



## CAPITOL OPTICAL

### A Vision for Better Things: Capitol Optical Company

Capitol Optical is the result of a family's passion for eye care, quality eyewear and customer service. In 1968, three brothers embarked on a shared dream to redefine the Singapore optical industry. Theirs was a humble beginning as they sold glasses from a pushcart. Working tirelessly, they were soon able to open their first store at Outram Park. One store grew to four and by 1983, they were serving customers right in the heart of town in Orchard Road. Only premium brands had a presence in Orchard Road, so for Capitol Optical to be there spoke volumes about how far it had come.

The brand enjoyed steady growth as happy customers shared their experiences with others. Word spread and by 1989, Capitol Optical had nine stores across Singapore and the brothers were regarded as leaders in the Singapore optical industry. Today, the company operates 18 optical boutiques across the island, with more plans in the making.

### Relooking “just do it”

Having built a successful business over the last five decades, the founders were hesitant when the second generation wanted to transform the business. The way the seniors saw it, their stoic “just do it” attitude, hard work and “gut feeling” had served them well over the years – the company celebrated its golden jubilee in 2018, and it stands among the most established local optical companies in Singapore today – so there was no real impetus to change, explained Chief Commercial Officer (CCO) Marcus Wong, 32. Marcus and his wife, who is the company Chief Marketing Officer (CMO), had returned from Melbourne to join the family's optical business in 2017. Both are adept entrepreneurs who have jointly built their cold-pressed juice business from scratch when they were living in Melbourne; it remains “the number one wholesale cold-pressed juice supplier there”, shared Marcus.

“I was all about the numbers,” admitted Marcus, of his approach when he first joined Capitol Optical. Armed with corporate experience, he had reviewed the company's operations and proposed a wage cut, which was immediately rejected by the first-generation management team. It would take Marcus a year to let go of his “corporate self” as he immersed himself in the “family-like” culture of the company.

“This is a *Capitol* family business,” he said firmly, acknowledging the contributions of all the staff, especially the long-serving members among them. “Sixty-five to 70 per cent of our staff have been with us since the beginning. They have fought alongside us in good times and in bad. They have always given their best to the business. Our staff are our Capitol family.”

### Cultivating 6/6 vision

While Capitol Optical has an enduring presence in Singapore, the majority of its customers are 40 years of age and above, so there was a need to reach out to a younger demography. By 2018, the new management team, comprising the second generation, was ready to step up and take the company into the future. The new team comprises Marcus' cousin, who has been with the SME for almost 15 years, as Chief Executive Officer; Marcus' brother, who has worked at Capitol Optical for close to a decade, as Chief Operating Officer; and Marcus and his wife are CCO and CMO respectively.

The new team rolled out a brand refresh, and being technology-savvy, prefers to “go with the data; we were not quite ready to rely solely on our gut instincts”, clarified Marcus, with a laugh. They did, however, retain and build on the values and characteristics that have made Capitol Optical a trusted household name, with considerable input from the bigger Capitol family. As the CCO explained, vision care is “very personal”, and customers “follow” the people they trust. Although relationships take time to nurture, the team knows that being customer-centric is the way to go.

Through a multi-pronged marketing campaign tailored to reach out to customers via different marketing channels, Capitol Optical was able to “create a brand presence very quickly” as it repositioned itself for a younger clientele. “We registered good growth after one year,” reported Marcus, and the new team was given the green light to open more optical boutiques based on their new innovative concepts.

### Sharpening perceptions

Technology plays a crucial role in positioning Capitol Optical for the future. On the retail front, technology is an enabler that elevates the customer experience. For example, the company’s revamped website has become more user-friendly – customers can make appointments for eye checks, complete their online purchases, and get immediate replies to their queries from a chat bot. At the boutiques, all staff will soon be armed with an iPad that provides an array of information from catalogues to inventory updates, to enhance customer service delivery. For operations, instead of standalone point-of-sale (POS) systems at each boutique, the company has transited to a cloud-based POS system, and is reaping the many efficiencies. In the pipeline is “an app for customer relationship management”, said Marcus.

The team is busy implementing the company’s multi-pronged growth strategy, part of which is to develop its own proprietary brand of eyewear. This will be trademarked and marketed as “our own brand” and be retailed at Capitol Optical boutiques as well as distributed overseas.

Internationalisation also features in the company’s expansion plans, and the SME is eyeing Vietnam and Myanmar. Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh City, with its burgeoning middle class, may have a Capitol Optical as early as 2020, if things go as planned. Myanmar, being at a different stage of development, will have to wait a year or two.

As the optical industry evolves, more solutions are emerging to address various eye problems, such as retarding the rate of progression of myopia. Capitol Optical aims to deepen its capabilities to provide myopia solutions, and is working towards opening its own eye clinic in about two years.

On the retail front, the second-generation management team is continuing its “very active approach” to enhance its customer base. In a “casting the net and reeling them in” approach, the company participates in events that attract crowds, like atrium promotions at the shopping malls, school festivals and corporate functions. On the corporate front, it recently launched a new corporate partnership programme where it positions itself as the preferred eye care partner to organisations. “No one in the optical industry has done this before, and I am very proud of myself for initiating this,” informed Marcus. He has, in his sights, the insurance industry, and looks forward to the challenges that inevitably come with any new idea.

