

SLOWING DOWN TO GO FASTER



DISPENSER DETAILS

Name: Alison Middleton
Position: Optical manager and dispenser
Location: Optical by National Pharmacies, Adelaide
Years in industry: 22

1. What inspired you to pursue an optical dispensing career, and how has your perspective changed over time?

My early career was in sunglasses retailing. It naturally led me to a role as a sunglass department manager in an optical business. I was eager to combine my passion for fashion with a new challenge. I was initially captivated by how optical dispensers not only made fashion and styling decisions with customers but also engaged in deep lifestyle and technical conversations. Watching them perform the “magic” of precise measurements was fascinating— I wanted to learn more. Over time, I’ve come to appreciate how rewarding the work is, not only because of the blend of artistry and precision but because of the profound impact we have on people’s daily lives. The experience has broadened my perspective, and now, it feels more like a calling than a career.

2. What are the most influential moments and people that led you to this point?

One influential person was a learning and development leader, who taught me the magic of blending styling and fashion with deep lifestyle and dispensing conversations. He then taught me how to pass these beautiful skills on. Another inspired me to volunteer, helping provide eyecare and glasses to under-served communities in Australia and overseas. I’ll never forget revisiting a school for at-risk youth I volunteered at a year earlier. The outgoing young woman in front of me was a totally different person to the shy young girl struggling to stay engaged in school when we dispensed her first set of glasses. It was an amazing transformation to witness.

3. What’s something you know now that you wished you understood at the start of your career?

For the love of all things good, ask for help far more often! Slow down to go faster, and you’re never going to learn it all. Every day there will still be some odd conundrum that you’ve never dealt with

before. It’s truly OK to not have all the answers and seek support.

4. Can you share a moment when you made a significant impact on a patient’s life?

There are so many moments, but one stands out. A young man, about 16, came to have his eyes tested. He was shy and surprised to learn he was myopic. I styled him in a great frame that I knew looked fantastic, but he really wasn’t convinced. When he came to collect his glasses, I got him to look at the leaves on the trees outside first, which was fun because he had that full “oh wow, trees have leaves” experience, and then I got him to check himself out in the mirror and he realised how good he looked in glasses. He came to us a shy awkward teen and walked out a confident young man. That’s the kind of difference I love making.

5. What innovations in eyewear or technology are you most excited about, and why?

What I find super fun is the variety of tints, mirrors, flash coatings, photochromic colours and anti-reflective coatings now available, meaning we can design truly unique eyewear solutions that are incredibly individual, functional and stylish.

6. What skills or qualities do you believe are most important for an optical dispenser to thrive in today’s market?

Communication and relationship building. This enables us to ask the right questions, so we can

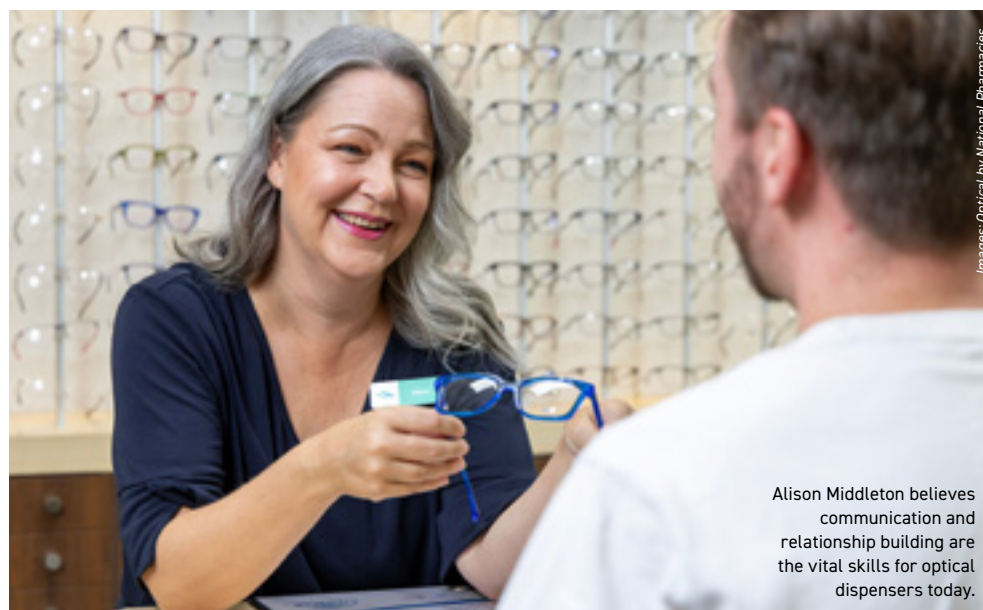
design great solutions and troubleshoot the problems that will arise from time-to-time. We also need to value our technical skills and maintain a learner’s mindset to keep us fresh and learning.

7. How do you ensure your skills and knowledge stay current in such a fast moving industry?

One of my favourite ways has been working with the Australasian College of Optical Dispensing (ACOD) and optometry students in my store. The students keep me hitting the books after asking another super technical question. Over the years, I’ve taken on every opportunity, such as project training, regional management and business coaching, which means my career has been broad and I understand aspects of optical retailing from a granular technical level and a higher-level business point of view.

8. Why did you become a member of ODA, and what value do you see in the organisation?

I became a member because I saw how ODA values the art, talent and skills of optical dispensing and is working to raise the profile of well trained and educated optical dispensers both within the industry and outside of it. I wanted a resource where I can easily access community and ongoing education while promoting all the different facets of what we do. ■



Alison Middleton believes communication and relationship building are the vital skills for optical dispensers today.

Founded in 2022, **OPTICAL DISPENSERS AUSTRALIA'S** mission is to transform the optical dispensing industry by creating a community where optical dispensers and their associates can feel supported and inspired through education, events, networking, and employment advice, plus more. Visit: www.odamembers.com.au