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Refresh the Pharmacy: Best Ideas for 2022

by Will Lockwood

What are the best ideas for pharmacies looking to hit the refresh button and add to their capabilities in the coming year? We surveyed a few industry experts for their take.

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By Maggie Lockwood

This is the time to do an inventory of where your pharmacy is now and where you'd like to take it. DrFirst's Heidi Polek, R.Ph., gives you the steps to follow.

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An Interesting Year

2021 TURNED OUT TO BE A YEAR WITH INTERESTING developments. Top of the list is the chip shortage, which has really affected the auto industry. The cars we drive today are dependent on "chips" to carry out many of the functions we, as drivers, enjoy. Chip makers cannot keep up with demand. From what I have read, we can expect this problem to continue in 2022.

Cryptocurrency got a boost from the launch of its first ETF (exchange-traded fund) during the year. But Bitcoin, while still not recognized by many as a legitimate currency, requires a massive amount of energy to mine this digital currency. And its large carbon footprint is a major criticism. A *New York Times* article in September stated that in 2009 you could mine one Bitcoin using a desktop computer. Today, you need a room full of specialized machines costing thousands of dollars.

Back in 2009 the amount of household electricity required to mine one coin was just a few seconds. Bitcoin's value back then was nothing compared to today. However, the amount of household electricity now required is more than nine years' worth, or more than \$12,500. With the current value of one Bitcoin in excess of \$60,000 (as of this writing), the profit incentive is there to do the mining, despite the vast amount of electricity consumed to do so.

And in 2021 we saw the emergence of synthetic biology, with a few synthetic biology companies going public during the year. Those who are enthusiastic supporters of this technology say that this change in biology can increase food production, fight disease, generate energy, and purify water. According to an additional *New York Times* article in September, money is pouring into this field from venture capitalists. Major pharmaceutical companies such as Bayer and Merck are pursuing this area, as are several start-up companies, one of which is called Ginkgo and was featured in the article. Synthetic biology could become a big business.

Another biotech company getting attention in 2021 is MeiraGTx. This is a gene therapy company developing what could be curative treatments for ocular indications, a salivary gland condition, and Parkinson's disease. Johnson & Johnson has an ownership position and is covering the costs of the clinical trials. Suggest you read up on this company.

Medical treatment is going to be a lot different in the years to come. This is certain to change the training of future pharmacists. **CT**

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blog.prescribewellness.com/entrepreneurial-community-pharmacist

Micro Merchant Systems' selection of the **Solutran S3** technology solution to process OTC (over-the-counter) card payments through its PrimePOS point-of-sale module turned out to be a good decision, especially for New York City pharmacies. That's because Solutran was recently awarded the UnitedHealthcare OTC business for New York City. This will mean that no longer will pharmacies have to use a separate device to process OTC purchases that do not interface with the PrimePOS software. The switchover by UnitedHealthcare will take place on Jan. 1, 2022. Micro Merchant PrimePOS users are being encouraged to join the S3 network.

Micro Merchant Systems now also offers its PrimeRx pharmacy management system users integration with RelayHealth's eVoucherRx program. This will provide electronic coupons to reduce a patient's out-of-pocket costs.

Arete Pharmacy Network, LLC, and **Pharmacy Providers of Oklahoma (PPOk)** have announced that AlignRx, LLC, the nation's largest independent pharmacy services administrative organization (PSAO) is now operational.

According to Melanie Maxwell, president of AlignRx, this is a milestone in the sense that it is an independent PSAO that does not require pharmacy owners to purchase from a specific wholesaler or buying group. She also points out that the interests of AlignRx pharmacies will not come second to corporate shareholder interests.

Alison Haas, Pharm.D., owner of Jackson Pharmacy & Wellness Center in Jackson, Ohio, was the recipient of the 2021 **CPESN** Luminary-of-the-Year Award. Haas was selected from dozens of nominations.



"Our luminaries are the lifeblood of the CPESN movement. Many of the leaders of local community pharmacy practice have been lighting the way for retail pharmacies as CPESN luminaries. This award celebrates one, but recognizes the volunteerism and hard work of 278 others," says Joe Moose, Pharm.D., director of strategy and luminary development.

CPESN USA was named a Federal Pharmacy Partner for the CDC COVID-19 vaccination program.

PharmSaver has been working with PMS (pharmacy management system) vendors to create a system to automatically update drug price increases. The PMS vendors include Liberty Software, Micro Merchant Systems, and PioneerRx. This updating avoids having to manually update prices from wholesaler invoices.

One pharmacy owner benefitting from the PharmSaver service is Milltown Pharmacy in Milltown, N.J. Hardik Shah, R.Ph., owner, has this to say: "It is important to have an accurate grasp of margins to ensure that we are running profitably. Knowing the wholesalers and the prices allows us to choose where to purchase a drug. It's a huge advantage to have accurate margins reflected in our system when filling prescriptions. Another advantage is the automatic updating of inventory levels. Since we use perpetual inventory, this saves us time as we don't have to enter invoices manually."

Parata Systems has announced new appointments to its management staff. **Karen Thomas-Smith** is the company's new senior VP of marketing and **Michael Young, R.Ph.**, has taken on the role of VP of pharmacy strategy.



Thomas-Smith's background includes leadership positions at 3M and Optum. Young's background includes leadership positions at Ascension and Banner Health.

"What drew me to Parata were all of the customer successes that the company is involved with on a daily basis," says Thomas-Smith. "That organizational satisfaction was evident through the abundance of customer stories that showed the direct impact that the right pharmacy technology can have on patient lives."



Young says that "after 36 years of being both a pharmacist and in organizational leadership roles, joining Parata provides me the unique opportunity to engage with our pharmacy customers and navigate the nuanced challenges unique to each of them." **CT**

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On the Road Again A snapshot of what's possible in pharmacy



by Bruce Kneeland

EARLY IN OCTOBER I DROVE from Dallas, Texas, to Charlotte, N.C. The trip was sponsored by Liberty Software, a pharmacy management platform headquartered in the Dallas area. Each of the four pharmacies I visited on the trip was selected because of some extra service they were providing that is supported by a feature of the Liberty Software platform they use.

This was my 12th formal pharmacy road trip, and as with all the others I learned things that just might help you find new, more, and better ways to grow your practice.

Dennis Song, owner of Flower Mound Pharmacy in



Dennis Song meets with customers and manages SOAP notes in his pharmacy system.



Flower Mound, Texas, is an expert on vitamin and nutritional supplementation. He meets with patients by appointment in a private consulting room. Each session includes developing SOAP (subjective, objective, assessment, and plan) notes and a follow-up letter with specific recommendations. Song says a big part of getting

people to enroll in the program is going out into the community and doing presentations. He says these not only build demand for the program but also allow him to explain the fee structure. That makes it much easier for him to charge for the service.

Max Caldwell, owner of Caldwell Pharmacy

in Wynne, Ark., is a medication synchronization whiz. He can't imagine how his pharmacy could handle its high volume and still provide personalized care without having 1,000 patients synced and the use of automation. He uses a 28-day fill cycle and assigns each patient to one of four weekly refill cycles to balance his workflow.

Caldwell says a key part of the program's success is having carefully trained technicians make calls several days prior to the refill date to find out about any changes in the patient's medication. Caldwell says they



Caldwell Pharmacy's use of automation allows the pharmacy to service a high volume of patients.



are also able to schedule the best time for pickup or delivery and suggest OTC (over-the-counter) or other items the patient may need.

Steve Hadley, co-owner of Kirby Whitten Pharmacy in Bartlett, Tenn., opened this brand-new, start-from-scratch pharmacy in the summer of 2020. Steve worked for years in health-system and chain pharmacy. A few years ago he decided he wanted to open his own pharmacy, bought the land, and built a really nice facility so he and his co-owner could provide customers with the kind of care he feels they deserve.



Steve Hadley, left, offers a variety of clinical services at his new Kirby Whitten Pharmacy, above.

In addition to having delivered more than 600 COVID shots, Hadley delivers flu, measles/mumps/rubella, pneumococcal, shingles, hepatitis B or hepatitis A/B, tetanus/diphtheria pertussis, meningococcal, HPV, and some travel vaccines. For a pharmacy not yet opened two years, it would appear it's off to a great start.

Blake Roche is a third-generation pharmacist at Roche Pharmacy OTC in Whitmire, S.C. Blake is an easy-going guy with a captivating personality. He hopes to formalize a purchase agreement with his father in the near future, but for now his job it to learn the business.

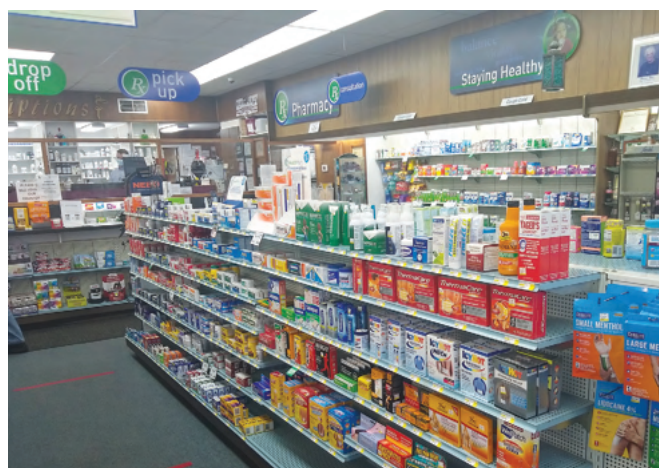
Roche took pride in showing me how the pharmacy has benefited from Pointy from Google, for which Liberty Software provides an interface. He says that as the staff scans in front-end items from their wholesaler, the products show up automatically on his website, complete with graphics and retail pricing. While he admits direct sales of these products are not large, he feels that having Pointy convey the idea to his community that the pharmacy is keeping up with technology is a major asset.

In talking with executives of Liberty Software in planning the trip, we went to great lengths to find pharmacies of different sizes, formats, and demographics. We think these four meet that criteria. Here's hoping that learning just a little bit about these pharmacies will encourage you to try something new. **CT**

Bruce Kneeland is an independent pharmacy veteran, author, and podcaster. He can be reached at BfKneeland@gmail.com and listened to at www.pharmacycrossroads.com.

We went to great lengths to find pharmacies of different sizes, formats, and demographics. We think these four meet that criteria. Here's hoping that learning just a little bit about these pharmacies will encourage you to try something new.

One of his major service offerings is immunizations. He got started right out of the gate doing the J&J COVID-19 injections. He added the Moderna vaccine and as the guidelines for freezing were relaxed, he added the Pfizer vaccine.



Roche Pharmacy stocks a wide variety of OTC and other front-end products

The Possibilities for Pharmacy



by Maggie Lockwood

WHEN DIANA LISCHIN, R.PH., renovated her Coats, N.C., pharmacy in 2019, she had a very specific goal in mind: to enhance her workflow to support the growing medication synchronization and compliance packaging programs generated by her traditional walk-in business.

"We're able to expand and offer services to that select group that really needs more time and attention, services they certainly don't get from the chain stores or mail order," she says.

Two techs handle the med sync prescriptions, which is about 55% of the volume at the two stores, as well as the compliance packaging. Even with the earmarked staff, double the number of workstations, and a ScriptPro dispensing robot handling 65% of the dispensing, the process was labor intensive. The staff would pull the robot drugs off the queue to handle the med sync prescriptions, which then required a second packaging and verification station. Lischin wanted to move away from bubble card packaging to strip packaging for a more efficient workflow that included not only an interface with the pharmacy system and automation, but networking with her second location for centralized services as well.



"Automation has enabled us to spend more time with the patients individually, discussing services that we can offer and how those might make their life easier. There are all kinds of things that we're now able to do."

— Diana Lischin, R.Ph.

After doing her research and speaking with peers on the various machines, Lischin went with the ScriptPro MP 100, a single- and multidose medication pouch packaging system that fills pouches from 100 medication packaging cassettes plus an auxiliary medication pouch packaging tray with an integrated control system. The MP checked off all the boxes for a seamless interface with Lischin's pharmacy management system and her other store. Lischin likes the MP's layout, maintenance, and the ease with which staff can add specialty drugs or supplements. Although the packages come out sealed, there's a neat way to open and reseal a package, and to indicate that this was done by the pharmacist. Verification is a quick process as well — and with a 98% accuracy rate with the automation and the interface with the pharmacy management system, there is enough staff available to handle the exceptions or corrections that rarely need to be made.

"Before I even thought about automation, my goal was to get up to 150 patients between the two stores," Lischin says. Now she's at 200 patients. Her business plan includes marketing to group homes and medication-at-home services. "Since I've gotten

the automation, I don't know how we did what we did before. The efficiency and effectiveness are key for automation. And I think we have that in spades with what we have now."

THE FUTURE OF PHARMACY

Although compliance packaging and med sync aren't new concepts, they are the direction that pharmacy is moving in the future, says Lischin. The foundation of both programs is efficiency, as Lischin says — for both the patient and the pharmacy. It can improve EQUIPP scores and decrease DIR (direct and indirect remuneration) fees, as well as improve inventory management through more control over ordering and keeping smaller quantities of expensive drugs on the shelf. Since the pharmacy knows when refills should be due, it's easier to catch a noncompliant patient and give the staff an opportunity to do more clinically.

"You've got all the information right in front of you," Lischin points out. "Refill requests, prior authorizations — it all wraps up into a big clinical picture."

Before adding the MP 100 unit, techs were specialized to handle either med sync or the packaging. Now multiple techs can manage the packaging. Other techs continue to handle walk-in customers, problem-solving, and contacting physicians. By early November, Lischin says, the pharmacy had transferred most of her patients from bubble packs to strip packaging.

"I'm gung-ho and I go a million miles a minute," she says. "I want everybody transitioned — like yesterday — and the staff reassures me that we'll get there." If a patient doesn't switch the first time, the staff is confident they will have the patient transitioned over to strip packaging soon after. "They tell me not to fret," says Lischin. "So I just let them do their own thing and run with it."

The customer service has been highly responsive and quick to troubleshoot problems, Lischin says. The company made site visits to observe how the MP 100 works in a functioning pharmacy with a robust med sync program, and how the networking between the two stores was accomplished. "ScriptPro has been phenomenal with its support," Lischin says. "I ended up buying every piece of equipment because if you're going to do it, you can't do it halfway. You have to do it to the fullest capacity and then just market the heck out of it."

Lischin is pleased that she's able to talk to more patients and demonstrate the advantages of strip packaging to them: "We're able to show patients these features and how much



Thanks to automation, Coats Pharmacy staff aren't bogged down with the mechanics of filling prescriptions as patient enrollment in the med sync and compliance packaging programs continues to grow.



simpler their life is going to be if they don't have the stress and strain of figuring out how best to take all of their prescriptions."

Lischin has learned that using automation can support the human aspect of pharmacy, but it can't replace it. "We were bogged down with the mechanics of filling prescriptions," she says. "Automation has enabled us to spend more time with the patients individually, discussing services that we can offer and how those might make their life easier. There are all kinds of things that we're now able to do." **CT**

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Refresh the Pharmacy: Best Ideas for 2022

By Will Lockwood
VP | Senior Editor

Will can be reached at
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Pharmacies turned in a strong performance in 2021. They continued to be the most accessible healthcare provider in the country and grew further into a central role in patient care.

 *continued on next page >*

GOOD THINGS SHOULD BE IN STORE FOR PHARMACIES IN 2022 AS WELL, and pharmacy technology vendors are indeed optimistic about the coming year. They uniformly report that they will be adding staff, releasing new products and services, and adding new interfaces.

As they do so, what are their best ideas for pharmacies looking to hit the refresh button and add to their capabilities in the coming year?

SERVICES ARE GROWING

Expect a continued demand for enhanced clinical services. Pharmacies have been building out the tools for patient care recently, and these efforts have only accelerated as part of their COVID-19 response.

The 2021 *NCPA Digest* digs into this topic and gives some specific examples of the trending services, which include point-of-care testing, and wellness initiatives. The *Digest* reports that the percentage of pharmacies that are CLIA (Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments of 1988)-waived facilities increased and that immunizations were the number-one wellness service offered by pharmacies. Both of these trends are outcomes of pharmacy's COVID pandemic response.

Another key highlight from the *NCPA Digest* pinpoints some of the emerging technologies that pharmacies have been deploying to address patient care and the provision of clinical services, such as appointment scheduling, clinical data exchange, and telehealth.

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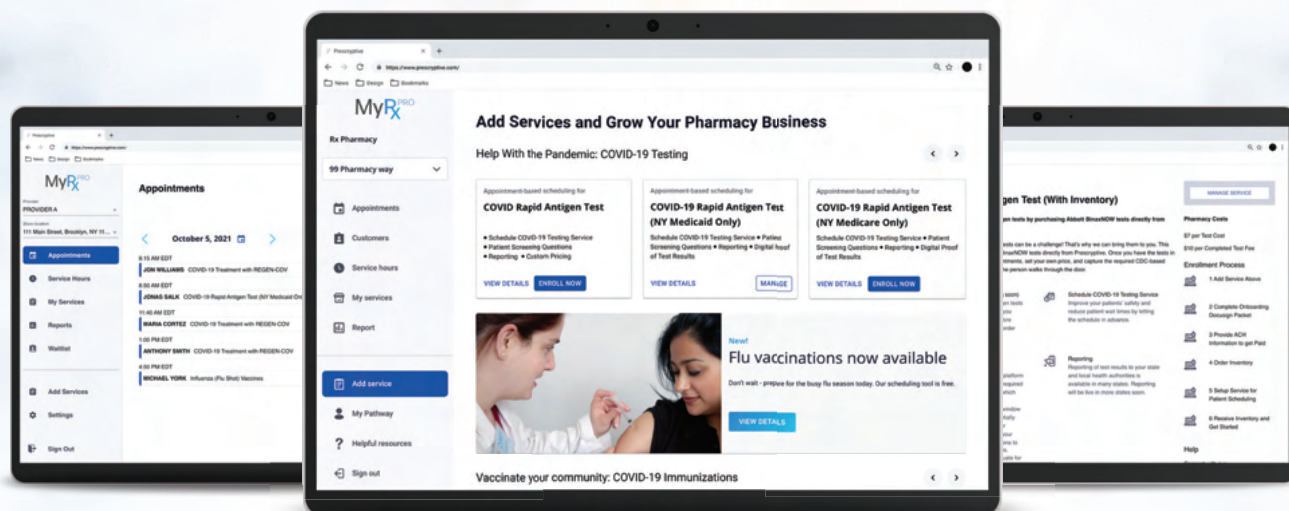
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cover story: 2022 refresh

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Is there truly demand for these services? Yes, according to the *J.D. Power 2021 U.S. Pharmacy Study*. The data shows that 51% of retail pharmacy customers report using pharmacy health and wellness services in a 12-month period, rising from 48% in 2020 and 43% in 2019. J.D. Power found that the most frequently used healthcare services are vaccinations and routine screenings, which matches up well with the report from the *NCPA Digest*. It's also worth noting that the *J.D. Power 2021 U.S. Pharmacy Study* found that health and wellness services are associated with higher patient satisfaction and spending.

HARNESSING THE TRENDS

So what are the best ideas that will help pharmacies ensure they are staying out ahead of this growing demand for services? Many revolve around increased efficiency, with a continuing need to find technology that shifts time to patient interactions and away from filling vials and managing claims. This won't come as news to most pharmacists or pharmacy

technology vendors. In fact, Micro Merchant Systems CEO Ketan Mehta sees 2022 as a time for pharmacy staff to continue efforts to provide time and opportunity for pharmacy services and patient engagement. "The ability to move pharmacists and techs from behind the computer and in front of the patients will continue to be key," says Mehta. "The goal will be to let pharmacy staff truly focus on patient outcomes and let technology handle the data and analysis and drive the profitability of the business."

WORKING SMARTER

While pharmacists will likely be working harder in 2022, they can also be working smarter, for example through re-freshed workflows to maximize efficiencies. One place to start, according to DrFirst Strategic Program Manager Heidi Polek, R.Ph., is with an inventory of technology and processes. "Pharmacies want to ensure that state-of-the-art automation and communication tools are being leveraged to deliver the best



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care collaboration and patient care possible," she says. Polek notes that artificial intelligence, or AI, should play a larger role in 2022, and pharmacies would do well to keep an eye out for AI-powered solutions.

RxSafe CEO Bill Holmes sees a need for reassessing workflow steps to help technicians improve accuracy and balance workloads. For example, Holmes points out that you can digitize the prescription verification step to allow for workload balancing, free up pharmacist time using AI, or implement pill verification and machine vision inspection for vials, pouches, and blister cards. "We can help staff-strapped independent pharmacies to ease the burden on busy pharmacists by eliminating bottlenecks and reducing the risk of errors," Holmes says.

Another area where Holmes is seeing a much broader investment by retail-focused pharmacies is packaging automation, which serves to jump-start growth even in the face of staffing shortages for pharmacies that have maxed out their manual



Bill Holmes
CEO, RxSafe

packaging capacity. Bringing in packaging automation allows a pharmacy to grow not just in the LTC (long-term care) area, but to expand into offering adherence packaging to retail patients as a way to support existing med sync program participants.

Then there's central fill, an area not typically on the radar at most community pharmacies. However, Mark Longley, chief strategy and business development officer at Parata Systems, sees many multilocation pharmacies taking a fresh look at

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Change Is Scary, But Change Is Also Good

Reviewing the typical procedures and workflows with an eye to improvement can yield results.

by Maggie Lockwood

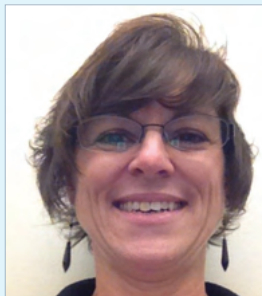
WE EVALUATE AND MAKE CHANGES IN

our everyday life even when things, like our iPhones or cars, may work perfectly well. There are always updates that pique our interest. Pharmacists, says Heidi Polek, R.Ph., strategic program manager at DrFirst, are hesitant to make dramatic changes with their businesses, and they shouldn't be. There is a lot to gain from evaluating and implementing new processes and automation. Polek wants to encourage pharmacists to look carefully at their business and acknowledge what they are doing well, but also to evaluate how it could be better. With advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), there are ways to do tedious tasks more efficiently, giving pharmacists and staff more time to spend with new clinical services and collaborative care.

"Anytime you've got something coming up, a change of the calendar year or a change of an ownership, or a big event like COVID-19 — COVID really changed how pharmacies work today, how healthcare works — that's the perfect time for a refresh," says Polek.

What are the steps to take when you're evaluating your current systems, and to consider what to change and how to implement those changes?

Define Goals: Everyone has goals for his or her business, and those goals can change as conditions change. COVID brought a lot of introspection into how we do work: Where do I need to grow my business? Is it just in prescriptions? Is it immunizations? Is it care collaboration? Map out your goals. Don't be afraid of competition. If you hear someone is doing something you'd like to try, or something similar to what you're doing, you should reach out to them and see how they did it, what their plan was.



Heidi Polek, R.Ph.
Strategic Program Manager
DrFirst

Make It Collaborative: With any new workflow you're going to impact the various roles in the pharmacy. You need to make sure that you have buy-in from your staff. Share your plans because you really are a team, especially in an independent pharmacy. Listen to their concerns and any apprehension, and do a lot of collaboration internally. There are resources through your pharmacy vendors and PSAO (pharmacy services administrative organization) as well as through fellow pharmacists. There are people with great ideas, and with your board of pharmacy, you know the regulations you're up against. You do want to make sure whatever technology you bring into play meets all the regulations for your practice.

Identify the Problem Spots: The best way to find gaps in your workflow is where you're consistently hitting roadblocks. Communication is a natural place to evaluate: It could be internal communication, or it could be external with your providers and your patients. How many times are you leaving written notes for staff members? With patients, how many times have you left a message and then the patient walks into the pharmacy? How many times are you stuck on hold with a doctor's office? Then look at how people communicate today. If you step back and

consider how computers changed pharmacy, it's dramatic. Now there is technology like artificial intelligence and SMS (short message service) messaging that gives pharmacists tools for collaborative communication — within the pharmacy and between pharmacy and provider.

Prioritize People: The DrFirst communication tools are removing workflow inefficiencies. They take the burden of data entry off the pharmacy. Artificial intelligence is not replacing people, it's automating tasks. "Our care collaboration solution lets pharmacists bring other people into a conversation," says Polek. "With our chat solution it's easy to move from a one-on-one conversation to a collaborative one with other staff or providers." A pharmacist can redirect that time toward a patient and a doctor with a care collaboration tool. Use technology to make an appointment to meet face-to-face or via telehealth. "Set up that encounter via text message versus tying up the phone lines, trying to get hold of a patient or tying up a provider's phone lines," says Polek. "The care collaboration starts with the text or email, and then the one-on-one care is best done by appointment."

Prioritize Services: Pharmacists struggle every day with someone trying to claw back at the bottom line. Focus on services that you can bill and get paid for that are outside of any type of clawback. "It's just setting yourself up to practice at the top of your license, doing those clinical things that state legislatures are starting to hand out," Polek says. "COVID really brought the value of pharmacy clinical services to the forefront. You can see how it all just starts to snowball and connect those workflows so much more efficiently." **CT**

Maggie Lockwood is VP at ComputerTalk. She can be reached at maggie@computertalk.com.

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Mark Longley
Chief Strategy and
Business Development
Officer, Parata

central fill as what he calls a cost-effective way to scale up in 2022. "Better utilization of central fill not only contributes to the viability of smaller independent pharmacies and chains," says Longley, "but also makes care more accessible for those in rural areas and areas where travel options are complicated or limited, especially for older populations." According to Longley, the market has now grown to offer scalable central fill and even what he calls micro-central fill, both of which can work for smaller pharmacies looking to establish wider ranges for distribution and offer more types of packaging.

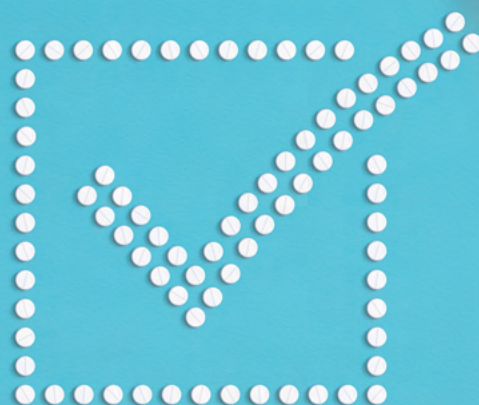
CONNECTIONS WILL BE KEY

Pharmacies will want to be on the lookout for technology that can further cement their ability to provide the highest levels of service. In this case there will be a need for fresh ideas for communicating with patients and managing the pharmacy patient interaction. This may require investments in forecasting tools, cloud-based tools for practice management and patient interactions, and interfaces and interoperability to ensure that pharmacies are best able to operate at peak efficiency and connect with all of the most current tools for serving patients, including the burgeoning field of digital health products.

Speed Script National Accounts Manager Birgit Heidel says interoperability and health information exchange will be a primary area of focus, and will lead to new pieces of the puzzle for pharmacies looking to reduce administrative burdens.

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"Streamlined interfaces and data feeds are a top priority for us," she says. "In 2022, pharmacies can look for better, more efficient reporting, for example, to state immunization information systems and prescription drug monitoring programs." Heidel expects interoperability to have a positive impact on patient care management as well, by improving a pharmacy's ability to track who on staff has engaged with patients and why.

Look for fresh ideas for interfaces too, such as those for inventory management within the pharmacy and customer loyalty and merchandising tools that can tie into point-of-sale systems on the front end.



Birgit Heidel
National
Accounts Manager,
Speed Script



Paragi Patel
CEO,
Meditab
Software

The best ideas for pharmacies in 2022 will be those that automate as many manual processes as possible, according to Meditab Software CEO Paragi Patel. "We are focused on three things," says Patel. "One, enhancing software automation to minimize user intervention; two, providing robust apps and portals to engage patients, LTC facilities, caregivers, and physicians to improve patient outcomes; and three, enhancing purchase automation to select the most cost-effective vendors while improving inventory turns. We believe that improvements in these three areas will allow pharmacies to reduce costs and engage both patients and their care team to improve outcomes."

PUTTING PATIENTS AT THE CENTER

Whatever goes onto a pharmacy's list of best ideas for 2022, it's important to think about how each one puts patient-focused pharmacy services front and center. If the trends and advice covered aren't enough to convince, note the growing group of so-called digital pharmacies marketing themselves primarily around the patient-centric model as they attempt to disrupt the market with consumer-focused technology platforms built from the ground up. Whether these pharmacies bring anything truly new to the market is an open question. They certainly aren't serving the community with such in-person services as immunizations and point-of-care testing. Are they underestimating the many ways in which traditional pharmacies can build on their ability to connect with and serve patients? 2022 will offer those pharmacies willing to put fresh ideas into practice opportunities to cement their value to patients. You can be sure that traditional pharmacies of all kinds and the technology vendors that support them will be working their hardest to make their best ideas bear fruit in 2022. **CT**

Building an Effective SMS Campaign for Health Behaviors



Brent I. Fox, Pharm.D., Ph.D.

COMPUTERTALK READERS HAVE

likely seen the reports that childhood vaccination rates dropped dramatically during 2020. The latest reports indicate a substantial drop-off during the early part of the pandemic. The good news is that weekly vaccination rates approached pre-pandemic levels by fall 2020 among all age groups examined (less than 24 months, 4–6 years, 11–13 years, and 16 years). However, vaccination rates and the proportion of children who are up to date on vaccinations remain below 2019 levels (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2784888>).

Vaccine hesitancy was the focus of this column in the July/August issue. Vaccine hesitancy was discussed in the context of individuals' reluctance to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. In terms of childhood vaccination rates during the early months of the pandemic, the issue was not vaccine hesitancy. The issue was access and demand, as providers were encouraged to delay routine vaccinations to maximize social distancing and to minimize potential exposures to COVID. These same concerns led parents to not bring their children in for routine vaccinations. Reports like the one identified above highlight the results of those decisions to delay routine vaccinations. In that July/August issue, incentives, as-



sistance programs, and general information were identified as methods to help address patients' vaccine hesitancy. Messages delivered via SMS (short message service) were identified as a conduit to share information about these methods to address vaccine hesitancy.

USING NUDGES

Recently, reports have highlighted the core components of SMS messages to nudge people to receive the COVID vaccine. (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03843-2>).

My focus here, however, is not the COVID vaccine. Instead, I want to focus on SMS “nudges” and health behaviors in general. To be fair, the domain of health behaviors is very broad. In essence, health behaviors are actions that an individual takes (or chooses not to take) that influence health or mortality. Common examples include exercising, smoking, sleep habits, medication adherence, health-seeking activities, and diet choices. In the context of health behaviors, the term nudge represents an approach to influencing decision-making through how choices are presented to patients and how the various presentation methods can impact actual decision-making.

Think of your patients who have considered stopping smoking. The health benefits of changing this health behavior (behaviors can be positive and, in this case, negative) are irrefutable. That reality doesn't make it any easier to stop. Patients have a variety of resources to help, from nicotine replacement to apps and

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support groups. Or what about patients who want to improve their adherence to prescribed medication? Reminders are a common method of improving adherence, ranging from sticky notes to apps. Medication synchronization is another popular tool. You can think of a host of other health behaviors and behavioral change approaches that have and have not worked.

Underlying the use of these tools are the mental processes that a patient goes through to make decisions. This is an extremely active area of research and provides many insights into programs and services pharmacies can implement to support their patients' efforts for healthier lifestyles. This is where nudges enter the conversation. Dr. BJ Fogg (behaviormodel.org) is one of the leaders in this area (although he is not a fan of the term nudge, because he believes it is ambiguous). According to his model, nudges must include three primary components for success: motivation, ability, and a prompt.

Without getting too deep in the weeds, let's quickly look at the core components of Dr. Fogg's behavioral model. He believes there are three primary motivators, each having positive and negative sides: sensation, anticipation, and belonging. In terms of ability, there are three ways to improve someone's ability to perform a behavior: training, providing a tool, or simplifying the behavior. Lastly, prompts in Dr. Fogg's behavioral model can take three forms: signals, facilitators, or sparks.

So how does this apply to SMS for health behaviors at your pharmacy? Let's circle back to the COVID report linked above. Including a link to schedule a vaccine appointment in SMS reminder

Your relationship with your patients can provide the entry point for discussions about the nudges that work best for them.

messages increased vaccination rates. This link is an example of a prompt — specifically, a facilitator — in Dr. Fogg's model. The presence of the link prompts the behavior, making it easy for the recipient to perform the target behavior, which is signing up for the vaccine. In that same report, terminology was used to create a sense of ownership for the vaccine. Specifically, the use of phrases indicating that the vaccine had "just been made available to you," and to "claim your dose," was found to increase vaccination rates.

But what about other health behaviors? The Pew Research Center indicates that 97% of American adults own a cell-phone of some kind, meaning that most adults in the United States have SMS capability. While variations exist in desire and capacity to send SMS messages, this remains one of the most efficient methods to reach patients and support their health behaviors. One recent review looked at nudges for health behaviors among patients with diabetes (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1262363620300574>). Behaviors of interest included medication adherence, physical activity, diet, blood glucose monitoring, and several others. This report found that nudges that included reminders and gamification were most likely to lead to the desired health behaviors.

How does this translate to your practice? First, you are not expected to be an expert in behavioral models. There are many, and while each has its proponents, no one model has been labeled *the* model. The discussion here is intended to illustrate a few points. One, research provides support for the notion that simple interventions delivered via SMS messages can have a positive impact on helping change patient health behaviors. Two, patients may respond differently to the same nudge, and similarly, a nudge that is effective for one behavior may be less effective for other behaviors. This is where relationships enter the discussion. Your relationship with your patients can provide the entry point for discussions about the nudges that work best for them. Similarly, as you explore SMS-based strategies to promote your patients' desired health behaviors, your pharmacy management system vendor will be an important partner. Your comments regarding successful and unsuccessful nudges are welcome. **CT**

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Prognostications for 2022



Ann Johnson, Pharm.D.

Tim Kosty, R.Ph., M.B.A.

INTRODUCTION

AS WE APPROACH THE END OF THE YEAR, we look forward to a post-pandemic 2022 and the return to a normal life. There are many entities and market sectors that benefit from prolonging the pandemic. However, our take is that most of the public is ready to move on, and the continued reopening of stores and businesses is expected. We expect most 2021 trends to continue in 2022, with a few twists and turns based on political decisions made in Washington.

PHARMACIST CLINICAL SERVICES

Pharmacist administration of COVID-19 vaccinations has been a tremendous success. We believe this performance has improved public perception of pharmacy, allowing the public to see pharmacists not only as product dispensers, but also as service providers. The key for pharmacy will be to find ways to leverage this change to gain access to new clinical opportunities and get paid for the services. CMS (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services) established vaccine administration fees that were adopted by private insurers. This provided the funding for pharmacies to offer vaccination clinics to the public.

Sustainable funding for pharmacist-provided clinical services is a major barrier for expansion of these services. For example, under many state standing orders, pharmacists have been able to dispense naloxone to patients who are receiving an opioid prescription. While pharmacists may be paid for dispensing the product, most are still unable to bill for the counseling that should accompany these prescription fills. The uptake of this service has been less than expected. Patients may not be willing to pay the copay required by their pharmacy benefit, and pharmacies may be losing money on naloxone prescriptions due to low third-party reimbursements. Absent funding for pharmacist counseling, the financials associated with dispensing these prescriptions are not especially attractive for pharmacies. These issues limit the uptake of the naloxone distribution through the pharmacy channel. Without the alignment of financial incentives, naloxone programs will continue to struggle in 2022.

LABOR MARKETS

The pandemic changed everyone's perception of where we work. Many companies found that employees' work was not impacted by working outside of the office. The lack of a commute added additional productive hours to the day, while reducing out-of-pocket expenses. Office work will never be the same. Rite Aid recently announced a new corporate headquarters in Philadelphia that is more of a temporary meeting place for associates than a traditional office. Employers are now more likely to be concerned with productivity and to be indifferent about where their employees reside, as long as the work is accomplished on time. These changes will have a long-term impact on office rental rates and the construction of new office buildings, which may not be needed.

It seems like every restaurant or retail location that we go into these days has a help-wanted sign on the door. Where have all the workers gone? The financial publication *Barron's* reports that the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis conducted a study indicating that 3 million people retired during the pandemic. The lack of entry-level workers will have an impact on all of us, as stores and restaurants reduce hours or limit services, e.g., carry-out only for restaurants. The shortage of workers and the need to increase wages puts retail at a competitive disadvantage compared to online competition. Retailers have relatively high fixed costs, with limited opportunity to leverage fixed costs. Comparatively, online retailers rent warehouse space — a fixed cost — and can become more profitable as their sales volume increases. We expect retail wages to increase dramatically in 2022, which will cause some pharmacies to close or consolidate with existing locations that are nearby.

INTENSE MARKET COMPETITION FOR EVERYONE!

All sectors of the pharmaceutical market are facing new competition. The pandemic accelerated the introduction of nontraditional competition, including telemedicine providers. Telemedicine refers to remote clinical services.

continued on next page

New telemedicine companies, such as Truepill, offer physician consultation services combined with pharmacy fulfillment. These organizations are identifying market niches and providing services to meet those needs.

RETAIL PHARMACY MARKET

There is intense competition for cash-paying customers. TV advertisements for SingleCare and GoodRx seem to be everywhere. These companies focus on prescription pricing and imply that consumers are being taken advantage of by using pharmacies without their services. Pharmacies that support the discount card programs contribute to the perception that their cash pricing is not competitive. There are many valid reasons for higher cash pricing, and it's beyond the scope of this column to discuss those. The commercials for discount cards do not mention the value of professional services provided by pharmacists. In 2021, Amazon pharmacy offered new services to its Prime members. Prime members are able to compare a cash price for a prescription versus an estimated copay amount before deciding how and where to have their prescription filled.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) accelerated the introduction of high-deductible health plans. For example, ACA plans may have a \$5,000 pharmacy deductible that the majority of consumers know they will not meet. Therefore, these consumers act like cash-paying customers, seeking the lowest cost for their prescriptions and accessing discount card programs. These changes apply downward pressure on retail cash prescription prices and pharmacy margins. We expect these trends to continue in 2022.

PBM MARKET

The top three PBMs (pharmacy benefit managers) process over 75% of the third-party prescriptions in the country. This market concentration has not deterred new PBMs from entering the market. For example, Mark Cuban is launching a new transparent PBM called Cost Plus Drug Company PBC. Transparency means the PBM will typically pass along 100% of the rebates and pharmacy pricing that has been negotiated without taking a markup. Transparent PBMs charge their customers a flat fee for service. While purchasers of a PBM's service desire a better understanding of their costs, it has been our experience that minimizing the total dollars spent on the pharmacy benefit is more important in decision-making than whether the PBM uses a traditional or transparent business model. We expect to see PBM market consolidation in 2022, especially in the mid-tier PBMs. These organizations lack the scale to compete with the top three PBMs and need to identify a niche market where they can be successful.

PHARMACEUTICAL MANUFACTURERS

Pharmaceutical manufacturers are experiencing increased competition in a number of areas. For example, the continued introduction of biosimilars has provided new competition for brand products. The biosimilar manufacturers are still exploring marketing approaches and tactics to gain market share. We believe this will be a payer-driven decision in the short term, depending upon the financial arrangements made with the biosimilar manufacturers. This will require pharmacies to carry multiple biosimilars of the same molecule.

The just-in-time delivery of products has reduced supply chain costs over the last 20 years. In part, this reduction eliminated safety stock. The pandemic has exposed cracks in the global supply chain of pharmaceuticals and has led politicians to call for the manufacturing of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) in the United States. Currently, approximately 80% of APIs are manufactured in China and India. New organizations, such as Bright Path Labs, provide the technology to manufacturer APIs in the United States at competitive prices.

In the coming year, we expect competition to intensify in all segments of the pharmaceutical market, which will lead to consolidation of existing companies. We expect to see the introduction of new competition as entrepreneurs identify and seek to fill market needs that may have been overlooked or not identified as meaningful.

CONCLUSION

We look forward to each new year with positive expectations. To move forward in our careers and personal lives, the ability to embrace and not resist change is paramount. In every industry and walk of life, there will always be the need to do things faster, better, and more cheaply. Be an early adopter and try new things, or at the very least, educate yourself about them. The pace of change has accelerated with technology, and there is no end in sight.

The willingness to continue learning and enhancing your skills and abilities is a strategy for handling industry and life changes. Continually updating your knowledge provides insight into the changes coming and provides time to reflect on how they may impact your company, job, and happiness. Be resilient — life happens, and oftentimes it's a challenge. To quote Woody Allen, "80% of success is showing up." Be willing to alter your approach if you are not getting the results you want. **CT**

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Community Pharmacy Holding Its Own

THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION (NCPA) held one of the first “live” pharmacy events last month with the return of its annual meeting in October. I made it a point to attend the National Alliance of State Pharmacy Association’s fall meeting held in conjunction with the NCPA event. Both were well attended, and it was evident people were happy to finally collaborate and connect in person after having so many professional and personal disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The association released its *2021 NCPA Digest* at the event, and findings show community pharmacy holding its own despite continued challenges.

Based on the 2020 data, independent community pharmacy sales were over \$67 billion, with 93% derived from prescriptions dispensed. As of June 2021, the number of independent pharmacies numbered 19,397. Net margins were slim due to continued margin pressure on prescription drugs from third-party payers and government contracts, performance incentives, and direct and indirect remuneration (DIR) fees. Coverage of prescriptions included 55% from government programs, 35% from commercial third-party programs, and 10% from other non-third-party programs.

All pharmacies are stepping up to the plate and providing expanded immunization services. I know this firsthand as a front-line immunizer who has worked more than double my usual capacity during the pandemic in providing immunization services. We have much to be proud of as a pharmacy community.



Marsha K. Millonig
B.Pharm., M.B.A.

Average sales in 2020 were nearly \$3.5 million, with a \$60,123 increase from 2019. Gross profit margins declined slightly, however, from 22% in 2019 to 21.9% in 2020. Gross profit dollars increased, however, by \$11,029. The average community pharmacy dispensed 57,678 prescriptions, 185 per day, an increase from the 57,414 dispensed in 2019. That included 30,000 renewed prescriptions (52%) and 27,678 new prescriptions (48%). These numbers have been in decline since 2016, so it was welcome news to see the increase. Many independents continue to operate multiple pharmacies, with 32% having ownership in two or more.

These numbers reflect the readiness of America’s independent pharmacy network as part of the public health infrastructure, especially during the pandemic, notes NCPA CEO Doug Hoey. The network has continued to provide innovative services to the public throughout the pandemic, including expanding immunization capacity to include the COVID vaccines. All pharmacies are stepping up to the plate and providing expanded immunization services. I know this firsthand as a front-line immunizer who has worked more than double my usual capacity during the pandemic

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in providing immunization services. We have much to be proud of as a pharmacy community.

Recently children 5 to 11 years old were green-lighted for a COVID vaccination, and pharmacies are receiving the first Pfizer vaccines as I write this column. Booster demand remains strong, in my personal experience, and many of the locations where I am providing immunizations are experiencing record numbers. There has been an increase in the number of individuals seeking vaccination for the first time, most often because of employer mandates. It has allowed for many more conversations to address vaccine hesitancy, as well as newer antiviral therapies and off-label uses of current medications. There are still too many individuals who remain unvaccinated or under-vaccinated, even though more than 433.1 million COVID vaccine doses have been given; nearly 194.2 million people have been fully vaccinated, and about 25.4 million people had received a booster dose as of Nov. 9, 2021. (See <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-09/lifting-vaccinations-can-help-head-off-holiday-surge-fauci-says?sref=s4jM8V8F>)

The international pharmacy community has also played an increasing role in providing expanded clinical services, including immunization programs and education. The International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) undertook a global survey of pharmacy's impact on immunization coverage in 2020. Some key findings:

- Some 70% of respondents confirmed that pharmacists play an active role in educating the public on vaccine-preventable diseases and serve as vaccine advocates.
- Pharmacy-based vaccination (PBV) is available in at least 36 countries and territories, 16 more than in the FIP's 2016 survey.
- Nearly 1.8 billion people can now access vaccination services at a community pharmacy around the world — almost twice as many as in the 2016 survey.
- Vaccine administration is authorized in 26 countries and territories, compared with 13 in 2016. However, 66 countries and territories have yet to authorize this — two-thirds of those surveyed — though many indicate they are in planning stages.

As of the writing of this column, current statistics for age groups fully vaccinated in the United States are:

- 75+ are at 83%
- 65–74 are at 88.2%
- 50–64 are at 76.1%
- 40–49 are at 68.7%
- 25–39 are at 60.4%
- 18–24 are at 56.2%
- 12–17 are at 50.5%

Details may be found at: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/coronavirus-covid-19/vaccine-tracker>

Study authors note that as countries report outcomes from PBV programs, more countries are likely to come on board. The study is accessible to FIP members at www.fip.org.

In addition to the immunization report, FIP recently released its global report on community pharmacy as well. Like the *NCPA Digest*, the FIP report looks at the scope of community pharmacy practice as well as its workforce, regulations, and reimbursement models. The good news is that since 2016, there has been a 12.1% increase in the average density of community pharmacists per 10,000 patient population and an 11.2% increase in community pharmacies per 10,000 patient population.

As in the United States, community pharmacy globally is meeting the ongoing challenges and continues to provide important services to patients. I'll focus on expanded pharmacy services both in the United States and globally in an upcoming column. These expanded services will be important to distinguish community pharmacies from emerging digital pharmacy competitors — a topic I'll address at the American Society for Automation in Pharmacy's annual conference March 15–17, 2022, in Amelia Island, Fla. Registration is open at <https://asapnet.org/>. This is a conference worth attending. **CT**

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