Imagine for a moment that you live on another planet operating under different principles. Suppose your planet has only 10% of the gravity of Earth and you effortlessly hover from place-to-place. You get your energy from the sun instead of eating. Your culture is so evolved that there is no need for money.

Suddenly, without warning, you find yourself on planet Earth. You step out of your spacecraft and fall abruptly to the ground. “Ouch!” you say, not knowing exactly why you fell. After five hours, you begin to feel lightheaded and are told by Earthlings that you need food. You feel better after eating but are thrown into jail when you cannot pay for the food you ordered. You only tried to go about your business, and now you have sore feet, fatigue from dealing with beings who don’t speak the same language as you, and a stomach ache from eating too much. Nice place to land, this Earth.

Does this sound far-fetched? Ophthalmology practices adding a dispensary have experiences similar to that of the alien. Managers and owners find themselves transported into a position of authority where optical management principles that have never been explained govern the dispensary’s profitability. These managers and owners often hurt the reputation of the practice and may end up owing money instead of experiencing greater profitability because they never understood how to apply the principles that could have helped them operate in accordance with reality instead of against it.

Optical management is set up with laws and principles that are as real as gravity and, if you do not know them, you will painfully discover their effects. Below are guidelines that will help you avoid common pitfalls associated with the realities of operating an on-site dispensary.

**Guideline #1: Sowing and Reaping**

The law of cause and effect is basic. If you overstaff your optical so someone will always be on hand to wait on patients, you most likely will suffer a poor profit margin, and you may even operate at a deficit. If you overspend on frames, you most likely will get calls from creditors, and you may even be placed on C.O.D. because of poor cash flow. The optical quantitative benchmark to keep in mind is that staffing expense plus cost-of-goods ratios should be under 50% of your quarterly operating budget.

What happens when the optician quits or is sick? I recommend investing in quality velvet roping that hooks to brass posts positioned across the entrance to the dispensary with the following sign printed in...
calligraphy on quality paper, “Optical is Temporarily Closed. (NAME OF PRACTICE) apologizes for the inconvenience.”

**Guideline #2: Responsibility with Boundaries**

Problems arise when optical responsibilities are confused with overall practice management. The owner/administrator is responsible for setting performance goals for optical employees. The optician is responsible for achieving optical success. There are many ways to define optical success.

Delivering, with professionalism, a high-quality optical product is a major part of any definition. From a business perspective, dispensary success is often defined as meeting payroll and covering fixed expenses every month, with a reasonable amount left over for the owner. It could also be defined as capturing a certain amount of changed prescriptions from the practice’s daily patient flow.

These are important goals. But the most important goal and the best definition of optical success is to achieve a high ratio of patients who purchase from the optical and who return year after year, convinced they obtain better service and superior products than they could from any other source.

Creating a perception of strong value among patients to get them to come back should be the primary responsibility of every optical employee. But, sadly, it is not always so. Why is loyalty in the optical so important? In every business, loyal customers invariably create the most profitability.

The process of engineering optical loyalty is typically broken down into three areas: setting, employees, and process.

Here are a few suggestions to begin the process of creating a standard protocol that can be handled by optical employees:

- The optical area has attractive, well-organized displays of eyeglass frames and sunglasses. Displays appear up-to-the-minute with a large number of new styles. Product mix is weighted to the highest quality, highest performance merchandise.
- Frame stylists are totally knowledgeable about available frame and spectacle lens options and are experts at selecting frames to complement personal appearance. Opticians anticipate patient desires for frame styles based on past purchases, personal appearance, preferences expressed, and facial characteristics. They guide patients to decisions without pressure. Suggestions about styles assume patients want the best, not the cheapest. No impatience or disapproval is ever conveyed.
- Price and the limitations of vision plan coverage are mentioned only after product choice is made or at the request of the patient.
- Patients are given an unexpected gift with their purchase (high-quality spectacles case, lens-cleaning materials, high-quality contact lens travel case, etc.)
- Do not expect your optician to know how to manage a profitable optical that excels in excellent customer service. The formal training of most opticians is heavily concerned with the functional, rational aspects of optics and much of their daily focus is on technical process.

Patients usually view the optical experience from a different perspective. Consumer research studies consistently show that patients usually take for granted the functional benefits of good acuity as commodities available from many sources. The purely functional side of dispensing seldom differentiates one provider from another and is usually the least memorable part of an office visit. Patients can seldom assess the optical benefits of one spectacle lens technology over another in rational, objective ways because they lack the knowledge to do so.

This does not mean that the functional aspects of optics are unimportant; it means that functional efficiency and effectiveness are not the main determinants of patient satisfaction and loyalty.

When polled and asked to talk about what they like or do not like about their dispensary purchase, patients almost always talk in terms of the emotional. When criticizing their experience, the comments are almost always about lack of personal attention or poor communication.

Every patient wants to be treated as an individual who is the most important patient visiting the optical. Build personal responsibility for customer service into your opticians’ performance improvement plans. Ask them to sow seeds of respect into each optical encounter and reap the rewards.

Remember the story of the alien? The good news is that there are resources available that teach administrators as well as opticians optical management principles and ways. Learn them, practice them, and fight the many battles necessary to internalize dispensing into your practice.

Do so and you’ll find you’ve landed in a potentially rich field. **AE**