

# BRIDGING THE GAP

Closing the distance between the pharmacy and front store

BY DAVID ORGEL

**F**or being in such close proximity, sometimes the distance between the pharmacy counter and the rest of the retail operation seems longer than it should.

That perceived distance creates complications for busy pharmacists trying to engage with teams and consumers in the front store, even as they manage their own workloads. Industry leaders say it's imperative to improve this situation, so that the entire retail operation can act as an effective, integrated health destination.

"I remember working as a pharmacist behind the counter, needing to rely on my teams in the front of the store to make sure they stocked the right items, or to actually go out and counsel patients about items out front," said Philecia Avery, founder and principal at Cincinnati-based Philecia Dayle LLC, who was a former vice president of pharmacy at Kroger. "So bridging the gap between pharmacy and the front of store is a topic that's very near and dear to me."

The need to bridge that gap is generating more discussion across the industry at a time of changing consumer attitudes and growing competition from a wider range of retailers — both brick-and-mortar and virtual. Industry leaders said that achieving success requires collaboration across the health ecosystem; improved consumer insights; effective technology and analytics; and a true understanding of the importance of educating consumers.

They made these points during a panel at the recent DSN Industry Issues Summit in New York City, which focused on the best ways to make progress. One of those ways is to foster a spirit of collaboration with associates, according to executives.

"It really starts from the top down with our merchant teams," said Craig Norman, senior vice president at San Antonio-based H-E-B. "All of our merchants are very collaborative. We're very communicative with each other. A great example is the collaboration between my pharmacy team and our drug store and beauty teams. We know what's going on in all of our respective areas. This presents an opportunity and an atmosphere for our pharmacy partners, who are our employees, to really play on both sides of the counter from the pharmacy and OTC, drug and beauty perspectives."

## Acting as a True Health Destination

At Rite Aid, collaboration is crucial to making sure the pharmacy and the rest of the store operate together as a health destination, said Tammy Royer, Rite Aid senior vice president of pharmacy operations. "We have a very collaborative relationship with our category management and merchandising teams to make sure that we're offering products and services across the store that can assist people who want to improve their health," she said. "It's different for each



Rite Aid's senior vice president of pharmacy operations Tammy Royer, left, and Philecia Avery of Philecia Dale LLC, right



Cardinal Health's John Fiacco, left, and H-E-B's Craig Norman, right, listen to Kantar Retail's Brian Owens, center



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Cardinal Health's John Fiacco, left, and Ben Doepke of IX, right

person, and we have to try and be smart about personalizing that for them.”

Camp Hill, Pa.-based Rite Aid looks at the challenge from both sides of the store. On the one hand, Royer said, associates spend a lot of time considering how to engage the pharmacy customer with the front end.

“But we also see from our loyalty information that we have a lot of people that shop only front end and often promotionally, but aren't utilizing the pharmacy. How can we make sure they see the value of the pharmacist who is there?” Royer said.

One of Rite Aid's solutions is its Wellness Ambassadors, whose

purpose is to engage the customer base and bring it to the pharmacy.

“That wellness ambassador is key to making sure customers are visiting the pharmacy and having conversations with the pharmacist,” she said. “So when it's flu season, for example, the ambassadors have the ability to talk to people and ask them if they want to come back and talk to the pharmacist about immunizations.”

Brian Owens, vice president at Boston-based Kantar Retail, observed that changes in the industry make it important to shrink the divide between pharmacy and the front of store. These changes include the industry's move to more of an outcome-based system, Amazon looming into the space and younger generations bringing new attitudes about privacy and trust. He called this an exciting time to make progress, in which “there's a huge opportunity right now for us to work with each other.”

### Bringing Tech to Bear

Analytics and technology have important roles to play in advancing the role of the entire store as a health destination, executives said. This includes freeing up the pharmacist to help focus on health care.

“It means creating programs for retail independents that are going to free them up, whether it's inventory management, reconciliation or other things that take time,” said John Fiacco, vice president of pharmacy transition services at Dublin, Ohio-based Cardinal Health. “This enables you to reposition the pharmacist and the pharmacy as a healthcare destination, making sure the pharmacist is out in front and promoting that.”

Having the pharmacist come out from behind the counter can leave a lasting impression on consumers, said Ben Doepke, principal of insight and strategy at Cincinnati-based IX, which leverages a range of disciplines that include psychology, anthropology, sociology and neurobiology.

## Getting in Step with Digital Consumers

It's an unavoidable topic today. Consumers are more educated and opinionated because of a wide range of digital resources available on the Internet and through social media. This has a big impact on pharmacists and their interactions with patients and associates.

“We know that social media and the Internet really impact the consumer and caregiver all the time,” said Philecia Avery, founder and principal at PhileciaDayle LLC. “As a pharmacist, I remember them coming into the store ready with their information.”

Some 47% of millennials

conduct research on social media, said Lari Harding, vice president of product marketing, at Inmar. “You have to meet the patients and consumers where they are, and that's where they are,” she said. [On social media] you can create messages that resonate with them.”

It's important to prepare pharmacists for the varied kinds of consumer queries sparked by digital engagement. “The amount of information and misinformation that exists today actually creates another level of need for our pharmacists,” said Tammy Royer, Rite Aid senior vice president of pharmacy

operations. “We spend quite a bit of time making sure we provide appropriate and timely information for our pharmacists, especially when a topic is receiving significant media coverage and will likely garner the attention of our customers, like the Ebola outbreak and Zika virus. We do the same for topics that might be harmful to people, like when a new diet that promises amazing and fast results circulates on Facebook or the Internet.”

Digital engagement should be part of a wider omnichannel approach that meets patient needs in store and from a digital and online

perspective, said Craig Norman, H-E-B's senior vice president.

That's because patients vary widely in their education levels about conditions. “The patients we are seeing at the pharmacy today are probably some of the most educated in regard to their particular disease state, Norman said. “That being said, there is still a high percentage of them that really don't have a clue. So as great as an online or digital component can be to their care, we still have to provide that basic education and communication around all of their needs, both at the pharmacy and front end.

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H-E-B's Craig Norman, left, and Inmar's Lari Harding

"I know it's a function of time to some extent, but it doesn't take that much time to come around the counter," he said. "Have you ever checked into a hotel where they come around the front, and there will be six, seven, eight people behind you in line, and this guy still comes out from behind the counter to give you the key and show you where the elevators are? It costs that guy 10, 15 seconds. And it's worth it. It makes you feel great."

Pharmacists can be empowered by having more personalized information, said Lari Harding, vice president of product marketing at Winston-Salem, N.C.-based Inmar.

"There's so much data that gets created, and it's important to use that data to push out to consumers' personalized information," Harding said. "You want to show, 'I know what you're shopping for, I know what you care about, I know what's important to you.'"

### Pivoting to Prevention

Health professionals realize the challenges involved in serving the patient, who doesn't yet have a chronic condition, and whose biggest need is preventing one. Avery positioned this topic in a way that underscored its importance.

"How do we bridge the gap for this person to ensure they have what they need?" she said. "So it's not just about the chronic state, but about this holistic person who's walking around trying to prevent hypertension or diabetes. How do we have that conversation with them when they're not in that chronic condition state?"

Owens said the industry does a very good job "from a sick-care standpoint," but added that when a patient doesn't have a chronic condition is when "I feel like we have to work harder."

He said, "I feel as though where we're falling short is that we're not doing enough for those folks who are part of that at-risk population. What does self-care look like in that environment?"

H-E-B's Norman said his company's embrace of registered dietitians has fostered the ability to boost consumer education about a wide range of solutions.

"Using RDs in a supermarket environment is just fantastic," he said. "We have begun down that path, albeit just a beginning. The customers absolutely love this interaction. They love to understand how they can shop our stores more efficiently, and understand what are the great items that are really good for them, and what are those items that maybe aren't the healthiest, but that they can have every once in a while in their particular situation."

The importance of fostering consumer education needs to be a conversation topic between retailers and their partners, Harding asserted.

"You need to put that education hat on when you're working on programs with your vendor partners, or with your community partners, or employers, or anyone else," she said. "You need to say hey, you've got a goal or objective that you need to meet, let's see how we can work education into this. Because the more educated we make all of these patients, the better our outcomes are going to be, which is ultimately what our goal is." **dsn**

## Relationships Drive Customer Loyalty

Building a pharmacist-patient relationship is no longer enough, retailers are realizing. They're finding that enhancing that relationship can pay dividends.

"The relationships that we can build on a daily basis with our pharmacy patients are going to dictate not only the patients' loyalty, but also their education level on their disease state to the degree that they are compliant and more adherent with their

medications," said Craig Norman, senior vice president at H-E-B.

H-E-B has focused implementing steps to build those relationships, even during shopping trips when a customer may not be plan to visit the pharmacy.

"We do a monthly screening program at all of our stores the second Saturday of every month, and that's a great opportunity for us to meet the patients on the floor within the drug store aisles,

and within other areas of the store in which we set up, and provide very good screening opportunities for blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol, and other things. Interacting with them and introducing them to our pharmacy services, if they're not currently a pharmacy customer, that's really key to the success."

Patient-pharmacist relationships are very important at Rite Aid, its senior vice president of pharmacy

operations Tammy Royer, said. "It's about authentic relationships," she said. "It's not about just sending an offer every time something comes up because they are a patient. It's about creating a relationship with that individual, so that you can provide something that's going to surprise and delight. It's [about] getting to that point where you have the authenticity to be able to provide it to them."

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