

the third

By Erinn Morgan

Its industrial-meets-modern-cave interior evokes more of an art gallery feel than that of an optical shop. Its marketing materials read more like a racy fashion spread than an optical ad, and the product mix includes an eclectic assortment of unusual eyewear styles. And with a name like "iis, an optical shop," it's no surprise that the design and marketing details of this Birmingham, Ala., eyewear retailer are equally creative.

"I wanted to raise the level of awareness about a broad range of unique eyeglasses and expose a predominantly traditional community to designs that could help them to express who they are," says owner Kris Childs, who founded the Birmingham iis in 1994.

Her vision has earned a customer base of more than 15,000, and its far-reaching appeal extends to local residents and international celebrities alike, including John F. Kennedy, Jr., Bill Clinton, and Lenny Kravitz.

INSIDE THE MIND

With two daughters in college and a design, marketing, advertising, fashion, and photography background, Childs was ready for a new career. "When a good friend suggested we open an

An *EB* exclusive sojourn inside the über-creative mind—and store design—of one unusual optical shop in Birmingham

A rustic, organic, and artistic environment show the creative side of optical retailing. iis, an optical shop, presents a variety of media as visual inspiration as well as a connection between the artistry of frame design and traditional works of art. Photography by Charles Walton IV



optical shop, I said 'Why not?' I knew nothing about optical, but had a sense of style that begged to be expressed," she says.

After taking a small business class and hiring an "extremely competent accountant," Childs dove into the aspect that interested her most—store design and development.

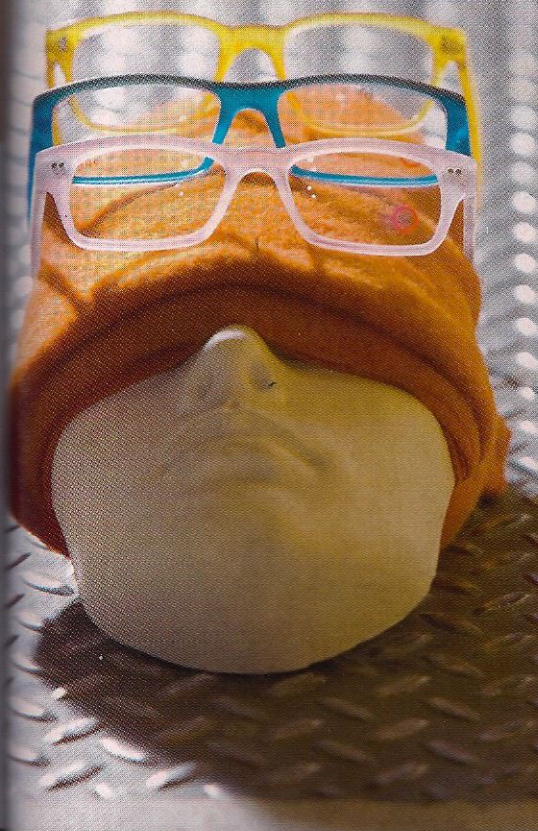
INSIDE THE DOORS

Childs' intense passion for store design shines through at iis. The 1,000-square-foot optical shop features a maze-like layout



Inside

THE MARKETING



With a long and rich history of stylish ad campaigns, *iils*, an optical shop owner Kris Childs has a flair for the creative. Her avant-garde ad campaigns feature modern-looking models donning the latest in eyewear designs.

How did she get an eye for stylish marketing? In addition to studying advertising and design, she spent several years working as a stylist for a variety of national magazines. "I also have a close friend who is a photography artist, and he has allowed me to do eyeglass shoots for *iils* for advertising and promotions with unbridled exploration," she says.

Depending on the advertising campaign's focus, *iils* points the camera either at a single model beautifully styled in the latest eyewear or in a scene that depicts a moment or event. Some of these campaign photographs were used as art.

"Our photographer would use variations of our sessions in his personal art offerings at shows and online," says Childs. "So, whereas I maintained it as spectacular advertising, he elevated it into art for sale."

Childs has also found a marketing outlet

for *iils* with a Facebook page that draws fans and followers. In addition, she works locally, collaborating with charity and art events for cross promotion.

"Every few months we also design a promotion that is sent to our email base," she says, noting that *iils*' yearly 50-percent-off weekend is a big draw for both new and existing customers.

Childs subscribes to a grassroots see-and-be-seen marketing philosophy. "I take my staff out to the hot restaurants and city events so that we are seen, and it reminds the public that it's time for some new glasses," she says.

At *iils*, service also plays a key role in customer satisfaction and retention. "We play good music and keep a small television on in a position where the customer can watch current news or sports events. This has become a very important tool at times when the optician is working on a difficult adjustment or trying to problem solve." In addition, a bottle of Prosecco is always chilling to serve to both customers or staff for celebrations and on birthdays.



complete with "caves" and "tunnels" on several levels to provide a visually stimulating experience, says Childs.

"We capture areas underneath that might normally have been ignored," she adds. "These spaces are shown only to those who can tell that something curious happens as they are looking around. Kids love to traverse the underground," she says. "We even have a hammock in one of the caves for the 10-minute catnap that sometimes is needed."

With the help of an architect friend, Childs designed the space, which boasts custom-designed counters, storage spaces, stools, and light fixtures fashioned from inexpensive building materials to achieve a "unique and creative" design finish.

Childs' quirky aesthetic extends to merchandising. "I let myself react to the design and color of the product," says Childs. "I have a generous collection of objects and surfaces to reset the way the eyeglasses relate to

each other and to the shelves."

Artwork from local artists is used throughout the space to complement and embellish the eyewear selection. This concept reflects Childs' desire for her shop to appear more as an art gallery than a retail store. As such, she uses little P.O.P., and all frames are out on display for customers to pick up and try on.

"Every frame is out for the consumer to see and touch," she says. "Letting the frames be so accessible gives the [customer] a chance to become personally involved."

Overall, Childs describes the soul of her shop as "stimulating, unique, creative, and unpretentious."

She adds, "Multiple levels of intimate displays wind through the space, which is at once hip but homey, earthy but industrial, and a symphony of perfectly choreographed chaos is designed to encourage exploration and experimentation—and create an individual experience." **EB**

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