Expanding a practice outside

by Vance Thompson, MD

In order to truly expand our practices, eyecare professionals may want to explore becoming active in research and product development. My experience has shown that when eyecare professionals play a role in bringing ophthalmic products from concept to market, we enhance our practice as well as experience professional growth and job satisfaction.

It’s good for business
Utilizing one’s expertise and clinical experience for the benefit of product development saves pharmaceutical and device companies a tremendous amount of time and money. When organizations are developing new products and studying them for safety and efficacy, enlisting the help of someone who is actively performing eye examinations and surgeries bridges the gap between industry and patients.

This gap is one that cannot be overlooked in product development—companies need and want to understand the true clinical utility of a product, how physicians are going to use the product in everyday practice, and what the unmet need is in the marketplace. Oftentimes in development phases a product idea...
can appear to be attractive on paper. However, when that idea is put into the real world, it may not translate. These are things that can only come from the clinician.

At a time when reimbursement from health insurance (public and private) is shrinking, we are consistently seeking alternative practice-building opportunities. Getting involved in product development and clinical research has allowed our practice to be on the forefront of the latest technologies and procedures, leading to significant increases in areas like premium surgeries. Our involvement contributes to the progression of eyecare treatments while also generating revenue from companies that value our services.

**It’s good for self worth**

Some of the greatest joys of my career have come from assessing and studying new technologies. That sense of satisfaction helps keep the practice of medicine fresh for me. After many years of practice, some eyecare professionals may feel like their desire to practice has become stagnant. Advising companies through product development and research and working with patients who are also interested in contributing to the process adds an exciting dynamic to our profession that energizes us. It leads to conference calls, writing opportunities, and lectures, forcing us to hold ourselves to a higher standard and practice medicine to the best of our ability. When we are involved in research projects, we are well read and participating in stimulating conversations with other surgeons and researchers. It keeps our skills sharp.

**Relationship with industry**

Relationships with industry representatives, like any other relationships, are built on trust. We are more likely to be asked to participate in a project if the company knows our values and our ethics. Therefore, an important component to relationship development is keeping in touch. As a result, when opportunities for involvement arise in our areas of expertise, we are thought of.

In addition to my direct relationships, I have been exposed to many new companies through my consultative relationship with Ora (Andover, Mass.), an ophthalmic research and product development firm. The firm has been paramount in my ability to build industry relationships by connecting me with companies who are conducting research that align with my team’s interest. I also consult with Ora for advice on how to set up the proper research framework in our practice.

**Build a team**

Clinical research and product development takes a commitment of time and resources. When companies are considering us for involvement, they are looking for an infrastructure in our practice that can handle a large commitment. I have a research team of 5 that consists of a director of research and 4 other individuals who are dedicated to ensuring that protocols are being followed precisely. It’s not unusual for us to have 5 to 7 active protocols at once, and my team completes the necessary paperwork, works with patients in the examination room, and sits in on surgical procedures for documentation.

**Don’t do it alone**

My practice is currently working with Euclid Systems in Herndon, Va., on a rigid gas crosslinking technology for corneal reshaping with contact lenses. The technology is designed to reshape the cornea with a reverse geometry lens called Ortho-K technology. The company’s goal is to reshape the cornea with the contact lens and then instill an eye drop that locks the cornea into shape so that Ortho-K becomes a non-surgical method for correcting nearsightedness. Euclid Systems and I receive guidance from Ora. Our involvement with Ora was paramount as they represented us at the FDA hearing to ensure that we initiated our clinical trial in a way that maximized our chances of success. Ora is currently involved integrally in the preparation of the preclinical trial.

Being involved in product development and research in clinical trials is exciting, but it is also intimidating. It can be a frightening concept for a single practice to interface with a large company. However, we can be successful by building an internal research team and aligning ourselves with a clinical research and product development firm. We can then add a component to our practices that is career changing, motivating, and energizing. OB