Now expanding also in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, Chemat use alternative coating materials – organic polysiloxanes, spun on to lens surfaces rather than vacuum deposited, by a process identified as 'sol-gel chemistry'. The result, he said, is a durable, good quality, multi-layer lens coating that bears comparison in quality with conventional AR coats of today, with the advantages of improved flexibility and a reduction in heat stress problems. Sol-gel coating application can incorporate a hydrophobic layer.

Because lens pre-cleaning needs are reduced, the overall time required for this form of AR coating is curtailed. The smaller lab need not wait until it accumulates sufficient lenses for coating to make up a batch, so order turn-round can be consistently faster. Above all, coater and ancillary equipment costs are brought within the financial compass of a small lab or even (for the smallest in capacity of the three-unit Chemalux dip-coater range on offer) the busy larger practice.

This process, added Peter Wilkinson, can be automated; it offers a choice of residual colour reflexes, and a mirror finish option. Where lenses are received with one surface already conventionally AR coated, the two processes have been found compatible. Even for a larger laboratory which already uses a box coater for thin film vacuum deposition, Dr Wilkinson suggested, a compact, easily portable Chemalux unit could make sense for coping with overflow and emergency orders.

Laser engraving: creating customer benefits

Always an articulate contributor to symposia, Peter Kepets recalled how, in 2008 'we could see the clouds gathering, but could not be sure how severe a storm was ahead'. Now we know, he said ruefully as he addressed 2009's delegates. With a global downturn generally estimated at around 10 per cent, ophthalmics may not have been hit as hard as some industries that are 'really suffering heavily, sales 30-60 per cent down. But hard enough!'. It was a matter of enlightened self-interest for a company like his, as a lens laser engraving supplier, to help industry customers weather the storm. A combination of new lens market strategies and tactics, together with careful attention to budgeting, pointed the way ahead.

In the lens engraving sector, Kepets' ULM-CP excimer laser engraver had been streamlined to deliver faster operation for reduced outlay (so, a faster return on investment). Kepets had also introduced the smaller, but still high-performance, upgradeable ULM-B: a compact, small-lab engraving unit that needs no external exhaust and is therefore fully portable. Suppliers such as his company, said Peter Kepets, had to recognise that the core decision for laboratories today was investment in free-form technology. 'Laser engraving is an afterthought'. It was legitimate, however, for supply firms to help lens producers realise that under-investment in lens engraving – perhaps installing a simple CO_2 laser – would cost them more in the long run, as inferior delivery would impact on sales and therefore on customer loyalty.

Peter Kepets urged symposium delegates to think of services, such as lens engraving, as earners for the lab of today, contributors to the vital goal of lens added value. His machines had been designed to achieve good results with all modern lens materials, with Transitions-treated lenses and with MAR coated surfaces. The future lay with lens branding; public interest in big-name, quality lens brands could be effectively supported by the right quality of engraving to make a brand-mark.

A supplier who helped in such a way to promote an added-value lens strategy could be, and be seen to be, a partner (perhaps even in optician sales-training, which he suggested still had room for improvement). 'Focus on the future', Peter Kepets concluded, 'for that is what you can influence'.

Making profit in a recession with Trivex

Introduced by Frédérique Lefranc of PPG Intercast, Francesco Pellegrini offered a presentation on a lens material – registered, trademarked Trivex – which is bidding fair to lay a claim to a versatility unique in ophthalmics.

Typically, said Francesco Pellegrini, ophthalmic lens materials have a very long development cycle; it had taken CR39 some 60 years to attain the global 'commodity' status it currently holds – a status into which inroads are being made by higher index materials and polycarbonate (each with roughly a 25-year history). Trivex has been available to date for a relatively short period, 7-10 years; a more versatile, higher-performance, hybrid material (polyurethane plus nitrogen), it represented, said Mr Pellegrini, the shape of ophthalmic materials to come, and a focus for the fight against 'commoditisation' that has made a struggle of the campaign to add lens value.

Trivex has been showing its capabilities for some years as a plano sunlens, latterly in polarising photochromic form, in addition to taking a growing share of the prescription tint sector. Now it has made perhaps the ultimate leap across product categories, selected by leading designers as a frame material too.

As Francesco Pellegrini pointed out, the two markets have many aims in common, including the wish to offer consumers fashion and sports appeal, and to resist commoditisation. Frames in Trivex have inherent toughness, lightness, hypo-allergenicity (no phthalates) and low water absorption, so sweat does not discolour them. Made from flat sheet, or cast using moulds, it represents an entry-level investment for the manufacturer. It can even be treated to display photochromism, then fashion-tinted.

As befits a lens material, Trivex is being offered to frame producers with the