

Prescription for self-service

by Kevin Kerfoot
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When Don Waugh, co-founder and chief executive of PCA Services in Oakville, Ontario, started his company two years ago, he envisioned an integrated self-service dispensing and medication-management system designed for pharmacies, hospitals, medical clinics and physicians' offices.

About six weeks ago, PCA, which provides hardware and software for drug-therapy dispensing and management, developed PharmaTrust, Canada's first point-of-care dispensing.



The PharmaTrust Dispensary, which debuted at Sunnybrook Health Services Centre in Toronto, will operate within Sunnybrook's pharmacy during a three-month trial period to evaluate patient experience. During the trial, a PharmaTrust pharmacist will process the prescriptions, verify each medication dispensed, and provide medication counseling to patients using the automation-assisted dispensary.

"Basically PharmaTrust does everything you expect to occur in a pharmacy," Waugh said.

The pharmacy customer enters his script in the machine, and after a barcode is recognized and keyed in by a pharmacist, the system confirms the patient, the medicine, the drug plan, the card number, the billing address, the co-pay and the payment preference. A robot picks the medicine and brings it to the dispensing area, where the medicine is labeled and issued to the patient. The customer also can receive counseling from a pharmacist via a telephone handset.

Waugh says the most important thing PharmaTrust does is team the pharmacist with the physician.

"There's a record of the prescription, the dispense, and notes of the counseling, so the next time the doctor prescribes, or the next time the pharmacist counsels a patient, they have complete medical records and can start addressing the patient's safety issues," Waugh said.

This system benefits the pharmacists as well.

"The first thing pharmacists think is that they're going to be put out of a job, and our answer is absolutely not," Waugh said. "We're elevating them to the same level as the pharmacist in the hospital, where they do the rounds with the physicians, counsel patients and really get involved with the management of the patient's drug therapy."

Shopper conversion and retention

Five years ago, Linda Pinney was standing in line to pick up a prescription at a retail pharmacy. Frustrated by the long wait, she got the idea for a technology that could quickly process her prescription, even when the pharmacy was closed.

Today she is founder and chief business officer of San Diego-based Asteres Inc., the first company to commercialize a system to store and deliver finished prescriptions to consumers in a retail pharmacy.

Known as ScriptCenter, the kiosk allows consumers to pick up and pay for their prescriptions 24 hours a day.

The ScriptCenter holds between 400 and 500 unique patient prescriptions. Consumers call in their prescriptions or refills and the pharmacy fills the prescriptions as usual. The customer enters an ID and passcode, or uses a biometric fingerprint scanner for identification, at the ScriptCenter. After his identity is confirmed, the user's pays for his prescription and then waits for the medicine to be dispensed.

"The chain drugs have owned the business for a long time and now they are starting to see their customers divert to mail order, grocery or mass merchants, and they have to step up their service initiative to retain the customer," Pinney said. "We're delivering a completely finished prescription and allowing the pharmacists to provide the time and service to the customers who really need it. There also are no liability issues, because the pharmacy still handles and delivers the prescription."

Consumer adoption and satisfaction

A recent Wilson Health Information pharmacy satisfaction survey found that more than 33,000 pharmacy customers cite convenience as one of the top three drivers of pharmacy customer satisfaction, along with price and overall professional service.

"Retailers are struggling with prescription volumes, staffing shortages, hours of operation, reimbursement changes and wait times, yet customers expect their prescriptions," said Jim Wilson, president of Wilson Health Information.

Short lines, convenient store hours and 24-hour pharmacy access are also key to customer satisfaction. Seven out of 10 customers of leading retail chains said they were interested in having a kiosk to pick up and pay for their prescriptions, including when the pharmacy is closed.

The ScriptCenter system has been approved for deployment in 35 states. And the kiosk has already been deployed by Safeway, Rite-Aid and Giant Foods, to name a few.

"They've been in production about a year and we've had to go state-by-state, because there was no technology out there that allows you to deliver drugs," Pinney said. "We've got a couple in trial stages and a couple of regional rollouts."

She said consumer adoption has been phenomenal.

"The consumers absolutely love the opportunity and the choice to not wait in line and pick up prescriptions when the pharmacy is closed," she said.

Pinney says grocery store chains are also looking at the service, because grocers are trying to convert more shoppers into pharmacy customers.

"Clearly, these are the very early stages but we're seeing that we don't have any retailers saying this is a dumb idea," Pinney said. "We're in that first phase and next year you might see a few retailers move in a much larger fashion, but I think the market breakout is probably in 2010."