

Topics in this article: [Retail](#)
September 04, 2011 8:00 PM

Golden's opportunity: With noncompete clause ending, 'sexy specs' icon can broaden market view

By [Chad Halcom](#)

Richard Golden has a big decision to make.

The president, CEO and majority owner of Southfield-based Selective Eyewear Elements -- **SEE Inc.** -- has only a few months remaining on a five-year noncompete agreement that began when he closed on the \$120 million sale of **D.O.C. Optics Corp.** to Italian optical company **Luxottica Group SpA** in early 2007.

On one hand, there is plenty to keep him busy at SEE, which is on pace to grow 30 percent with revenue of \$23 million to \$24 million this year. The eyewear chain also opens a 26th location in the SoHo district of New York this fall.

The SEE chain, which opened its original store in Birmingham in 1998, offers exclusive collections of glasses from artists or manufacturers of other designer brands to fashion-conscious shoppers at affordable prices.

On the other hand, when he is free to re-enter mass-market eyewear in February 2012, it could mean a new opportunity for his children. His son Seth Golden was a vice president of D.O.C. and still handles special projects for SEE. And some recent market research has told him that building traction on a new eyewear startup might be easier for Golden than for most, he said.

The SEE stores do not compete with Luxottica properties like **LensCrafters** and **Pearle Vision**



Richard Golden says he wouldn't consider launching a new eyewear company except for the fact that market research shows he may have an easier time doing so than a startup founder without his "recognized persona."

because they do not carry the manufacturer name brands and designer collections found in those chains. And Golden, 65, can man-age SEE in part from remote offices without the heavy marketing that went into D.O.C., leaving more time for family and other investments.

"My honest answer is that (question is) unanswered. I can't give my own wife an answer and commit on that. I spent a couple of decades building a recognized persona -- good, bad, or indifferent -- and the research suggests that's still an asset I have," he said.

"If it wasn't for that fact, I'd say 'absolutely not' to going back -- because it would be such a job to (launch a new company). But I would have such a running start from that past, the question is do I want to invest the time?"

Earlier this summer, SEE opened a fifth Florida location in South Miami, lifting a moratorium Golden had placed on new stores for more than two years while the company adapted to the economy. The company received a permit last week to open the SoHo store, its third in Manhattan, by October. Golden plans a second location in San Francisco and a new location in another mid-American city outside Michigan by early next year.

Revenue was off about 8 percent to just over \$16 million in 2009 but recovered enough last year to roughly match sales before the national recession began in late 2008, he said. He was expecting an average 40 percent same-store growth in 2011 across the company this year, but he now is hedging that projection due to uncertainty in the national economy.

Besides the economy, Golden said recent growth also derives from a mix of new media marketing strategies, increased customer recognition at local stores and a recent management push to convert store visitors into new sales. SEE gathered its local managers at a conference in January in Miami after sending sales specialists into many of the stores to observe and report on customer service.

"A bell went off for us in the management, and I told my staff: Forget about coming up with new ideas; right now we just put a new focus on capture," he said. "We're in a lot of walkable communities, and throughout a 10- or 11-hour day, it's easy to miss two or three customers that walk in with some interest in buying because you were checking on an order or had someone else waiting. That could be a \$250-\$500 sale, three times a day -- and over a year it adds up."

Golden in 1986 became president and CEO of D.O.C., the company founded in 1946 by his father. By the mid-2000s, he had grown it into the 10th-largest retail optical chain in the country with more than 100 locations in six states and \$100 million in revenue. Golden's distinctive

dancing and "sexy specs" slogan used in local commercial spots is one of Detroit's most memorable local ad series.

"Everyone remembers 'sexy specs' in this market -- so much that many people probably don't even realize yet that he's out of that business," said retail consultant Kenneth Dalto of Farmington Hills-based **Kenneth J. Dalto & Associates**.

"The market is there, too. You have an 80 million baby boomer market, who are about to turn 65. They still represent the largest buying power, three-quarters of them will need new glasses in the short-term, and they're vain. If he can sell the notion their glasses don't have to make you look old, it could work. He'd have to come back like gangbusters in advertising, but he could."

Even when Golden was growing D.O.C. during the 1990s, he also formed SEE after developing his own frame brand names and forming exclusive retail agreements he had forged with frame designers and artists.

Glasses at SEE start as low as \$169 but are commonly at the mid-market \$250-300 range including lenses -- more than some commercial optometrists but below the \$450-700 range of designer boutiques.

The company also recently created profile pages on Facebook and Twitter, started cultivating some positive customer reviews on Yelp and elevated its email and direct mail contact with customers, with very little mass market advertising. All marketing and social media work is handled in-house.

"With a lot of one-off or two-off stores in major markets, it wasn't feasible to do print and TV ads. So we've discovered things were just as feasible," he said. "In that sense, it's like the total opposite model of D.O.C., which was fewer markets and greater (local media) saturation."

Michelle Calder, optometrist and owner-president of Northville-based **Urban Optiques**, also said the economy and a mix of new media marketing strategies have helped improve sales since she acquired the former Urban Optiks from Rob Diegel in late 2009.

Monthly sales of designer brands have more than doubled since then, said Calder, who launched "The Visionista Blog" to promote the company online and like Golden focuses largely on marketing European couture frames for the fashion-conscious customer.

"We were still in the midst of local economic problems when I started. But I have found there is still a strong market for really good quality designer glasses," she said. "There are still customers who choose to buy on the name, but we've actually got a lot more interest in brands that are less well known but are higher quality even if it's at a higher price."

Golden continues to manage other investments -- he is one of the local business community backers of the **Coney Dog** restaurant launched earlier this summer on Sunset Boulevard by actor-director Mike Binder and several other Detroit-alumni celebrities, and he is also coordinating with a partner in Florida on some film projects that are still in early development with little details available so far.

A final decision on Golden's plans on a new eyewear company will probably happen around the time the noncompete expires, he said. But he will not consider broadening SEE or changing its focus to include mass-market brands, or cross-promoting with another eye care company.

"It took a lot of years to build an awareness in the public as the spokesman for my company. I don't really want to dilute that by lending it to another business," he said.

Chad Halcom: (313) 446-6796, chalcom@crain.com. Twitter: @chadhalcom