



Going above and beyond

**Pharmacists discuss
how they are adapting
in challenging times.**

by Chris Linville

Independent pharmacists as a whole tend to be a modest lot, simply trying to do good by their communities by providing health care solutions to patients who are often their friends and neighbors. They, like just about everyone else, have had to make adjustments to respond to the coronavirus pandemic that has thrown the world upside down.

To get a sense of how COVID-19 has affected their operations, NCPA held a virtual town hall with 13 pharmacy leaders. NCPA Innovation Center President Kurt Proctor and Gabe Trahan, NCPA's senior director of store operations and marketing, moderated the discussion that focused on a wide range of topics. (See Trahan's Front-End Overhaul column on page 52 for more town hall insights.)

In this article, we highlight some of the things independent pharmacists are doing that separate them from others. "They are tremendous representatives of what community pharmacy is all about," says NCPA President Brian Caswell.



Pictured top row from left are Matthew Fettman, Boyd Ennis Jr., Kurt Proctor, and Brad White. Pictured second row from left are Jack Dunn, Rebecca Holt, Brittany Sanders, and Jeff Scott. Pictured third row from left are John Brossart, Kathy Campbell, Gabe Traban, and Ira Katz. Pictured bottom row from left are Kelly Selby, Dawn Butterfield, and Josh Rimany.



COMMUNITY INSPIRATION

As mentioned previously, community pharmacists are not given to bragging, but during the virtual town hall they were encouraged to toot their horn a bit.

Jack Dunn, owner of Jasper Drug Store in Jasper, Ga., says, “We’re an inspiration to a lot of people in our communities, and we don’t see chains being inspirational to their communities. I made a 4-by-10-foot sign and it says, ‘Jasper Together We Will Stand.’ I’m getting a lot of feedback from it. It’s just the little things we do as independent pharmacies that make us above and beyond.”

Brad White, owner of Medicine Center Pharmacies in Canton, Ohio, says, “We’ve seen patients who have been disappointed by the promise of chain pharmacy delivery. They have told us they appreciate our curbside and drive-thru service because they walk into a Walmart and see there is no attempt to maintain social distancing or keep patients safe, and they are ticked off. We’ve had a lot of patients come in with prescriptions who say they aren’t going back there because they don’t care about their health.”

Ira Katz, owner of Little Five Points Pharmacy in Atlanta, echoes those sentiments. “We’ve picked up a lot of business because people are tired of going to the CVS or the Walgreens,” he says. “They appreciate that we are trying to keep staff safe and well along with patients safe and well, and I don’t think they get that same feeling when they go to the chains.”

DELIVERING CARE

In the last few years, the chains have been touting their delivery services for patients. Independents will tell you this is old hat for them, as they have been doing it for years, usually for free. And in their opinion, they do it better. Matthew Fettman of Davies Drugs in Canton, Ohio, is convinced of that.

“I don’t think chains can do delivery the way we can,” he says. “We have the same delivery people, and the patients get to know them. There’s no way that the chains can reproduce the delivery experience, and it is a big deal when they open their door to somebody and know who is delivering their medicine, especially now.”

Fettman points out that independents have the flexibility to handle any kind of request.

“Somebody might call us at 2 p.m. requesting an antibiotic, asking if we can deliver it,” he says. “We’ll find a way to get it to them. The chain model might be a 24-hour turnaround. I can’t imagine they are making the adjustments that we are.”

Josh Rimany, owner of Dilworth Drug & Wellness Center in Charlotte, N.C., considers his delivery service as an extension of the pharmacy’s care piece.

“We’re proud of that,” he says. “I call our delivery driver the ambassador to Dilworth because he knows everybody, so you can’t duplicate the thing without the part of it that makes the difference, which is the continuity of care

we are giving. It doesn't stop at the door, it stops with the patient receiving the medication in the right way at the right time with the care involved, and with the do-whatever-it-takes mentality. The chains will never have that."

Fettman, like other independent pharmacists, says he sometimes makes deliveries on his way home. "Patients will say you didn't need to bring this," he says. "I tell them they have supported us all these years, they have come to see us, and we haven't come out to see them. I think that means a lot to people when you tell them it was important to see them. I think that's pretty powerful, that personal touch."

MUTUAL GRATITUDE

Rimany says the mutual gratitude between his staff and the patients is extremely rewarding.

"When people compliment us, it makes all the difference in the therapeutic relationship we have with our patients and our community," he says. "We truly love our patients, so that's why they are asking us if we need anything. People are waiting 15 minutes at curbside and they are still genuinely grateful about what we are doing. I am super proud of our team and our industry."

Jeff Scott, president of Cheek and Scott Pharmacy, Lake City, Fla., says his lobby is closed and the store has a message that is automatically played when people call, saying that the primary focus is keeping patients and staff safe.

"I think people appreciate that," he says. "We've had customers offering to bring us lunch, and asking what they can do for us. That's been a real joy for the staff."

For Kathy Campbell, owner of Medicap Pharmacy in Owasso, Okla., hearing stories like that makes it all worthwhile.

"I think the reason all of us continue to work as hard as we do and put up with all that we are having to put up with is for situations like this," she says. "This is how we serve. It's been a tremendous time to be who we know we are and it shows the critical role of an independent pharmacy in the community. It's been like nothing I've seen in my career. Our ability to do what we do and why we do it is at the forefront, and it's making a profound difference."

Campbell says that the bottom line is that "loving and taking care of your community is important whether insurance pays for it or not. Love heals and care heals." ■

Chris Linville is America's Pharmacist® managing editor.

"I don't think chains can do delivery the way we can. We have the same delivery people, and the patients get to know them. There's no way that the chains can reproduce the delivery experience, and it is a big deal when they open their door to somebody and know who is delivering their medicine, especially now."

