



Defying Expectations: Optifair Excites and Unites the Vision Professions

Event

By Paddy Kamen

Ali Khan likes to defy the odds. This registered optician has created a successful continuing education conference for both optometrists and opticians in the same place, on the same day. This feat might be nothing special in Europe or the U.S., but here the political silos were pretty much unbreachable until Khan came along.

The Optifair shows, put on by The Khan Group and their education arm, the Academy of Ophthalmic Education (AOE), feature a trade show in addition to educational streams for both opticians and optometrists, which run concurrently throughout the day.

Optifairs are popular with optical professionals and distributors alike. Attendance at the October 2012 Optifair in Toronto was approximately 750 opticians and over 200 optometrists, with 40 of 42 booths sold for the trade show. The Vancouver conference is newer, with the second annual event scheduled for May 26, 2013.

What factors have led to Khan's success in a market that was supposedly replete with conferences staged by professional associations?

"For one thing, we cannot take any chances with the quality of the continuing education so we fly in professional speakers, mostly from the U.S. We are continuously researching topics and seeking speakers who make the day very stimulating and enjoyable for the attendees in both streams," he explains.

Khan says that opticians enjoy a mix of medical and pharmacology lectures, in addition to marketing. "Some people say opticians are not interested in continuing education, but we've proven them wrong."

There are also stringent requirements for any speaker affiliated with a supplier. "We don't allow them to stand up there and advertise. All our lectures are approved as Class 'X' credits by the appropriate accrediting bodies and are valid for optical professionals from across Canada," he explains.

Exhibitors appreciate the fact they receive a steady stream of visitors throughout the day, due to the fact that the educational stream's coffee and lunch breaks are staggered, notes Khan. "We also have excellent food in the trade show hall, making it easier for professional participants to visit and mingle with exhibitors. Further, we offer lunch to exhibitors well before the continuing education participants meet them on the trade show floor. The shows have become known a place to learn, socialize and make connections for everyone in the optical business."

In conjunction with the April Optifair in Toronto, The Khan Group is sponsoring a gala fundraising evening in support of the Canadian Coalition of Eye Care Professionals (CCEPro) and the Foundation Fighting Blindness. The Eye Ball will be held on April 13, the evening before the Optifair. "We're expecting 300 people, along with VIPs from the federal and provincial governments," says Khan. "We've always had a lot of fun at these events and this one promises to be very special, indeed."

Wowing both optometrists and opticians with stellar continuing education, pleasing exhibitors and also fundraising for good causes – clearly Ali Khan has found a way to defy the odds as he continues to change and challenge the optical professions in Canada. ■