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Business

Longs tries prescription refill machine

By James Temple

Longs Drug Stores Corp. has unveiled a sort-of ATM for prescription drugs at a Walnut Creek store, a trial run of technology the drugstore chain and other retailers believe busy customers will readily adopt. Most consumers will not get a chance, however, until the machines secure the nod of state regulators and overcome the resistance of some pharmacists.

The so-called ScriptCenter, developed by Del Mar-based Asteres Inc., allows customers to pick up and pay for refill prescriptions, using a log in, password and credit or debit card. Customers must still have their initial prescription and consultation completed in person, and must order the refills over the phone or online before collecting them at the machine.

The three main advantages are that consumers can bypass growing lines at pharmacies, enjoy greater confidentiality and pick up prescription refills after normal pharmacy hours, said David Valencia, vice president of pharmacy operations at Longs. For instance, at the 24-hour Walnut Creek store equipped with the machine, at South California and Mt. Diablo boulevards, customers can pick up drugs anytime, though the pharmacy is open only from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Longs Drugs, the first retailer to test the technology in California, is operating ScriptCenters at three additional stores in San Diego. Since the first machine went live in December, 700 customers have signed on, representing 10 percent of all refills at those stores.

The company hopes consumers take to the technology the same way they have embraced other self-service options, such as ATMs and check-in kiosks at airports. If so, Longs Drugs will likely roll out the technology to high-volume stores across its chain. Other companies see similar promise. Pleasanton-based supermarket chain Safeway Inc. and drugstores Walgreens and White Cross Pharmacy have also recently obtained approval to place drug delivery machines in California stores.

Obstacles remain for the spread of the technology, however. For starters, each machine in operation has been granted a waiver only for the trial runs by the California Board of Pharmacy, the regulatory agency that governs pharmacies. Wider use would require changes to state regulations. Such rules have been written and will appear on the organization's Web site today, starting the clock on a 45-day public comment period, said Executive Officer Patricia Harris. The regulations must be approved by the full board.

Some pharmacists are lobbying against this, however. The Pharmacy Defense Fund, which represents independent pharmacies, filed a lawsuit against the Board of Pharmacy, seeking to force it to revoke the waivers. Similarly, the California Pharmacist Association filed a letter with the board, arguing that the machines could reduce patients' interaction with pharmacists.

"When someone comes in to get a refill, a pharmacist will engage in a conversation, learn of some problems they're having and help resolve those problems," said John Cronin, senior vice president and general counsel for the association. "If their only interaction is with a machine, the opportunities to help identify those things and resolve them are not there."

The California Pharmacist Association wants guarantees in the waivers or regulations that the machines will be used to increase, not reduce, pharmacists' time with patients. In other words, they do not want the machines to replace pharmacists.

Longs Drugs, for its part, says it has no plans to do so and believes the machines will naturally increase the amount of attention customers receive. "In actuality, it frees pharmacists' time up to spend more time with patients picking up new prescriptions," he said. "If we can divert some pick ups, then we are able to give patients all the attention they need."

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