

ONE-TO-ONE: JOSHUA FREILICH



BY JOHN SAILER ON OCTOBER 20, 2017

Joshua Freilich is president of Western Optical Supply, Inc., a design, and manufacturing and distribution corporation, with a 44-year history. Prior to founding Western, he worked for Novamatic Systems and A. Lemay Corp.

JOHN SAILER: What's the company's background?

JOSHUA FREILICH: Western Optical was founded in 1974 before 800 numbers and nationwide UPS delivery existed. Back then the supply business was localized. The sales territory was as far as we were willing to drive, so we covered the entire state of California. Western started by selling and servicing lens finishing labs. We assembled a complete lab for an optician, optometrist or an independent wholesale lab, from various manufacturers. Then, when 800 numbers came in and UPS began delivering nationwide, Western Optical Supply expanded.

My personality drives Western's business style, which means that when someone trusts me to supply them with a product, I want them to know that I have a personal stake in their satisfaction. When we used to install edgers, the best part for me was having a relationship with the client, and it wasn't at all unusual and still isn't unusual for me to give out my personal phone number in case a client has a problem over the weekend.

Western transitioned from distributing edging equipment and supplies into manufacturing when we bought a company called OptiGraphics. This company designed and produced acrylic displays to boldly showcase eyewear. This was back in an era when a dispensing optometrist's eyewear selection was not allowed to be seen from the street.

SAILER: Do you mean that an OD's office would look exclusively like a medical establishment rather than a retail establishment?

FREILICH: Yes, but then that started breaking down due to economic factors. A movement was growing in Los Angeles to actively market the fashion aspect of eyewear with more innovative ways of merchandising. It was a radical change and an entirely new business model.

SAILER: How has Western Optical evolved over the years?

FREILICH: We've intentionally remained small, boutique-ish and focused, whereas our competitors have become mass merchandisers. Western has a loyal following of clients who appreciate the quality and knowledge that goes into everything we design and manufacture. We actually get fan mail!

SAILER: What other changes have you seen over the years?

FREILICH: The transition from glass to plastic was revolutionary. There was much more you could do with

plastic in terms of size and shape that you couldn't do with glass. That gave a big boost to fashion marketing and directly led to selling multiple pairs of eyewear. Then there was another big transition when the chains came along and couldn't hire enough properly trained opticians. Training went from a two-year course to six months. We had to start designing products that compensated for the lack of expertise. In the early '70s, for instance, a dispensary might have only eight pliers and the technician's thumbs. Western actively engineered tools that would ease the skill gap. (See OpticalGuidelines.com.)

SAILER: Can you give examples?

FREILICH: Temple Bending pliers. An old-time optician might scoff and say, "Who would buy this thing? I just use my thumbs." Yet, a day doesn't go by where we don't sell quite a few temple benders.

We encourage an open dialogue with our customers so we can engineer solutions. Our catalog says, "If you have a need for a new style of tool or have an eyewear adjustment challenge you would like us to solve, please contact Western Optical with your comments/suggestions."

When we exhibited at trade shows, people would buy tools and say something like, "There's a new frame out that has a spring hinge that we just can't get a screw into." So, I designed the Spring Hinge Plier Kit, which is sold worldwide. We'd also hear, "There are so many different shapes and sizes of hex nuts and star nuts. How many wrenches are we supposed to have?" So I designed the Universal Nut Grabber. The name gives people a few laughs. Both tools have proved to be enormously successful products.

I'm an inventor, but Western also owns our own plier factory, so when I have an idea for a tool I create an engineering drawing, send it off and a few weeks later I've got a working prototype in my hand. I don't have to have it cleared by corporate, no test marketing. I can rely on my instinct; my experience will tell me if our clients will appreciate it.

SAILER: What other tools resulted from requests from customers?

FREILICH: The Shootout. It's a consistent seller. A buyer for a chain once asked, "Do you have a tool for punching out screws?" You see, existing tools were simply pliers with spikes on the end so you would have to squeeze very hard to hopefully, pop the screw out. The problem was that you were squeezing so hard you had no control. Not only would you punch out the screw, you would split the barrel. It was a mess. To solve that dilemma, we developed The Shootout.

At first it was only a screw punching plier, then clients said, "It would be great if this thing could also flare the end of a screw." So we added more accessories to flare and also round over the end of a cut screw.

A while later, I realized that the problem with screw head slotting files was that it not only put a slot into a damaged screw head but also into the barrel. So, I added a chisel point to use as a component of The Shootout, which re-slots the head of a screw without touching the barrel at all.

Responding to changes in eyewear technology and design is a tremendous factor in creating new designs for pliers. During a trip to the Hong Kong show several years ago, I saw that suddenly compression rimless was out and frames with super large temples were in. Standard double plastic jaw pliers wouldn't work on adjusting those temples and could mar the frame. As a remedy, I designed a line of parallel jaw pliers that work perfectly on larger, thicker material.

You see, Western doesn't put out a product simply as a copy of somebody else's idea. We come up with something nobody else has or we improve on an industry standard.

SAILER: What's next up for you?

FREILICH: I've been at this for over 45 years and it has been a great experience. The next step is for me to step away from the day-to-day operation of the company and spend time developing a new generation of products.

SAILER: What is your personal background?

FREILICH: After graduating from UCLA, I took a job at Novamatic Systems. Novamatic distributed and manufactured bench equipment and imported the world's best pattern maker from Japan. It was so popular that we couldn't keep it in stock. Next, I was offered a job by the A. Lemay Corp., Arthur Lemay's nephew, Emil Santinelli, hired me. He's an unsung hero of the industry.

SAILER: That was Joseph Santinelli's uncle?

FREILICH: Joseph's uncle, right. I worked for Lemay for a number of years. Then came the advent of plastic, and their machine, the Lemay Robot, had a fatal limitation. It couldn't take greater than a 65mm blank, especially if you decentered it more than a few millimeters. Also, it used a belt-driven diamond wheel that would gum up when grinding plastic. Yet, it was revolutionary in its day.

Mr. Santinelli was faced with a decision: to completely retool or retire. He chose retirement.

I ran their West Coast office with hundreds of customers who needed maintenance. As I suddenly needed a job, it was a great opportunity. Literally over a weekend, the company went from Lemay to Western Optical Supply, Inc. I found another edger to sell called EdgeMaster, made on Long Island. I kept the same package of equipment but simply changed the edger and carried on from there.

SAILER: And created your own company to do all this.

FREILICH: Exactly. Then sometime later, I bought the Optigraphics Co., which got us into manufacturing displays. After a while, I tired of shipping eyeglass cases across the country to our warehouse in California so I bought Titan Case Co. in Los Angeles.

SAILER: How is the optical industry different now, and where do you see it headed?

FREILICH: I am only comfortable speaking as a supplier. Back in the day, my competitors were small businesses who shared similar values to my own, providing superior products at a fair price to customers with whom they had a relationship. We all operated on the premise that this is a big country with plenty of room for everybody and that the customer ultimately would decide who succeeded. Now it's radically different. I'm not saying it's bad, it's just not my style.

Having to compete with "big optical" is extremely problematic as we don't share the same values. The small manufacturer/supplier focuses on innovation and personality. By its nature, "big optical" has to be number driven, leaving little cooperation with the competition.

It concerns me that ECPs who support "big optical" are handing over intimate details of their business that ultimately could be used against them. Many are doing it willingly; however, I am concerned how this data could eventually be used. My advice to them is, "Be very aware of who you support economically and who you choose to bring in as part of your outside team to deliver product and services."

The analogy is being put forward that the plight of the independent pharmacist is going to befall the ophthalmic dispenser. I am not so quick to agree. A pharmacy is a very different retail environment than an optical dispensary, and an ECP is uniquely different than a pharmacist. I see room for a thriving independent segment in the optical marketplace.

One of the reasons I stayed in the optical business is that I like the people who practice it. They're "people" people, science-oriented people who are making the world a better place.

It's a great industry, but I see it becoming depersonalized.

SAILER: Is this inevitable, or will we retain pockets of personalization?

FREILICH: We have to accept that the industry is going to reflect American society. With that in mind, you need to know who your customers are. You can't be all things to all people. Focus on who your ideal patients/clients are and then market specifically to them.

SAILER: Where do you see the bright spots?

FREILICH: I've recently seen that the larger exhibitors are taking less floor space at the major trade shows, which opens up space for smaller booths with new innovations. These are mostly frame companies with eco-friendly, customizable frames. Imagination in technology and care about sustainable sources is to be applauded.

On an everyday basis, I know that the majority of people in the industry are enthusiastic to do well in their jobs. We can tell from all the communications we receive that they are hardworking, eager professionals in doctors' offices, optometric schools, wholesale labs and optical dispensaries who deserve respect for practicing a worthy craft. I've spent 44 years making that respect our priority at [Western Optical Supply](#). --

