



Highlights: Opticians

Glasses and contacts can be expensive, and the hassle of shopping for eyewear can add to the bother. The latest edition of **Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook**, available at www.checkbook.org, examines the optical options in the area and has ratings, price information, and advice to steer consumers toward retailers that focus on customer service and affordable prices. Findings from the article include:

Eye-opening differences in price and quality:

- In store-to-store price checks, Checkbook's shoppers found price differences of \$200 and higher for the same eyeglasses. And this was true for various models. For a one-year supply of daily disposable contact lenses (including exam, fitting, and follow-up visits), prices varied by as much as \$587. Examples of Checkbook's price comparisons for identical frames and contact lenses with the same prescriptions:
 - Kate Spade Miranda frames and lenses ranged from \$275 to \$615, with an average price of \$403.
 - Nike 8098 frames and lenses ranged from \$296 to \$508, with an average price of \$410.
 - Ray-Ban RX5286 frames and lenses ranged from \$261 to \$473, with an average price of \$346.
 - A one-year supply of 1Day Acuvue Moist daily disposable contact lenses, exam, fitting, and follow-up visits ran from \$577 to \$1,044, with an average cost of \$792.
 - A one-year supply of Air Optix Aqua monthly disposable contact lenses, exam, fitting and follow-up visits ran from \$233 to \$681, with an average cost of \$439.
- For eyeglasses, Checkbook found the best prices at online-only stores, which also carried a much wider selection than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. One caveat: online eyeglass shopping can be tricky because it's hard to tell which frames will look good on you.
- Checkbook also found low prices online for contacts—several online contact lens sellers offered prices that were at least 20 percent lower than the average prices at local stores. The lowest prices were offered by FramesDirect.com and ContactLensKing.com, but even these two options offered higher prices than local price leader Costco.
- In 2013, price shopping for contact lenses became near impossible when the four largest contact lens manufacturers enacted minimum pricing requirements that forbade any store from selling their products at a discount. After backlash from consumer groups, stores, and state consumer protection offices, the contact lens manufacturers reversed their price-control policies earlier this year. For now, at least, contact lens retailers can again set their own prices, which is a good thing for consumers.
- Checkbook's ratings reveal sizeable differences in customer satisfaction: Of the 133 outlets rated, some were rated "superior" for "overall quality" by at least 90 percent of their surveyed customers, while others got such favorable ratings from fewer than 50 percent.
- In general, chains and franchise operations were rated lower than other stores, but there was variation among chain and franchise locations. The chain or franchise operations with the lowest percentage of "superior" overall ratings were LensCrafters (45 percent), JC Penney (48 percent), and Sears (48 percent). Costco and For Eyes tied for the highest percentage (64 percent).
- Fortunately, some area stores that offer low prices also received Checkbook's top rating for quality.

Alternatives to traditional eyewear retailers:

Most eyeglasses on the market—including those sold under popular brand names—come from just a few Italian companies with names you probably won't recognize: Marcolin, Safilo, and Luxottica. Luxottica not

only manufactures millions of pairs of glasses annually, it also sells them via more than 7,200 retail stores it runs. Several other companies seek to challenge Luxottica's near monopoly. While most of these stores' offerings are so different from their competitors' that Checkbook can't report price comparison scores for them, they offer good prices and selection and deserve your consideration.

- **Costco** (www.costco.com): Costco carries a mix of its own frames and a few designer options. For overall quality, Costco received better scores than the other big chains from its surveyed customers. It offers lots of wire rims, some chunky acetates, but fewer trendy colors and unusual shapes, compared to other eyewear outlets. Frames start at \$39 and run up to about \$199; add \$80 for single-vision lenses and \$210 for progressive lenses. An annual membership (\$55) is required to purchase glasses.
- **SEE** (www.seeeyewear.com): SEE operates 38 boutiques, including three in the Bay Area. SEE is a bit pricier than some retailers, but the company bills itself as "hip without the rip." Each frame comes in a limited-edition run of 100 pairs, and styles boast higher-end finishes than many other manufacturers offer at the same prices. In the lowest-price Core Collection, single-vision lenses with frames cost \$169 and progressive lenses with frames cost \$419 and up.
- **Walmart** (www.walmart.com): Walmart runs optical departments in many of its stores. Checkbook shoppers found a range of wire and plastic frames, many that could pass for higher-end brands. Private-label frames with single-vision lenses cost \$38 to \$172; frames with progressive lenses cost \$88-\$222. You can order in person or online.
- **Warby Parker** (www.warbyparker.com): In addition to its well-known website, Warby Parker boasts more than three dozen boutiques, including two in the Bay Area. Warby specs look like they catwalked off the streets of Tokyo or Brooklyn. New collections and designer collaborations are released several times a year. The focus is on style at an affordable price: glasses cost \$95 for single-vision lenses with frames; \$295 for progressive lenses with frames.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated opticians, as shown in Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook, and Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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