

PROFILE

Helping an industry transition from one standard to another is always a tough task. And that is the task that Takahito Hikichi, GM-Marketing of Mitsui Chemicals has on his hands as he tries to get the optical industry in India to migrate from low-index to higher-index lenses.

Making MR8 The Standard For High-Index Lenses

Chemistry, innovation, dreams – that is the tagline of the \$14 billion Japanese company called Mitsui Chemicals. The company provides raw materials for industries like automotive, information and electronics, packaging as well as living and energy.

Interestingly, Mitsui Chemicals has a vision business division which also supplies raw material to leading lens manufacturers globally. These include the likes of Essilor, Carl Zeiss Vision, amongst others.

The company started its Indian operations in 2006 when it had a workforce of around four people.

Today it has offices in New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai and has expanded its manpower strength to 21 people who are led by the Managing Director, Shingo Shibata.

The company's GM-Marketing, Takahito Hikichi is candid enough to state that currently this vision division contributes only an insignificant 1% to its revenues. However, he hopes to scale this to double-digit numbers over the next few years.

Mitsui's vision division's core competency lies in manufacturing MR monomer, which is the raw material used to manufacture high-index lenses. While high-index lens might not exactly be new to the vision industry in India, there are not many companies that have taken to manufacturing it on a large scale.

And this is exactly what Mitsui wants to change and make high-index lens the de facto standard for the

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– Takahito Hikichi,
GM-Marketing, Mitsui Chemical

optical lens business. The company has started taking steps in this direction already. Takahito details how.

OP: Can you give an insight into Mitsui Chemicals' business?

TK: We manufacture monomer for high-index lenses and our MR product line ranges from 1.60, 1.67 to 1.74 index lens. The optical lens sale in India is rapidly shifting from glass to plastic lenses. However, majority of the plastic lenses sold in India is still the low-index (1.50) ones.

Amongst the various plastic lenses available in the market, the MR-based lenses are growing rapidly thanks to its thin features and light weight with superb optical quality and impact resistance.

All our MR series are produced in Japan and exported to leading ophthalmic lens manufacturers globally. We want to target lens manufacturers who will buy raw material from us and make lenses for the customers. We are already working with the leading names in the industry like Essilor, Carl Zeiss Vision, Hoya, etc.

OP: But you are talking about very limited players in the market right now.

TK: Yes, the segment is very limited and is a very niche market. In countries like Japan, Korea and the Europe, the demand is more for high-index lenses. But in China and India, the low-index lenses are more prevalent perhaps because the knowledge about these products is not very high.

We are trying to popularize MR8 so that it is as popular as CR39 and make it a hallmark for high index lenses globally.

OP: What is Mitsui doing to transition the ophthalmic trade in India from low-index to high-index glasses?

TK: We are approaching a lot of local lens manufacturing companies in India. We also work with their network of laboratories and opticians to promote the awareness about high-index lenses and why it is better than low-index lenses besides helping them position it with correct branding from our end.

We believe that the MR series lenses are already well accepted by the ophthalmic lens market for its superb functions that contribute to lens wearers' eye comfort and safety. A customer wants high-performance lens which is also very thin and of the right weight and yet very strong, clear and with good visibility. And that is true for Indian customers as well.

Our strategy is to talk about our lens performance to laboratories and retail shops through proper advertising. We haven't tried focusing on advertising and brand promotion earlier. But since last year we have been doing this for distributing MR products, especially in China and India.

"Mitsui's objective is to create awareness about high-index lenses first. We want to generate a need for the product by creating this awareness."

– Prafulla Shinde,
Assistant Manager - Marketing,
Mitsui Chemicals

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But India is very different and if we need to invest in branding activities then we would have to focus not just on the manufacturers, but also on the entire chain involved in the trade.

OP: So, you would like MR8 to become a recognized brand name?

TK: Yes, we want to make MR8 the standard for high-index lenses in India.

OP: Do you have monomer for making lens with 1.8 index?

TK: We already have the raw material to make the 1.8 index lens and can even introduce it

OP: But when it comes to high-index lenses, people will take the name of your suppliers like Hoya, Essilor etc. How will Mitsui come into this picture?

TK: We are the raw material supplier so it is obvious that our customers are better known. Usually an end-customer coming into an eyewear shop will ask for CR39 lens. We want that the optician should suggest MR-8 to him instead. That is the kind of branding that we want to do. Of course, we have never advertised for opticians till date.

OP: So you are planning to educate the opticians about MR8 as well?

TK: We already have strong relationship with manufacturers and we can ask them to utilize their network to promote MR8. We never tried to educate the optician network, because our way of thinking was to work with the manufacturer.

in India. But we feel that the 1.67 and the 1.74 index lens are more prevalent here. The demand for the 1.8 index lens is not there currently which is why we are not focusing on providing it in India.

OP: What was Mitsui's revenue growth in the past four years, percentage-wise?

TK: We have been growing our business at the rate of 30% to 40% year-on-year, especially from the automobile business division. Globally our company is a \$14 billion one but the vision division contributes just 1% to the overall business. We want to increase the vision business by 20% - 30%.

– OpticPlus Bureau

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