

IN FOCUS

Can Acuitis be the Apple of our eyes and ears?

The arrival of optical chain Acuitis on the UK high street raises the stakes as the French company secures investment for a new concept of hearing and vision care stores akin to technology giant Apple. **Joe Ayling** reports

Evolution in the UK optical sector is increasingly driven by external forces. The Danish chain Crosseyes, now with 15 practices in the UK since its arrival in 2015, has focused on clear pricing and in-house design.

John Lewis has also been in on the act, opening optical outlets in four of its locations in a bid to make eye exams part of the department store experience.

Now, French firm Acuitis has launched a practice in London (*Optician* 14.04.17) that flips traditional store layout and product mix on its head.

The practice, employing 13 people across optical and hearing care, opened its doors on March 29 and set out to re-create the Apple store effect for optical retailing.

The open plan shop has a bright airy feel without excessive wall displays, creating more of a gallery effect. From the outside, the Acuitis practice on 18 Tottenham Court Road could be likened to some of the large multiples in the surrounding busy shopping area in London's West End. But the store concept within sets a new standard for modern optical retailing.

During a media launch of the new location, Acuitis UK MD Diane Newman told *Optician*: 'I have desperately wanted to bring this to the UK for a long time. We are a different concept to what's out there at the moment.'

French eyewear artist Frederic Beausoleil has been pivotal to the design of in-house frame collections at affordable prices in the new Acuitis practice.



Frederic Beausoleil and Diane Newman at their Acuitis store in London's West End

FROM FAST FASHION TO SURROUND SOUND

However, the main driver was a focus on audiology, thanks to a funding partnership with hearing aid company Widex which championed integrated hearing glasses.

Indeed, Beausoleil designed the entire Acuitis optical range to be adapted with a sleeve at the end of the arm to fit the Widex hearing aids, giving integrated optical and audiology patients a new level of choice.

To support the new product, a BioFoam hearing test room with padded walls was installed, complete with surround sound speakers to simulate background

demos including the restaurant environment, traffic noise, bird songs and classical music. It means patients who are new to hearing aids will have time to adapt before first entering such environments.

However, potential patients in their 60s were putting off a hearing test for up to a decade, the company has found. Free hearing tests and a new advert on Classic FM was designed to increase footfall and stress that in these 10 years, age-induced deterioration can make matters worse as patients spend years becoming unfamiliar with common background noises.

'It takes people 10 years to admit they have a hearing problem,' said Newman. 'We want to look after

both elements of people's health [vision and hearing].'

Meanwhile, investments have also been made on the eye examination at Acuitis, costing £25 and lasting half an hour. Pre-screening included pachymetry and tonometry using an Essilor Wave Analyser, which was designed to cut down unnecessary referrals.

Next, the practice also has a dark room like no other, with natural light streaming through two glass walls, lifting the mood and revealing real-life targets for patients to look at during the examination on the street outside.

Meanwhile, patient records and images were stored close at hand

using a contactless card supplied on arrival. A separate fitting area on the mezzanine level displayed the French firm's own brand daily disposable contact lenses.

Downstairs, light flooded through the large glass shop front that the premises is fortunate to possess, and window displays were abandoned in favour of a minimalist approach.

Less was also deemed more when it came to internal walls, which were kept free from displays, with rustic tables used instead to display Beausoleil's collection of 100 frames for men and the same number for women – all in four different colours. He has also created a colourful children's range with 'Gommeflex' hinge technology to prevent breakages.

'The diversity of brands doesn't exist but we have a diversity of shape and materials,' Beausoleil told *Optician*.

The in-house Acuitis optical frames were displayed on rustic table tops clearly displaying price tags ranging from £40 to £300 for high end designs, all including lenses.

A range of colours and materials were used throughout the range, including bamboo, horn, titanium, wood, acetate and slate.

Patients buying optical frames were also offered a 50% discount on Acuitis' range of 150 sunglass designs, with 70% redesigned every year. Beausoleil said: 'We are within the fast fashion concept, but with beautiful hand-crafted

manufacturing.'

For £150, patients could select an optical design paying homage to their favourite icon, through Beausoleil's Les Cultissimes collection of frames, recreating designs made famous by the likes of Winston Churchill, Serge Gainsbourg, Marilyn Monroe, and now Steve Jobs. The Les Cultissimes range, complete with artwork, has a dedicated area in each Acuitis practice.

'We always have a corner like this and people love it,' said Beausoleil. 'We want people to understand that a frame on the face contributes to their overall personality.'

A SCALABLE CONCEPT?

The Acuitis London practice has a modern approach to design, technology, fashion and clinical care. But how practical and affordable will it be to replicate this novel practice elsewhere?

Plans were in place for two further Acuitis openings, in Milton Keynes and Oxford this year, while 30-35 UK practices have been pencilled in for the longer term.

Funding and engagement from Widex was a real asset, and new locations would be stationed in city centres to help secure the right kind of open plan real estate.

It means that to compete, optical practices must strive to tick the same boxes, such as providing a freshly brewed coffee to each patient, creating a brighter working environment for the optometrist, insisting on a



Trying on some frames at the first Acuitis UK store opening in March

paperless patient journey, displaying prices clearly and having a logical pricing tier. Just ticking a few of these would be more realistic for multiples with hundreds of stores and smaller independents alike.


Founded in 2010 by father and son Daniel and Jonathan Abittan, Acuitis has 47 stores across France, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Lens and equipment partnerships with Essilor, Nikon and BBGR, and in-house frame design, has afforded re-investment in store environment.

'The reason we can do this is we can make our own glasses,' added

Newman. 'We see this as a new and exciting opportunity that makes consumers fall in love with the products they buy.'

Regardless of how successful this UK venture proves, rival practitioners should be able to cherry pick some inspiration from the new destination.

An initial week of trading had pleased Newman, who added: 'The practice has been busy with passing trade during lunch and with a mix of age groups.'

'A £40 starting point for good quality glasses is tremendous, and some shoppers have liked them so much they buy a few pairs.' 



The store's hearing test room (left), and the wave analyser in use



Beausoleil's Les Cultissimes collection of celebrity-inspired frames