

# Childs' Destiny

What it takes to be a devoted pro in pro-active retailing **BY MARYANN LORUSSO**

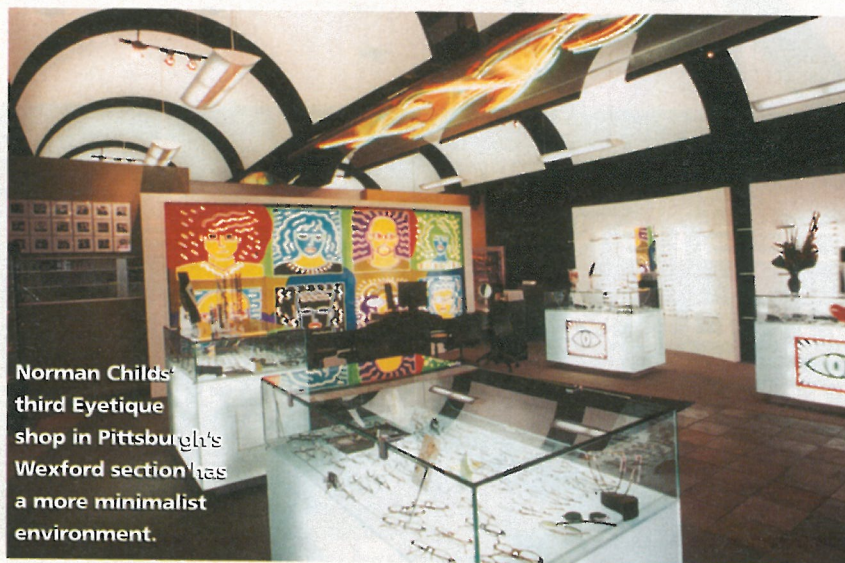
**N**orman Childs will do almost anything for a customer. He'll hunt down a pair of frames recently spotted on Reese Witherspoon. He'll send an optician to deliver a pair of glasses straight to a client's door. He'll even open one of his stores at 7 a.m. if a patron's schedule demands it. But the one thing he will absolutely not do is let someone get away with "just browsing, thank you."

"We're a little more aggressive than most retailers about taking control of the sale," says Childs, who founded his Eyetique business 22 years ago. "I'm not going to let people walk into the store and just look around on their own. They may not know exactly what they're looking for, and we know better than anyone what kind of frame or lens they might need."

This pro-active approach seems to be working like a charm for the retailer, who recently celebrated the opening of his third Pittsburgh store in the high-income neighborhood Wexford. Like the other two Eyetique locations, in the city's Squirrel Hill and Wilkins Township areas, the new shop features Childs' special formula of chic brands, out-of-the-way service and colorful atmosphere.

The design of the Wexford store was the brainchild of Pittsburgh architect Alan Dunn, who also created the look of the first two shops. "In every store we tried a different approach," Dunn says. "For example, in Wilkins Township we used low-voltage halogen lighting to give the store a warm, twinkly feel. For Wexford, we decided to use indirect fluorescent lighting to create a cool, minimalist environment that's also highly energized. While the lighting methods are almost diametric in nature, we think the results are equally exciting."

The indirect lighting is used throughout the new 1,800-foot location. The glass floor displays, the



Norman Childs' third Eyetique shop in Pittsburgh's Wexford section has a more minimalist environment.

Plexiglas shelving and the curved, white-laminate panels on the walls and ceiling are all enhanced through backlighting, which gives the store an "ethereal glow and makes the displays look as if they're floating," Dunn says. Special graphic elements include a pop-art-inspired mural of stylish eyeglass wearers, which Childs commissioned to Pittsburgh artist Burton Morris, as well as a giant neon "optic nerve" Dunn was inspired to run straight through the center of the ceiling.

"The space has electricity," the architect notes.

Childs says Dunn's design, along with the upbeat jazz and pop music that's regularly piped into the sound

system, creates just the right shopping environment for the store's 18- to 55-year-old customers, most of whom are female. "I want people to feel comfortable and happy when they're in the store," he says. "If they're comfortable and happy, they're going to buy."

Of course, the product is ultimately what seals the deal. For the latest Eyetique store, Childs remained true to the fashionable, high-end brands that have performed well at his other locations. The Wexford shop carries 18 labels, including Oliver Peoples, Paul Smith, Fred, Kata, Sama and Lunor. Joining the product lineup this month is Vera Wang Eyewear, the latest brand extension

from the esteemed New York bridalwear designer. Childs, who served as a consultant to Cordeur Design Group, the team launching Wang's eyewear, called the debut collection "one of the most exciting I've seen in 25 years."

Although most of his brands are considered luxury—the average frame price is \$350, and the most expensive style is about \$1,000—the retailer insisted his customer is not necessarily a high-income earner. "We're not just targeting people with platinum cards," he asserts. "Our customers are people who want a trendy product, a quality name and impeccable service. Even if they can't afford our product, they want it because it looks better and makes them feel better than other products out there."

According to one of Childs' employees, these discriminating patrons make working at Eyetique fulfilling. "Our average customer is the customer they told us in optometry school that we would never get," says Ellen Lebow, OD, an optometrist who has worked for the chain since 1990. "It's someone who is concerned about their vision, not about how much the product costs. And it's a person who always comes back for their [scheduled] follow-up."

In order to provide these conscientious customers with the service they demand, Childs employs 25 highly trained staffers, including 18 eyecare specialists who work in all three stores. "To run a successful business these days, you've got to hire the best people," he says. The Wexford store provides a wide range of services, including 21-point vision exams, contact-lens fittings, hearing tests and laser-surgery follow-ups. The retailer also offers laser corrective surgery, performed in a nearby office by ophthalmologist Scott

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Portnoy, MD, who is affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh.

While laser surgery and contact lenses are gobbling up a lot of consumer attention these days, Childs says, the traditional part of the business remains the most fun because of the fashion element. These days, he leaves most of the frame hunting to

his brother, Brad, and buyer Maxine Shepman, who comb the shows in Las Vegas, New York, Paris and Milan for cutting-edge designs. "Our challenge is to keep things fresh," the retailer says, "and staying fresh often means taking a shot with a new line."

So far the Wexford store's best sellers have been heavy plastic frames in various color combinations, as well as

double-laminate and drill-mount rimless styles. Childs notes that many customers request designs they've seen on a favorite celebrity. "The other day someone came into the new store looking for the Oliver Peoples sunglasses Brad Pitt is often seen wearing," he recalls. "More and more people want to emulate what they see on TV and in the movies."

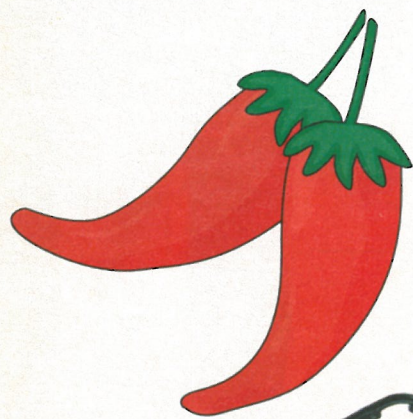
Three years ago, when the retailer was thinking about how he could better accommodate his fashion-savvy customers, he launched the Norman Childs frame collection. Every six months, he rolls out a handful of new styles, based on the colors and details customers have been requesting. After collecting input and designing the new frames, Childs hires a factory to do a limited run of about 300 units. "We now have 11 strong styles," he says, adding the collection is among the most popular at the Wexford store.

For Childs, word-of-mouth has proved the best kind of marketing. Still, the retailer has dabbled in advertising, most recently with a quirky local print campaign featuring Pittsburgh personalities such as composer Marvin Hamlisch and the late comedian Phil Hartman. Childs has also found that in-store events work well to draw new customers and generate excitement about Eyetique. Once a month, the chain hosts a designer trunk show. After Thanksgiving, a 40-percent-off lens sale "packs them in," according to Lebow. And when the Wexford store first opened, Childs offered free eye exams to local merchants, about 80 percent of whom "ended up buying something."

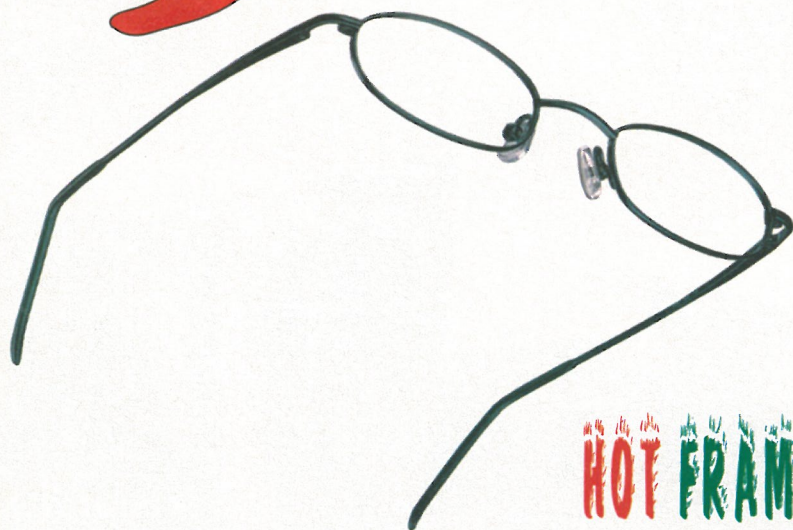
The retailer, who is already considering locations for a fourth Pittsburgh store, said he tries not to worry about competition from the big guys. "I think it's fabulous that we have a LensCrafters," he asserts, "because they make consumers aware of new products on the market. Ten years ago, people had never heard of polycarbonate Featherlights. So in an indirect way, [the super chains] help me in my business."

The confident retailer also professes not to be too concerned with the erratic economy and the threat of new vision-correcting technology. "Sure, the industry is changing a lot," he says. "Many [retailers] are afraid laser surgery will take over, but they said that about contacts 25 years ago."

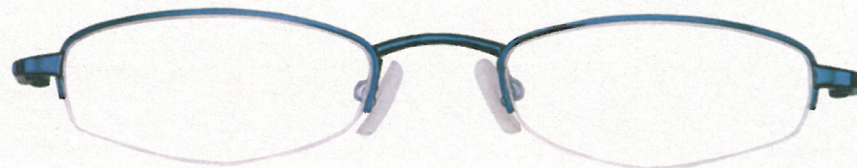
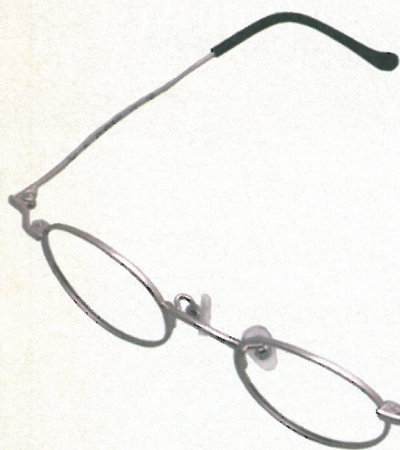
He continues, "I think the strong optical retailers will flourish by making sure they stay focused and making sure they stay fresh." And, perhaps, by making sure those customers do more than just browse. ■



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