

Fred Kahn

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The year 2012 began with a loss in the ophthalmic field. It was not an economic loss. It was a deeper one. Fred Kahn passed away on January 10, 2012. If you graduated in the last decade or so you may not recognize that name. But for many of us who are getting longer in the tooth ourselves, Fred was a major figure in the early parts of our careers.

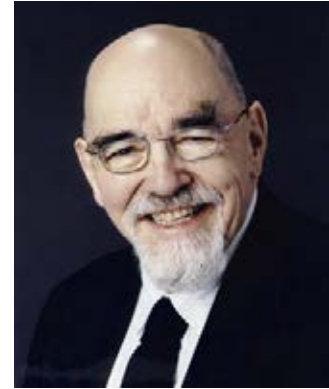
After graduating as a Civil Engineer in 1946, Fred joined the family business, Kahn Optical, and became its General Manager and ultimately Chief Operating Officer. In its day Kahn Optical was the epitome of the independent ophthalmic laboratory and frame distributor. It battled giants such as Imperial Optical, American Optical and Bausch and Lomb for its scrap of turf on the Canadian optical scene. But Fred was more than a lab owner. He travelled throughout Ontario and Western Canada selling his product and his philosophies on professional practice. He became personal friends with a great many of his clients. I considered him a mentor in many ways.

When Fred's company succumbed to the growing trend of bigger business he decided to follow one of his passions — creating thoughtful, high-end optometric offices across the country. Having visited many hundreds of offices and talking to practitioners for so many years, he understood the needs of grass roots optometry better than almost anyone. He and his interior designer associate, Larry Funston, who actually engineered and designed Fred's concepts and oversaw the construction, worked out of Zeiss Canada's Toronto quarters. Together they changed the face of optometric offices for almost two decades.

Fred's gently persuasive, reasoned manner and his love of language made him a natural communicator. He not only came up with innovative office designs that presented optometry in a powerful and professional manner, he wrote about it. He published numerous articles in professional journals

in both Canada and the United States. Ultimately he authored a book, "Maximizing the Potential of Your Ophthalmic Office", that was hailed as a bible in optometric office design. But even more important from my standpoint, Fred Kahn understood our profession, recognized its evolution and worked with many of its leaders to move it forward from its mercantile roots to the respected primary care health profession it has become. When others clung to the tried and true, wary of displacing the long held emphasis on being dispensers with a diagnostic bonus attraction, Fred got it. While remaining proud of its dispensing background, optometry had to bring its ever increasing diagnostic and treatment capabilities to the fore. He understood and championed the unique value that optometry could offer. "Unified service" was a philosophy he believed in, promoted and it was the hallmark of his designs. Gone were the little refracting lanes in the back of optical dispensaries. Across the country, optometrists who practiced in a Kahn-inspired office were seen as leading edge by their patients and their peers.

Fred's office designs evolved with the profession. In fact, it could be argued that Fred didn't follow the evolution of the profession in Canada, he was one of its leaders. When optometry was emerging as a fully recognized health care profession in the mid-sixties, Fred saw that it had to downplay its mercantile beginnings. Fred began advocating "dispensing rooms" with frames in drawers, which he eventually designed and manufactured, so that the dispenser (often the optometrist) completely controlled the frame selection process. It tied in with the fee for service concept that distinguished optometric offices from optical shops. Once the profession gained confidence and firmly established its professional status he began to advocate a whole new approach to the dispensary. It could still be controlled but fashion display became a key element and made getting glasses a pleasurable experience for the involved patient. Delegation of a number of tasks in the optometric office,



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including frame selection, and eventually diagnostic technical tasks, were assumed in the new designs. Over the years, Fred fortified not only the unified service concept of optometry but helped make the health related/medical aspects of optometric care more efficient and effective. Diagnostic pods radiating from a central core were seen more and more across the country. These designs reflected his firm belief that optometrists had strong choices in their mode of practice. A non-dispensing model was certainly valid but neither superior nor inferior to a unified service mode with an exciting high fashion eyewear boutique as an integral part of a state of the art diagnostic centre. In this context many would say he was a visionary.

Our profession has continued to evolve since Fred finally slowed down and rested after a lifetime of working with passion and love for our field. There are many beautiful new offices and our confidence is at an all time high. But I wonder if we would have been where we are today had it not been for the likes of Fred Kahn. His last book was a thick, comprehensive, delightful chronicle of his family and his life. He finished it at age 88. He gave me a copy when we visited him in his seniors' apartment in Toronto last year. I will cherish it and I just might try to do the same thing myself someday. He inspired me personally in many ways. He challenged, enriched and loved our profession. I will miss him.