

Issue Date: VCPN January 2010,

## ONE-TO-ONE: TOM PFLEGING

Candid conversations between VCPN's Ed De Gennaro and leading optical executives about their product strategies.

[Ed De Gennaro, MEd, ABOM](#)

**Tom Pflęging, President of Briot USA, has more than 25 years of international experience in the optical industry—he worked for major retailers, distributors, and manufacturers in the U.S., U.K., and Germany. Prior to joining Buchmann Optical Group in 2005 as General Manager of Briot/ Weco Canada, Tom was Vice President for Breifeld & Schliekert GmbH. Today, Tom is focusing on building and strengthening Briot's sales and service team to help ECPs grow their business and increase profitability. Here Tom talks about the benefit to them of incorporating finishing equipment.**

**Ed De Gennaro:** What indicators should an optical practice look for to determine when it's cost effective to add an in-office finishing system?

**Tom Pflęging:** The simplest indicator can be found in your lab bill. If the edging, mounting, drilling, and other finishing services portion of your lab bill exceeds the lease payments or monthly payment you'd make on a loan for the equipment you're considering, then it's time to add an in-office finishing system. There are a lot of other issues to consider too. Do you want to provide faster service, control quality better, grow your practice, offer enhanced convenience, maximize your staff's utilization, etc.?



Since each practice is unique, there are many factors that bear on this decision and no two will make the decision based on the same reasons. We've developed some tools on our Web site to help potential buyers come up with the right decision. These tools focus on the various parts of their business like gross profit, lab bills, and so on.

To choose the right equipment, also consider the kinds of patients you serve. For example, are there a lot of geriatric patients or kids, or a mix of clients? Is it a high-end or a high-volume discount shop? What kinds of frames must you be able to produce? Rimless? Cord mounted? Wrap? Lens materials are also an important consideration.

**EDG:** Is there a time when a practice should not do its own in-office finishing work?

**TP:** It's pretty tough to imagine not having an edger system in any practice that has the right indicators. In European countries like Germany and France, every optical outlet has an edger. It's an expected portion of the practice. The percentage of U.S. offices with finishing equipment varies greatly based on region and the data we see differs, but in our estimation, it's a bit below 50% for the whole country.

**EDG:** Why does the U.S. incorporate this equipment much less than western European countries?

**TP:** One factor is limited office space. Many offices are originally designed without an in-office lab so when they decide to add one, they have to find the space for it. Utility issues also come up like having a water supply, enough electrical service, etc.

Another concern is staffing. This is sometimes the biggest anxiety in an office. The first reaction we often get is, "Can I or any of my staff handle this equipment or do I need new employees who have the skill level?" ECPs don't know how much easier today's equipment is to operate and how much more accurate it is compared to equipment from just a few years ago. Most staff can also be trained to operate modern edging equipment in a very short period of time.

**EDG:** Is lab equipment getting too expensive for ECPs?

**TP:** Actually over the last few years, our prices have come down while the functionality features and applications have increased. The bottom line is customers are actually getting a better value today for their money.

**EDG:** What's the next big innovation in finishing equipment?

**TP:** In the future, look for new developments in tracing and blocking. Briot is constantly analyzing the whole work process and based on that, and things such as new materials, lenses, and coatings, we adjust and come up with new features.

**EDG:** Have you made any changes to your business plan due to the recession?

**TP:** We're looking at some finance companies to develop helpful financing strategies. For example, a 0% loan rate or a deferred payment plan might work for some ECPs. It all depends on their unique financial situation. We always make it clear to ECPs that we are not the financial experts. They really need to talk to their accountant to come up with the right decision.

We're also looking at ways to address ECPs' reservations on issues like staffing or space. And we're now offering extended service agreements and warranties beyond the standard two-year warranty. A five-year service plan means equipment will be serviced for free, which includes parts and labor. This allows an office to be comfortable that its investment is going to have a stable output without costing additional money for service over the life of the extended plan.