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*File
OMA
History*

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Ms. Virginia Haynes
Southern Connection
130 West 57th Street
New York, New York 10019

Dear Ginny:

Attached is an article on the history of OMA, which seems to agree with the spirit of our discussion.

It is authored by Anthony D. Dichiaro, of Liberty Optical and should be acceptable to 20/20 for inclusion in an early edition. I suggest the article be submitted to the publisher as is.

Please let me have you thoughts.

Sincerely,

Gene Corcoran
President

ERC:DJB

cc: Jerry Pomerance
Tony Dichiaro
Gene Keeney ✓

OPTICAL MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION ... A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It was just about sixty years ago that a small group of eyeglass manufacturers gathered in Providence, Rhode Island to discuss setting standards for gold-filled eyewear. Such were the beginnings of what we know now as the Optical Manufacturers Association.

In those days most frames and mountings were made of metal and, with gold commanding a higher and higher price, the group gathered to decide whether or not eyewear would conform to the recently-set jewelry standard for gold-filled, which was 1/20th 12K. Since eyeglasses are worn with more intimacy than jewelry, these manufacturers opted for a 1/10th 12K gold-filled as their standard.

From these modest beginnings the group became known as spokesman for the ophthalmic industry and in the '30s became involved with Depression-spawned government agencies such as NRA and others. With World War II looming, however, manufacturers got involved with the defense industry and the increasing shortage of nickel for gold-filled base metal put a severe crimp in frame production. Through the war years, OMA as an organization was largely inactive and it was not until well after VE-Day that the group once again took up cudgels in behalf of the ophthalmic industry.

The return to normalcy wasn't without its dislocations and problems, however. Plastic frames had come into prominence due to the nickel shortage and with them, a realization that eyewear could become a fashion item. In addition, government became a great deal more active in the scheme of things, especially with the growth of such giant agencies as the Veterans Administration. This called for a unified industry voice, which was supplied by OMA.

In succeeding years the group pioneered in resolving the many technical problems facing its members. In lenses, for instance, OMA helped set the standard for base curves which is in general use today, relegating the old six-base lens series to the background. It instituted the standardized boxing system of measuring eye sizes and promoted it to the entire ophthalmic community so that it quickly became the measuring system of choice the world over. It has continuously policed the quality of imports as well as domestic production and, in the process of dealing with its members' customers, developed a credit-reporting system of benefit to members as well as prescribers.

During the past three decades OMA met regularly with representatives of all groups within the industry and professions -- wholesalers, laboratories, dispensers, optometrists and ophthalmologists -- in an effort to resolve problems common to the ophthalmic universe. The informal meetings of the past were formally structured in the early '70s by the creation of an organization called the "Total Ophthalmic Community" (TOC), consisting of representatives of each of the participating groups, which meets periodically to continue the free interchange of ideas and to discuss problems common to all its members.

It was in the area of information and education that the OMA made its greatest impact, however. Not only were the technical aspects of eyewear promoted to both labs and prescribers but the emerging awareness of fashion in eyewear -- as well as the need for continuing professional eye examinations -- were brought to the attention of the ophthalmic world and the public as well.

It is interesting to note in this context that, almost simultaneously with the development of the early OMA, another group of ophthalmic manufacturers was busy helping to create the Better Vision Institute, today recognized as the ophthalmic community's voice to the public.

In the early '50s OMA embarked on a project which was to have, over the years, a significant impact in its field: the Optical Fair of 1954. As the Fair's prospective put it:

"... for generations the ophthalmic professions and the optical industry have been united in a common purpose: the conservation of human vision. And yet, strangely enough, we are divided into a number of special groups, each with its special problems. Within the past few years, however, a new and significant idea has emerged. It is the conviction that our bonds of mutual interest are far more important than our few differences ..."

The first Fair was planned and promoted by the Optical Manufacturers Association; American Optometric Association; Guild of Prescription Opticians of America; Optical Wholesalers National Association and Association of Independent Optical Wholesalers as well as the Better Vision Institute. Three of the groups also held their annual meetings during the Fair and the measure of its success was a total attendance of over 5000 from the professions and

industry.

In 1957 another Optical Fair was planned by the same groups, but problems of logistics in setting up annual meetings by participating groups doomed the venture as a cooperative effort. The OMA, in spite of this, went ahead with the '57 Fair and the evidence of its success was an attendance equal to that of the '54 Fair, without the participation of other groups in its formation.

In 1969 OMA proposed resumption of optical fairs with association participation on an alternating basis and this resulted in the creation of Optical Fair '72, held in St. Louis in conjunction with the AOA's 75th Anniversary Congress and the first meeting of the Opticians Association of America, a group formed to expand the former Guild of Prescription Opticians by recognition of all dispensers rather than a select few. Other groups participated on an informal advisory basis by helping direct activities of the Fair, which offered, in addition to product and services exhibits, an educational program resulting in continuing education credits for attendees. The total attendance was mute testimony to the Fair's success -- almost 10,000 visitors from all over the world -- and this Fair set the pattern for the successful commercial optical fairs now being held regularly.

Not content with just interfamily information and education, OMA took over the destinies of the Fashion Eyewear Group of America, formed by OMA Associate Members in 1965 to promote style in eyewear. FEAGA, as it was known, held regular annual awards to recognize the development of eyewear styling by domestic manufacturers, with judges drawn from the fashion world. The activities of FEAGA resulted in a remarkable interest in eyewear fashions by style-conscious editors and reporters attending each annual awards presentation, and subsequent publicity influenced eyeglass wearers to regard eyewear as a fashion accessory rather than a prosthetic device.

The Fashion Eyewear Group of America, having accomplished its decade-long purpose by fostering the style-in-eyewear revolution of the mid-'70s, was quietly disbanded in 1974, although OMA has continued to promote all eyewear styling through other means.

While FEAGA was developing a fashion program of international proportions, OMA

took a hard look at educating the public to the need for regular professional eye examinations. The groups had had a taste of this endeavor in a one-year program some years previously in which the manufacturing group joined the BVI to mount a massive program aimed at making the public aware of the benefits of good vision and the means of attaining it. Called the OMA/BVI Program, it was funded by OMA and utilized the services of one of the top advertising agencies in the country, which prepared public service messages destined to appear on TV and radio as well as in most major magazines and newspapers across the nation. After little more than a year, however, the OMA/BVI Program became a casualty of the joint effort's inability to raise funds for its continuance.

In the late 1960s OMA revived the educational concept on a more modest basis of substituting public relations for paid advertising through the creation of the Society for Visual Care and the resulting campaign on a continuing basis attracted the support of many prominent figures, especially in the sports world, where good vision was a factor in the success of many specs-wearing sports champions. SVC made regular awards to bespectacled ball players, golfers, tennis champions and swimmers, with consequent publicity for the cause of vision.

In addition to the good vision awards, SVC also heavily promoted better vision in areas which did not conflict with the activities of the BVI or for which the latter group didn't have funds for the work. The good work done by the SVC has been continued by OMA although the formal structure of the group was dissolved in later years.

In 1975 the OMA, in response to the changing needs of its members and the ophthalmic community, began to direct itself to the development of better relations with government and the myriad federal agencies which were becoming involved in the day-to-day activities of the ophthalmic community. Committees were set up to monitor the dictates of such groups as the FDA, FTC and tariff and import groups within the government. With these activities, in which the OMA often represents the voice of the entire ophthalmic community as well as its own members, the group has come a full circle to the aims of the original members.

Not bad for a group which started with a meeting of a handful of frame manufacturers in Providence so long ago!