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Innovation



Andre Hardy leads Optelec US.  
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## INNOVATION

### Vista's Optelec Innovates to Help People See the World Anew

**HEALTH CARE** Company Produces Products to Assist People With Impaired Vision

■ By EMMET PIERCE

As the baby boomer generation ages, Vista-based **Optelec US Inc.** is positioning itself to serve the growing market of people who need products to help them overcome impaired vision at home and in the workplace.

With its global corporate headquarters in the Netherlands, Optelec is a distributor, designer and manufacturer of technologies for people with eyesight problems. A major player in the business, Optelec has about 65 percent of the global market, said Andre Hardy, president of Optelec US, which was founded in 1985. Within the U.S., it has between 35 percent and 40 percent of the market, he added. The company's Vista office has about 35 employees.

Hardy said the U.S. company did between \$18 million and \$19 million in business in 2009. There was an increase in revenue of about \$2 million from 2008. Last year was the best in the company's history, he said.

Hardy, a former NFL running back, has transferred his passion for sports to helping the visually impaired remain active.

"I have owned and operated lots of businesses, he said. "I've worked in real estate, but nothing that excited me like

this industry."

Optelec's many products range from enhanced computer screens to portable reading devices that people can use at home or in the workplace. Some hand-held electronic devices can be used to magnify objects on a desktop or from a distance. All of the magnifiers feature multiple color contrasts, such as a yellow font on a blue background, to make reading easier.

#### Growing Need

There is a growing need for the products of companies like Optelec. The recession has hit older workers especially hard. A 2008 AARP survey found 27 percent of workers age 45 and older reported that they had placed retirement on hold because of the economic downturn. We are likely to see an increasing number of workers who are coping with disabilities, such as loss of vision, as the baby boomers reach their golden years. They represent the demographic bulge that occurred following World War II.

Products that help aging Americans see better and remain employed "are really going to be important for people who want to do their own businesses or part-time jobs, in addition to people in a traditional work environment," said Liliane Choney, executive director of Revisions Resources, a nonprofit organization based in San Diego that helps older adults remain independent.

The Foundation Fighting Blindness is a nongovernmental funder of research for retinal eye diseases. Stephanie Wells,



Photo courtesy of BerkmanPR  
Andre Hardy, president of Optelec US, says last year was the best in the company's history.

director of development for the foundation, said the devices Optelec sells are highly useful to people of all ages with retinal problems.

"Some of these diseases hit children just as they are learning how to read," she said. "They can't see the blackboard. They can't see the book in front of them. Other retinal diseases affect adults in the prime of their careers. They can't see their computer screen anymore. They can't read documents."

More than 16 million Americans report some form of visual impairment, even when wearing glasses or contacts, according to Optelec. That number is expected to double by 2030. Hardy said one thing that sets his company apart from competitors is the desire to partner with others to find solutions to vision problems. The company has formed a partnership with the Foundation Fighting Blindness to conduct a

public-awareness campaign.

#### Cross-Country Tour

The major initiative in 2010 will be the Optelec VisionZONE, a cross-country tour that will travel to 18 cities to discuss health and increase awareness of vision problems. VisionZONE events will take place during the foundation's fundraising initiative, Vision Walk. VisionZONE events will feature a variety of product demonstrations and exhibits from Optelec, its online company, ShopLowVision.com, and other corporate partners.

The VisionZONE events will allow participants in the fundraising walks to experience a variety of activities related to low vision, including navigating through an obstacle course wearing sight-reducing goggles. Hardy said the events will educate the public about ways to help people with failing eyesight. Too often, people with vision problems, such as macular degeneration, are told there is no help for them, he explained. The disease results in a loss of vision in the center of the visual field.

"There is a giant gap between diagnosis and awareness of solutions," Hardy said. "Typically, someone will go and see their doctor and they will say, 'There is nothing we can do for you.' The truth is there isn't a lot they can do for your retina because it is a degenerative disease, but we make products that allow people to function, even with macular degeneration."

Emmet Pierce is a freelance writer for the Business Journal.