

Improving the Consumer Experience

By **Fred Gebhart**, contributing writer

Successful retailers long ago realized it is faster and cheaper to resell and upsell a repeat customer than to acquire a new one. And in pharmacy, where consumers and patients can choose from big box, chain, mail order, online, and community retailers, improving the customer experience is key to repeat business.

“The whole basis of our business is to lighten our customer’s life, even by five minutes,” says Cliff Holt, PharmD, president of Hurricane Family Pharmacy in Hurricane, UT.



Beverly Schafer, RPh, and Steve Cone, RPh, co-owners of Ketterman’s Pharmacy in Seattle.

One of the surest ways to lighten customers’ lives is to make it easier to communicate. Amazon and other major retailers have gotten customers accustomed to using mobile applications on smartphones and tablets. Healthcare has been slower to adopt mobile applications, in part because of privacy concerns and HIPAA regulations

“Mobile apps, mobile refills, and text messaging are a very strong consumer preference,” says Kurt Proctor, RPh, PhD, NCPA senior vice president of Strategic Initiatives and president of the NCPA Innovation Center. “We see that chains are somewhat ahead of some independent pharmacies. In today’s pharmacy marketplace, customer convenience can make a huge difference.”

For Beverly Schafer, RPh, customer convenience for her Ketterman’s Pharmacy in Seattle, WA, includes a full line of immunizations and travel advice. Ketterman’s was the first pharmacy in the country to offer flu shots, she says, and the first to provide routine vaccine administration by pharmacists. The pharmacy administers 20 to 30 vaccines daily.

Vaccinations filled the gap for Ketterman’s Pharmacy when Schafer decided a large contract was unacceptable. “Without that low-ball contract,” Schafer says, “we had the time to come up with ways to allow these families to keep using our store even if we weren’t filling their prescriptions.”

Schafer notes that Washington state gives pharmacists broad scope to prescribe and administer vaccines, but she adds that pharmacists in other

states can set up collaborative practice agreements with prescribers as needed. Almost any pharmacy can boost vaccination rates by 10% or more simply by checking current patients for tetanus boosters, shingles, pneumonia, flu, and other common vaccines.

Providing travel advice is a natural outgrowth of serving patients who might need measles, typhoid, cholera, Japanese encephalitis, and other vaccines for work, school, vacation, and other travel. The need is there, she says, and it takes little more than letting patients know the pharmacy can provide the vaccinations.

Schafer notes that the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy and APhA have solid online modules that help with creating and running a pharmacy-based travel clinic. The CDC Health Information for International Travel, better known as the Yellow Book, updates health advice and precautions yearly.

In Gallatin, TN, Andrew Finney, PharmD, has transformed one of the country’s oldest pharmacies into one of the most modern. Perkins Drugs & Gift Shop opened in 1895. Finney’s latest enhancement is scripClip, an RFID-based will-call system for Rx pickups.

As prescriptions are filled, they go into individual bags hung randomly on the will-call rack. When the technician enters the customer’s date of birth, name, or other identifying information, a light on the prescription bag flashes. Bags can also be set to chirp. The tech scans the prescription package itself to



The ScripClip System at Perkins Drug and Gift Shop in Tennessee.



Cliff Holt, PharmD, at Hurricane Family Pharmacy in Utah.

confirm it is the right product for the right patient.

“For the pharmacy, it’s a patient safety improvement,” Finney says. “One bag, one person, one prescription. And if the patient has more than one script, all of his or her bags light up, so you never miss giving something out. For our patients, it’s convenience and speed because you never have to search for their bag. They notice the time difference.”



Finney

The system also helps boost compliance. A tech can sort the filled bags based on fill date, medication type, and other parameters. The selected bags blink for easy identification, which makes it faster to identify and contact

patients who have not picked up their scripts.

In Southwestern Utah, Holt built Hurricane Family Pharmacy from one prescription the day he opened to 12,000 scripts a month, 10 years later. There is no lack of competition from chains, big box stores and other independents in St. George County, Holt adds. What the community lacked was a pharmacy focused on improving the customer experience.

“I want to look different, act different, smell different,” Holt says. “Whether it’s using green vials because nobody else was, hiring nurses for immunizations, or including supplements and OTCs in my strip packaging, it is all about making Hurricane stand out and making life easier for our customers.”

Medication synchronization, which

he markets as a VIP program to the 70% of his client base that uses the services, also includes a popular free delivery service. In fact, 75% of his delivery service patients have never been to the pharmacy. Hurricane nurses visit patients in their homes, do medication reconciliation around the kitchen table, and set up their medication synchronization. Three days later, a driver drops off their first box of single-use strip packaging. Ten days before the next scheduled delivery, a nurse calls the patient to confirm the order.

“The typical pharmacy does 80% of their business from a three-mile radius,” Holt says. “We do the entire county, a 45-mile radius. We’re not just synchronizing patients and families, we’re medically synchronizing neighborhoods.” ■

Five Tools

Improving the customer experience starts with mindset, but it takes the right technology tools and services to turn mindset into loyal repeat customers.

Mobile apps for refills and messaging. Pharmacy websites are standard, but consumers today expect mobile, not just online. Amazon and other online giants set the bar for other retailers and service providers, including healthcare.

Full immunization services.

Why stop with flu and shingles vaccines? Pharmacists can administer vaccines against more than two dozen diseases from adenovirus to yellow fever. Some pharmacies employ nurses to free up pharmacists for counseling and other pharmacist-only duties.

Travel clinic. It’s a small step from giving travel-related vaccines to providing travel advice on staying healthy and avoiding diseases such as traveler’s diarrhea or malaria for which there is no vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Health Information for International Travel, better known as the Yellow Book, updates health advice annually.

Streamline dispensing with RFID Rx bags, robots, and other technology. Dispensing remains a key part of most pharmacy operations and few things annoy customers more than a long wait. Technology that speeds dispensing improves the customer experience.

Convenience packaging. Why stop at prescription meds? Savvy pharmacists are repackaging prescription meds, supplements, and routine OTCs in blister packs, strips, and other convenience packaging for customer convenience. Putting convenience packaging patients on medication synchronization makes their lives easier as it boosts repeat sales.