

Patients want **better service and communication** at the pharmacy counter. They're likely to reward it with **greater loyalty**.

BY CAROL RADICE

# Remedy required

**I**N THE PHARMACY, CUSTOMER LOYALTY COULD BE UP FOR GRABS. Wilson Health Information's latest *Pharmacy Satisfaction Digest* survey found respondents growing impatient with the mounting pharmacy workloads and time-starved pharmacists whom they perceive to be too busy for proper counseling. They also complained of inaccurate scripts, delays getting their prescriptions filled and confusion about drug coverage plans. And that's just the beginning.

Of the many areas the study explored, a couple in particular—relationships and services—stand out as the ones pharmacies most need to improve. “Clearly, based on the results of our latest research, pharmacies have their work cut out for them, and supermarket pharmacies in particular may have the biggest challenge to improve and increase their business,” says James Wilson, president of the New Hope, Pa.-based health care marketing research firm.

“This study brings key customer needs to light and highlights the fact that pharmacies need to do a better job with Pharmacy 101. Perhaps it's time they take a step back to revisit the basics before moving on to the next level of service and focusing on service bells and whistles.”

It's important to point out that not all types of pharmacies are facing the same struggles and service issues. According to Wilson's research, customers who use independent pharmacies reported having the closest relationship with their pharmacist. Independents also scored highest as a trusted source of information about medications and as a source of counseling and advice, followed by food stores, clinics and chain and mass merchandise pharmacies.

Not surprisingly, doctors were listed as the most trusted source of information about medications. And while pharmacists retain a high

level of trust, it appears to be declining. In 2006, 64% of respondents ranked pharmacists “most trusted” for medication counseling; in 2007 that figure dropped to 57%. “What's also concerning is the increasing number of patients who described themselves as having no real relationship with their pharmacist, from 48% in 2006 to 59% in 2007,” says Wilson.

He suggests pharmacies explore ways to encourage conversation with their patients. “The consumer's perception is that the chance to talk with their pharmacist is not always present, and what some pharmacists fail to realize is that just making a sincere offer to speak with a customer is enough of a gesture to reverse this feeling,” he says. “Our study found pharmacy customers who are offered the opportunity to speak with their pharmacist are often more satisfied with their overall pharmacy experience, which means they are also more likely to return and to recommend their pharmacy to others.”

## EMPHASIZING RELATIONSHIPS

Mike Coughlin, president and CEO of ScriptPro, based in Mission, Kan., says the survey results exemplify the fact that the value of personal relationships cannot be underscored enough. “We've been in the business of looking at how to help pharmacies operate at a higher level of service for a long time, and if there is one underlying theme that translates into success it's the personal relationship the pharmacist has with the patient,” Coughlin says.

He adds that, in his experience, grocery retailers are working to improve their pharmacist-patient relationships and have come



to realize that loyalty built in the pharmacy department transfers to the rest of the store.

However, he sees many managers still struggling to allocate money and equipment so that pharmacists have the tools at their disposal to make focusing on relationships more of a reality. “General management in grocery has a hard time understanding just how difficult this job is or why certain technology or equipment is necessary,” Coughlin says. “They often lose sight of the fact that pharmacy is a medical profession being practiced within a supermarket. It needs to be viewed differently than as just another department.”

Not everyone in the industry is seeing a drop in the level of trust. Tim Gregorious, director of retail operations for PRS Pharmacy Services



in Latrobe, Pa., says pharmacists today are just as apt to talk to patients as they did in the past. “We need to be careful when forming conclusions that every type and size of pharmacy is experiencing these problems. The decline in trust, loyalty and com-

munication that has been reported has definitely not been the case in my experience with smaller pharmacy settings,” Gregorious says.

He surmises that Wilson’s survey results may be more reflective of the issues larger companies have with turnover or the increasing num-

ber of patients who fill prescriptions by mail and therefore see a pharmacist less often. “The value of building strong relationships is a model I grew up with and one we believe in very deeply at PRS,” Gregorious says. “My suspicion is that waning trust is happening in some types of pharmacies more than others. That said, no matter how busy we are as pharmacists, it is important to take the time to talk with customers and take care of them and not lose sight of basic retailing tenets.”

### HIGH-SERVICE HISTORY

Ken Hill, CEO of Rx.com in Forth Worth, Texas, says there is a lot of room for improvement in pharmacy, particularly with patient care.

“Today’s pharmacist alone cannot fulfill all the roles he or she is being asked to play. The good news is that there are new technologies in the marketplace today that will give grocery pharmacies the ability to perform tasks more quickly and efficiently and allow them to have more time for patient interactions,” he says.

While he agrees change is needed to improve trust, Hill, like Gregorious, says the number of people using mail order to fill scripts cannot be discounted as a factor in its decline. “Increasingly patients are not talking to pharmacists because they are not entering pharmacies for their scripts,” he says. “Progressively more third-party providers are requiring them to fill scripts via mail order.”

Patients appreciate extra services, but Wilson’s research shows basic pharmacy operating principles like patient safety, counseling, privacy and having prescriptions ready when promised are still most important. “Customers across all channels rank the accurate filling of their script as their single most important consideration when choosing any pharmacy,” Wilson says. “Also important: getting the right brand and dosage of their medicine correctly and clearly labeled, having their insurance accepted without issue and knowing their prescription will be in stock when needed.”

Making customers aware of new programs and services is also critical. “It’s basic advice, but given the number of customers who report not being aware their pharmacy offers certain services, pharmacies need to increase their promotional efforts,” he says. “By heavily advertising



their new \$4 prescription program, for example, most of those we surveyed were aware of Giant Eagle's program compared to much lower awareness numbers regarding Wal-Mart's program, which had been out longer."

### MEDICARE'S INFLUENCE

Wilson says he believes numerous customer issues concerning Medicare Part D, as well as competitive market pressure, were chief factors contributing to the decline in customer satisfaction in 2007. He says that approximately a third of consumers surveyed were in Medicare and many had questions about Part D plan coverage. "The bulk of the help fell to pharmacists and that, I believe, eclipsed the time they had to help other patients," Wilson says.

ScriptPro's Coughlin says having the right equipment can alleviate such work flow issues. "Robotics make many of the pharmacist's basic job functions easier, more efficient, free up time to do more patient counseling and explain insurance or coverage issues," he says. The pharmacist shortage, understaffed departments and the increasing number of scripts being filled make it no surprise that time to deal with patients has been limited, he adds.

"One of the biggest fears every pharmacist has is that they will make a mistake filling a script. Today's technology can radically reduce that concern. Using robotics that can do a lot of the fundamental work such as automatically preparing scripts is a simple concept, but it dramatically improves accuracy and is a powerful time-management and loyalty-enhancing tool," says Coughlin.

However, he advises retailers not to assume that all technology has been created equal and says there are large differences in how well robotic technology works and how easy it is to maintain or repair.

Hill says in his experience most of the pharmacies that have recognized the benefits technology affords tend to be in chain drug stores. "Aside from Giant Eagle, as far as I know there are no other supermarkets today using electronic health care record technology which allows a patient to go to any of a retailer's stores and have that pharmacy be able to access their prescription profile," he says.

"In the event a drug is recalled," he adds, "we have technology that can go into the centralized profile database and call each patient to let them know about the recall. What's more, patients can go on the drug chain's Web site and see all the scripts they've had filled that year and can print their profile. It's products like this that can really help pharmacies improve loyalty, but stumbling blocks for acceptance include the cost issue, failure of management to understand the value of investing in technology and the impact waning customer loyalty can have on their bottom line."

Increasing prescription compliance is another area in which technology is helping pharmacists, Hill says. He says patients with chronic diseases typically get prescriptions filled only four months out of the year. "We've got a voice response system that can call the patient, mention how refilling the script will help them control their disease and tell them that the script can be filled and ready for them to pick up at the store or be mailed to them," he says, noting that compliance more than doubles when systems such as these are used. □

## PATIENTS' TOP PHARMACY ISSUES

	CHAIN DRUG	RANK IN: FOOD	MASS
Scripts filled accurately	1	1	1
Getting brand/dose of expected drug	3	2	2
Accepts insurance with no problem	2	3	5
Has script in stock when needed	4	5	3
Scripts clearly labeled/easy to read/understand	5	4	3
Protects privacy of health info	7	7	7
Able to speak with pharmacist w/questions or concerns	7	6	6
Ability to get info about meds and avoid side effects	10	8	10
Scripts ready when expected/promised	6	8	12
Pharmacists give clear instructions about scripts	10	10	9

## PATIENTS' TOP CONVENIENCE ISSUES

	IMPORTANT	NOT VERY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT
Prescriptions ready when expected	57%	38%	3%
Ability to call ahead to have script ready	55	32	7
Convenient store hours	41	48	5
Adequate parking	37	47	9
Pharmacy conveniently located/accessible	33	47	12
Ability to get scripts filled at any store in chain	29	34	20
Ability to easily view/retrieve script records	28	40	21
No waiting to pick up or drop off scripts	23	46	22
24-hour pharmacy access	23	30	26
Drive-thru/pickup pharmacy window	17	21	32
Home delivery of prescriptions	17	18	32
Pharmacy provides refill reminders	16	28	34
After hours prescription pickup	15	28	32
Comfortable pharmacy waiting area	14	31	38
24-hour kiosk for pickup/drop-off	10	20	34

## PROFESSIONAL SERVICE ISSUES

	IMPORTANT	NOT VERY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT
Scripts filled accurately	77%	21%	N/A
Getting brand/dose/amount expected	67	28	N/A
Scripts in stock when I need them	65	31	N/A
Scripts clearly labeled/easy to read/understand	65	30	N/A
Pharmacy protects privacy of health info	63	30	4%
Able to speak with pharmacist w/questions	60	33	4
Ability to get info about meds/avoid side effect	59	35	4
Pharmacists give clear instructions about script	59	35	4
Pharmacists friendly and courteous	54	39	4
Employees courteous and helpful	49	42	5
Pharmacists understand my condition	46	39	10
Employees answer questions/solve problems	45	41	8
Pharmacists available to advise about my condition	45	38	12
Pharmacists coordinate care with doctor/others	42	40	11
Pharmacy provides info on health conditions	36	42	16
Pharmacy provides personalized care	31	41	20
Pharmacists give OTC/herbal product advice	28	37	21

Source: Wilson Health Information