

A Survey of the Marketability of an Agency of
Temporary Optometrists Within Michigan

Mary M. Foresman

April 1, 1991

As times change so do the demands facing the private practicing optometrist. Not everyone can or wants to spend every day of every year working in their practice. Female optometrist for instance, have a great deal of responsibilities to their families and as a result, they have a greater need for flex time. What happens when you, the doctor, are hospitalized, want to take an extended vacation, or become activated into military service? It's not always easy to find someone to fill in with or without some notice of need.

Due to the recent war in the Middle East, many optometrists in the military reserves were faced with the concern of what to do with their practices if they should suddenly be called to active duty. Some state and local optometric agencies keep a list of practitioners who are willing to fill in during vacations or sick leaves. But, these practitioners also have their own practices to maintain. A full time practice may require a doctor to be on the premises 4-5 days a week. With circumstances like this in mind, the idea of an agency that contracts optometrists to fill into offices on a temporary basis has been examined in Michigan.

Survey Design

Surveys were randomly mailed to two hundred registered optometrists within the state of Michigan. The purpose of the survey was two fold: first to determine what actually happens in the average optometrist's office when the doctor

isn't there and secondly, to discover what type of practicing optometrist would be in the market to subscribe to the services offered by an agency of temporary optometrists.

The survey questionnaire entitled " Temporary Optometric Agency Marketability Survey" consisted of ten closed questions and required approximately five minutes to complete. Questions concerning their location and mode of practice, number of years practicing, number of vacation days taken, office routines followed when the doctor isn't there and their personal interest in an agency of temporary optometrists were asked of each participant.

Results

A total of 123 surveys were returned for a response rate of 62%. A complete breakdown of the respondents is shown in Table #1. Of the respondents 11% were female and 89% were male. Solo practitioners made up 42% of those surveyed while 32% were associated with a corporation, 16% were involved in a partnership, 4% were associates, and 6% didn't classify themselves. The respondents' average number of years practicing was 18.4 with a range of .5 years to 50 years. In describing their practice location 38% of the doctors surveyed said they were located in a suburban area, 34% in a small city, 15% rurally, and 12% in an urban area.

Each optometrist was questioned about his/her actual number of vacation days taken each year and in addition, how many vacation days they wished they could take each year.

All of those surveyed take some number of vacation days with 11% taking 1-7 days, 32% 8-14 days, 33% 15-21 days, and 24% taking more than 21 days of vacation each year. Only 2% of the optometrists surveyed desire to take 1-7 days of vacation while 13% desire 8-14 days, 34% 15-21 days, and 51% want to have more than 21 days of vacation per year.

This survey elicited further information about what happens in the office while the optometrist isn't there and how any emergency patients are handled at that time. When the optometrist must be somewhere else patients only pick up and order glasses at 38% of these optometric offices while at 13% of these offices partners work longer hours, 4% said their office closes completely, 30% say a doctor fills in for them and sees patients and 15% chose other. Office routines such as how to handle emergency patients when the doctor isn't in vary from practice to practice. Twenty eight percent of those asked refer their patients to another optometrist, 26% refer them to the local ophthalmologist, 13% refer the patient to the local emergency room, 26% have a specific doctor filling in for them that sees emergency patients, and 6% chose other.

After each optometrist answered the initial questions used to categorize his/her practice and person the survey asked each participant if an agency in their area could provide licensed optometrists to work on a temporary basis would they be interested and if so how many times would they subscribe to such a service in one year. The optometrists

(7)

who responded to the survey said that 46% of them would be interested in an agency of temporary optometrists and 54% would not. Of those who were interested 77% said they would subscribe to such a service 1-3 times per year, 11% 4-6 times per year, 9% more than 7 times per year and two respondents abstained from answering.

Discussion

The information that was elicited from this survey shows some interesting trends. First of all, a larger percentage of women respondents were more interested in the services offered by an agency of temporary optometrists than their male colleagues (Graph # 1). This may have something to do with a woman's role in raising a family or with the fact that one study has shown that women optometrists on the average work less than 30 hours a week. These factors show that women optometrists have a more consistent need for this temporary service.

The type of practice that each optometrist was primarily associated with had an effect on his/her interest in the temporary optometrist (Graph # 2). The most significant conclusion is that optometrists involved in a partnership were the least interested in the agency of temporary optometrists. This may stem from the fact that even when they are gone their partner can keep the office open and generate growth through new patient contacts. More solo practitioners and associates were interested in the idea of

5

temporary help than those within a corporation. A solo practitioner who is involved in tight competition with other optometrists would not succeed if he wasn't able to see patients in a timely fashion and as a result they went to see his competitor. But, overall these results were not as significant as the partnerships preference not to use the agency's services.

The number of years that each respondent has spent practicing optometry did not influence whether the optometrist chose to use or chose not to use an agency of temporary optometrists. The shape of a three dimensional histogram (Graph # 3) comparing number of years practicing with interest in such an agency was proportional to the shape of the histogram comparing number of years practicing with disinterest in the agency. The histogram for those not interested is taller in certain spots but that is because the number of respondents it represents is actually larger. The distribution comparison is virtually identical for each ten year block of time demonstrating that the number of years in practice did not influence the optometrists' opinion about the agency of temporary optometrists.

A review of other characteristics of these optometric offices that were investigated by this survey exemplify that no statistical significance was evident to show that these characteristics influenced the optometrists opinion on the agency of temporary optometrists. These characteristics included the optometrists practice location, routines

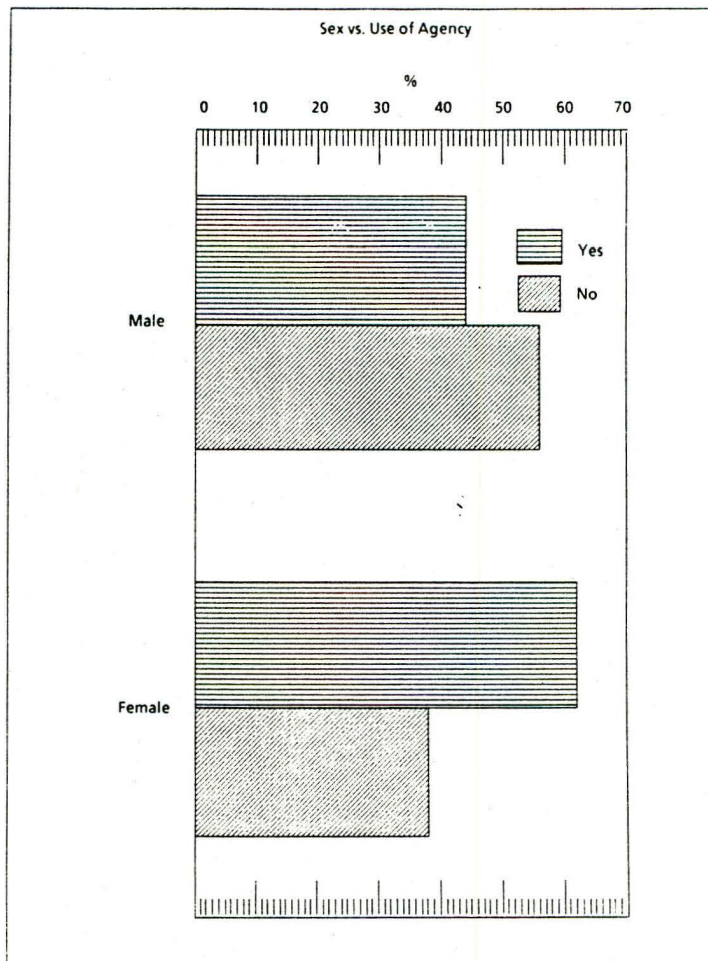
followed for each optometrists emergency patients, and the office policy followed when the optometrist can't be there. One such reason for this could be the fact that the activities of local optometric organizations keep optometrists in contact with one another and allow for working relationships to develop and grow. These relationships have been thought of as the basis for the growth that optometry as a whole has seen in recent years.

Conclusion

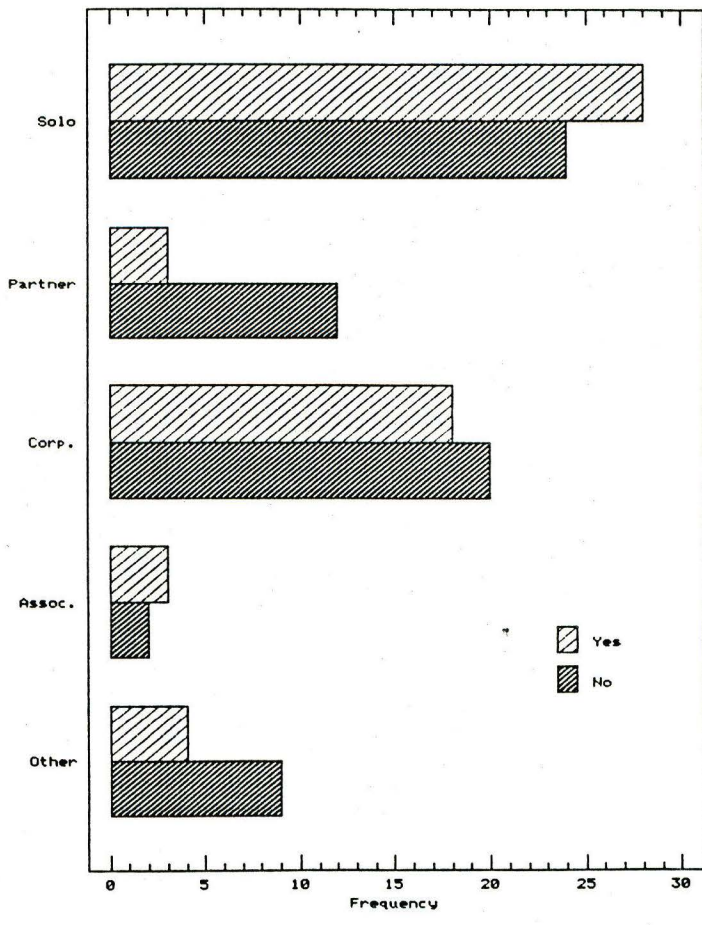
The results of this survey show that there is a market for an agency of temporary optometrists. The interest in the agency was not as strong as expected, only 46% of the respondents would subscribe to such a service. Further research needs to be done into the liability involved with such a service before it could become a reality.

TABLE # 1
Categorization of Survey Respondents

Sex	
Male	89%
Female	11%
Mode of Practice	
Solo Practitioner	42%
Partnership	16%
Corporation	32%
Associate	4%
Other	6%
Practice location	
Urban	12%
Suburban	38%
Small City	34%
Rural	15%

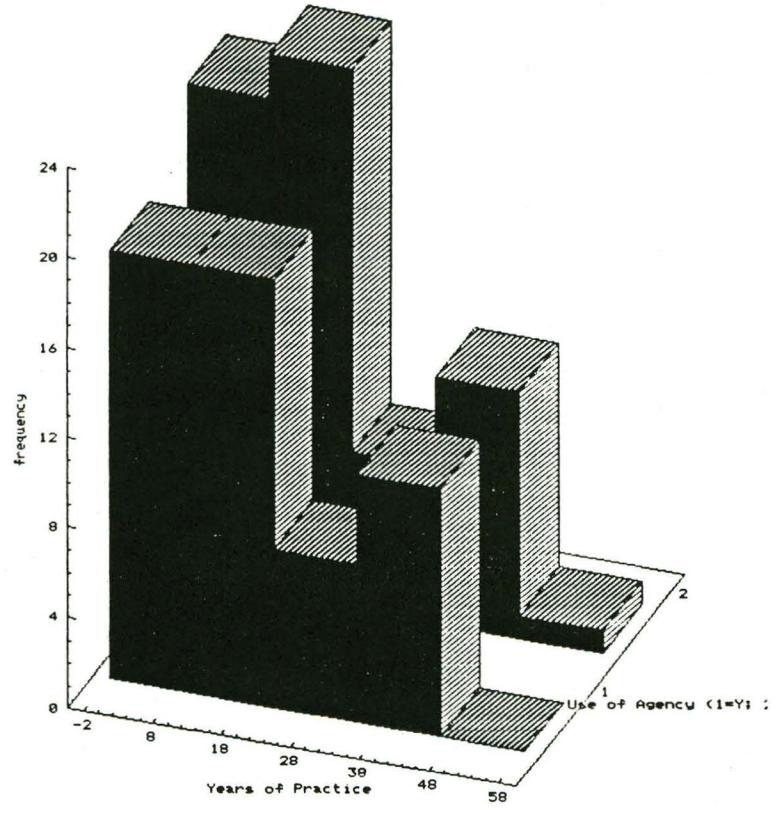


Mode vs. Agency



graphs

Three-D Histogram
Years of Practice vs. Agency Use

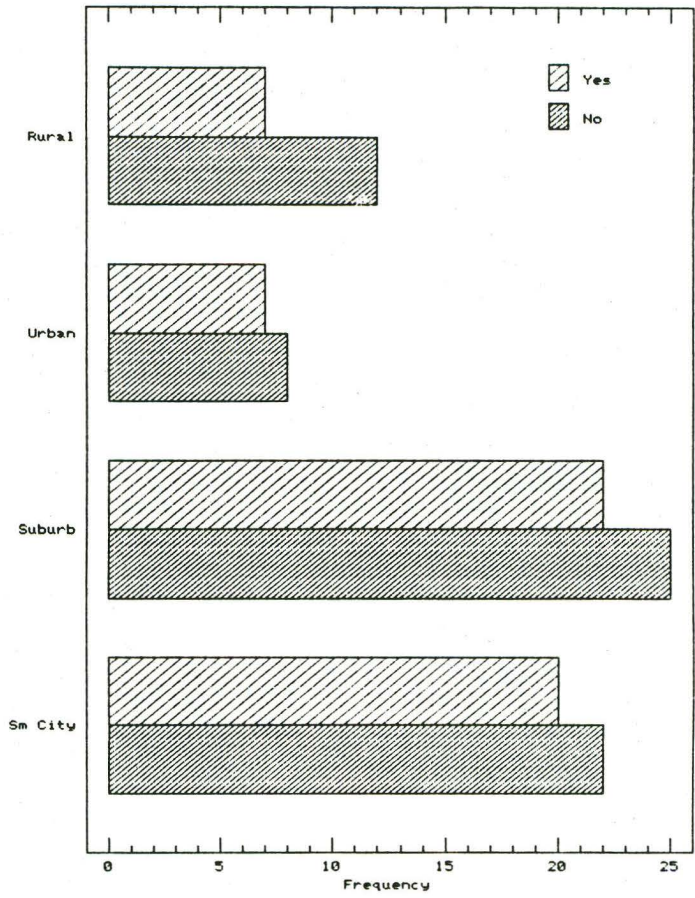


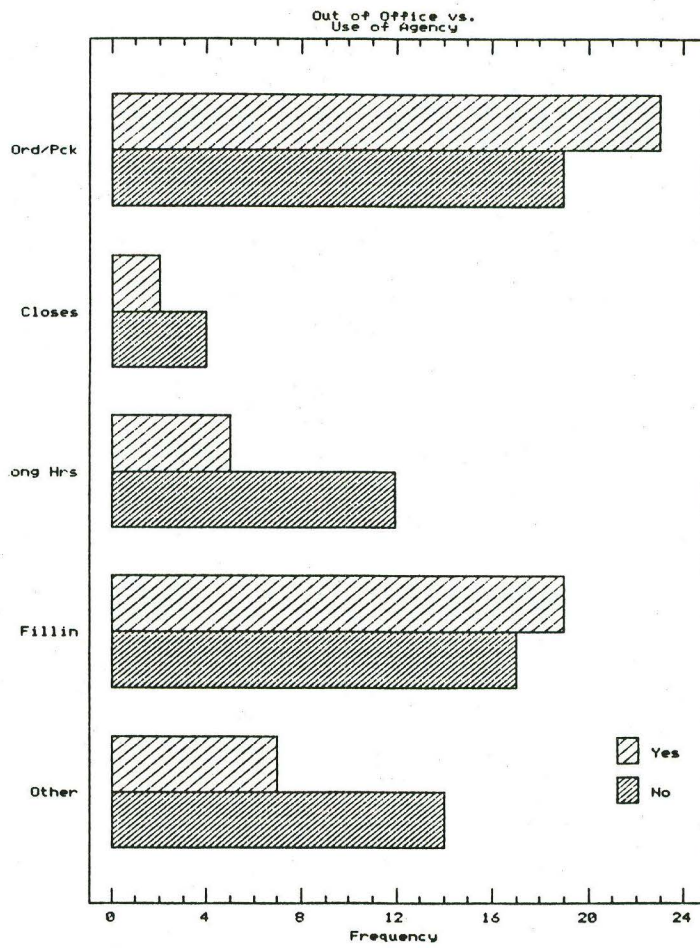
References

1. Call to Desert Storm threatens civilian practices. AOA News 1991 February 1; 29:5.
2. Johnston ER, Soroka M. A survey of optometric practice in New York state: trends and policy considerations. J Am Optom Assoc 1990; 61:836-841.

APPENDIX

Practice Location vs. Use of Agency





5

Emergency Patients vs.
Use of Agency

