.

Marketing Checklist

- Narrow niches within the market to a reasonable size and scope.
- Visit websites and flag the best ones for ongoing reference.
- “Follow” companies, associations or groups of interest on LinkedIn.com and join market-related groups.
- Note names of at least 15 individuals that would be good Centers of Influence in the market. Aim to target faculty at a teaching organization if possible.
- Conduct informational interviews and/or networking appointments
 - with potential strategic alliances also active in the market.
 - ask for “personal introductions” to others in the market.
- Subscribe to market-related blogs and magazines, note calendar dates, editors names and sponsorship or advertising opportunities.
- Determine which association(s) is most worthwhile and attend networking events; obtain meeting with Association Director and be sure to “ask” more rather than “tell.”
- Determine a Unique Value Statement that appeals to the market and sets you apart from the competition.
- Announce your presence in the market through social media, letters, ads, and press releases.
- Obtain membership lists for cultivation and look into targeted list buying if needed.
- Organize a mix of cultivation pieces. For ex., avoid sending all email or all snail mail. Aim for a minimum of six to twelve touch-points per year.
- Explore what types of seminar topics and/or guest speakers are of interest to this market.
- Contact local business journals and find out if they plan on dedicating a special issue to the market where you can advertise and/or get an article published.

SAMPLE One Page 90-Day Strategic Planning Template
Target Market Focus: Optometrists in (Region)

Three Year Vision: 30 Optometrist clients in database; Receive X number of leads per mo.; Conduct min. of 2 Workshops per year and 3 C of I Appreciation Events

One Year Vision: 10 new Optometrist clients in database with a min. of 3 who will provide ongoing introductions

90 Day Objectives/Tactics	Challenges	Action Items	Person	Date
1. Continue Research & Build Top 15 List		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Obtain local research & dig deep into links in report; - define profile of best client. - Identify 5 C of I's or faculty who work w/ Optometrists - Drill down to find out more about individuals and create a file. - Determine which associations to join or volunteer - Become active on LinkedIn.com. - Ask for introductions 		
2. Create Unique Value Proposition and Brand Statement		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Find out needs/wants - Come up with unique characteristics of product line and hone approach - Create brand statement; get approved by Compliance - Test out w/ Advisors 		
3. Build Cultivation Program		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vet communication materials - Select best approved pieces (2 or 3) - Create Approach letter - Get approved - Set up first mailing program 		
4. Conduct 5 Center of Influence Surveys; goal is min. of 5 per month.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modify interview as appropriate - Send hand written thank you's & follow up on any tasks/requests - Get responses from surveys into database - Schedule more appts. 		
5. Set up database/admin. needs		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make sure database can manage cultivation process for follow up, etc. 		