

Optician offers much more than just a name change

It's Your Northville Chamber Business

August 5, 2010

Tell us about [your business](#), including types of services and/or products you feature.

We're a full-scope optometry practice and eyewear boutique. That means we offer our patients complete vision care for life, including expert eye exams; contact lens fittings; glaucoma, cataract and macular degeneration diagnosis and treatment; dry eye treatment and diabetes-related vision health monitoring. However, unlike many optometrists, we also provide an unusually large selection of hand-picked eyeglass frames and sunglasses -- more than 700 models currently. We are extremely selective about the eyewear we carry. We deliberately choose boutique brands that exhibit exceptional quality and styling -- brands like Sama, Badgley Mischka, Chrome Hearts, TAG Heuer and Lafont. Each frame is selected to meet different style niches within our client base -- from classic and sophisticated, to edgy, funky, retro or trendy. We also specialize in rimless, drill-mount eyewear, which requires an extra level of skill to fit and produce.

How did you first decide to open your business?

Optometry was not my first career. I was an engineer in the [automotive industry](#) for over six years, and I decided to make a career change because I wanted to not only operate my own business, but help people. So I went back to school for my Doctor of Optometry. I never could envision myself working for a chain, which eventually led me to go into private practice. I purchased Urban Optiques (formerly Urban Optiks) in November of last year. My vision for Urban Optiques was to create an environment that made it fun to go to the eye doctor and pick out frames or sunglasses. Urban Optiks was already halfway there -- the space was funky and interesting and the location was amazing -- so it was a natural choice for me.

Why did you choose this area?

I chose Northville for several reasons. First, it's very

central to the west side of Metro-Detroit. So, I knew I could draw clients from as far west as Ann Arbor and as far east as Southfield and Bloomfield Hills. We also wanted to be in a downtown shopping district and not off in a suburban strip mall or medical center. Because of our emphasis on eyewear product as well as complete vision health care, we operate very much like a retail store, so being located in an area with strong foot traffic was important to us. The town is also extremely supportive of local, [small businesses](#).

What makes your business unique?

Hands down, it's the eyewear product combined with the environment and our focus on high-touch client service and expert vision care. I typically spend at least 30-45 minutes with each patient during the exam, which is very different from the 15-minute quickie exams you experience at most vision chains or discounters. It really takes that amount of time to perform a thorough exam, and I'm adamant that we don't overbook to avoid having to cut into that important exam time. Our opticians will also frequently spend upwards of an hour with our clients helping them choose their eyewear. That's very unusual in this business.

Finally, a little known secret is that we actually sell a sizeable amount of our eyewear outside of Michigan to clients in New York City, L.A., Miami and even Europe. We carry extremely high quality eyewear that people can't easily find and purchase, so our clientele extends far beyond Northville. This lets us bring in newer, edgier eyewear models before other

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The advertisement features the USA TODAY logo at the top left. Below it, the word "AutoPilot" is written in a large, bold, black font, with a blue airplane icon to its right. Underneath, a smartphone screen displays the app's interface, showing flight information for a "USA TODAY Meeting" on 09/21/2009, including flight numbers (A6, 73), destinations (BNA to IAD, Washington), and weather conditions. To the right of the phone, the text reads "The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®". Below this, it says "Presented by: Hampton" with the Hampton logo. At the bottom right, a blue box contains the text "SEE HOW IT WORKS »".

retailers in Metro-Detroit because our mail order business can support the inventory while it catches on locally. I'm not sure there is a single eyewear boutique in metro Detroit that can do that right now.

How has it changed since you opened?

We've made a lot of improvements to the client service side of the business. We also completely refreshed the product. Eighty-five percent of the eyewear is now from new, current collections, and we've made significant investments in expanding our high-end lines like FRED, Badgley Mischka, Lorie Rodkin and Chrome Hearts. We also introduced the new Modo ECO line, which is made completely of recycled materials, as well as Sama Eyewear, which is a gorgeous couture line for men and women produced in L.A. that is doing extremely well for us. There were also a number of physical improvements to the store, including remodeling the bathrooms, installing new floors and creating a private fitting room for our clients.

Do you have a funny tidbit or story about your experience as a **small business owner** to share with our readers?

We just were featured as a source on trends in eyewear in Women's Wear Daily, which is the New York Times of the fashion industry. The fashion writer found us on Twitter, read an article we wrote on our blog about the trend toward 24-karat gold lensed-sunglasses and then called the store for an interview. The next thing we know, we're part of a full-page article in the world's leading fashion daily. It really underscored for us how powerful the Internet has become, and how even small **businesses** like Urban Optiques can have global reach and influence. Just a few years ago, getting that kind of coverage would have been unthinkable.

How has the recent economy affected your business?

It may be surprising, but we've actually experienced triple digit sales growth in 2010. Part of this is because we do a brisk mail order business outside of Michigan, which can offset some of the challenges in the local economy. Another reason is that we ignored all of the industry pundits and other optical professionals who were advising eyecare professionals to downgrade their eyewear and offer more cheap, made-in-China product because of the

recession. We did the exact opposite and dramatically expanded our high-end collections. This actually helped us, because it turns out that there are a lot of people who want high-quality eyewear and are still willing to buy it, but simply can't find it locally.

Any advice for business owners?

Understand the Internet and how it can drive your business. Small businesses can't afford to sit on the sidelines when it comes to the Web anymore. We've built not just a local following, but also an international one, in large part because people can easily find us and our products on UrbanOptiques.com. In under nine months we've attracted more than 550 fans on Facebook. You can find us on Twitter, Google, Yahoo and Bing. We offer specials to people who use mobile apps like FourSquare on their iPhones. The Internet allows you to basically be in front of your client, customer or patient at the very moment that they need you. Even better, these customers have a tendency to be very loyal and talk a lot about you, which is great for referrals and word-of-mouth.

What's in store for the future of your business?

We'll continue to expand our eyewear collections and inventory, and will likely bring on two to three new, unique lines in the next year. We're also rotating more new stock in on a weekly basis, so that everything remains fresh. Investing in technology and automation will also be a big focus for us in the coming months. We're looking at

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putting our staff on iPads to improve client service and efficiency and make them more mobile. I would also expect some additional remodeling in the front boutique to freshen things up.



Dr. Michelle Calder Cardwell (right) and office manager Lindse Champine at Urban Optiques, 105 W. Main Street, downtown Northville. (JOHN HEIDER|STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Details

Business Name: Urban Optiques Vision Eyewear
Address: 105 MainCentre, Northville, MI 48167
Your Name/Title: Dr. Michelle Calder Cardwell O.D.
/owner
Your Hometown: Plymouth
Business Opened When: 1995; purchased in November 2009
Number of Employees: five
Hours of Operation: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday and Friday; 11-7 Tuesday; 9-1 Wednesday; 10-5 Friday; 10-3 Saturday. Appointments are always welcome outside of normal office hours.
Your Business Specialty: total vision care
Phone: (248) 347-9090
Website: www.UrbanOptiques.com
Chamber membership: yes

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Mom Dilemma #36:
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

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where Local moms meet