Explaining DIR – with food?

by Chris Linville

In November 2019, NCPA announced the SurThrival series. From now through October 2020, America’s Pharmacist® will assemble some of the country’s top experts in the pharmacy industry each month to share their insights on business, marketing, technology, personnel management, and much more. It’s what every independent pharmacist needs to know to survive and thrive in a changing marketplace.

Who knew that something as convoluted as DIR fees could be explained by pizza? That’s what Jennifer and Michael Shannon, owners of Lily’s Pharmacy in John’s Creek, Ga., decided to do. In a 90-second video (bit.ly/fixdirvid) they enlisted the pharmacy’s next door neighbor Rosa Bitussi, owner of RosaMia Ristorante Italiano. After she delivers a pizza to Michael, he calls her and says how much he enjoyed it, but says he thought it was too expensive (even though it was the same price the last time he ordered it). Rosa is incredulous when Michael says he is taking money back from her. The video is done with a humorous tone but conveys an important message.

“Rosa is a star in a number of our videos,” says Jennifer, PharmD. “Food seems to be the one analogy that continues to reach people, so we use food a lot, because for a lot of people that seems to make things click.”

Jennifer and Michael, a computer engineer, have done numerous videos as part of Lily’s Pharmacy’s social media strategy, which includes a frequently updated website (lilyspharmacy.com) along with an active presence on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.

“The social media part, neither of us were really great at it, and then we realized we needed to be great at it,” says Jennifer, who opened the pharmacy with Michael in 2013. “We service all demographics, from 95 year olds all the way to 2 years old. You have to reach all of your population and social media is such a good way to do that. Over time we realized we have to get our messages out better and that’s probably the best way to do it.

WHY IS A WEBSITE IMPORTANT?

Michael built the pharmacy’s website himself. He’s working on some upgrades to make its online selling component integrate more seamlessly with the overall site. When asked why a website is important, he says, “With any business, I get a little...”

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hesitant if I can’t find them online.”

Jennifer says, “For me it’s a first impression thing. Sometimes I’ll look for a pharmacy for patients that are moving or have family members in another city or state, and if they don’t have a website presence you can’t really learn about them first before you meet them in person. That is so important, you have to put your presence out there.

Michael adds, “Good Neighbor Pharmacy has marketing resources, and they will even make you a website. Yet some pharmacies haven’t even taken them up on that offer. I don’t understand that. It’s a must at this point.”

Liz Tiefenthaler, president of Pharm Fresh Media, a full-service marketing company, says she can’t stress enough how important it is to have a well-designed and high-functioning website.

“When people visit your site, what are they able to do?” she says. “Can they perform a task that makes life more convenient, such as filling a prescription or scheduling a flu shot? Can they find up-to-date and pertinent information about something that concerns them? Are you giving them a reason to visit your site often? And when they are there, are you doing what you can to keep them engaged on your site?”

SPREADING THE MESSAGE
Jennifer says she and Michael plan much of their online activity based on seasons or holidays, or to promote services it offers, such as flu shots. Like all other pharmacies, Lily’s has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and has been getting the word out that is still open, but with some new protocols in place.

With the videos, some are planned, such as those promoting gifts and other products. The more advocacy themed videos—always done with a sense of humor—are often created based on interactions with patients.

The Shannons say the videos are inexpensive to produce. Lawson Nagle, one of the pharmacy’s technicians, does filming as a hobby and uses a GoPro camera to shoot the videos. Mike says they create basic scripts and most of the time finish in one take.

“Literally what you see is one shoot,” he says. "We don’t take too much time thinking about the words or anything, it’s very impromptu.”

From set up through filming, it takes about 30 minutes, and Nagle says she typically spends about two hours polishing and adding elements such as music.

“It’s not professional but about as professional as we can get,” Jennifer says with a laugh. “Certain patient circumstances give us the idea. For example, DIR fees are a hard thing to explain to people.”

PUTTING THINGS IN SIMPLE TERMS
After her star turn in the DIR video, Michael says that Bitussi was amazed by what she heard. “At the end she was like, ‘Wait, is this really happening to you on a regular basis?’ and we said, ‘Yeah, every day, all day.’”

“When you put it into simple terms people understand,” Jennifer says. “She was horrified. Now when she sees other pharmacy owners, she’s talking to them about it, which is so funny, but good in a way. We’ve spread a little more fire to someone who would have never heard about DIR.”

Jennifer says she did a simple video on her phone last year about something that had happened to one of her patients, and it ended up being shared 50,000 times and made its way to hospital medical directors. Georgia state legislators have seen their videos, and she has testified at the legislature on pharmacy matters.

Both Jennifer and Michael says that their social media efforts are always patient-focused.

“When Jen testifies or we do videos we’re not talking from the perspective that it’s hurting our business, we’re talking about how the patient is affected. That’s what resonates with the legislators and other key entities.”
time but it’s not that long when you consider we entered the pharmacy world right when it was getting really bad. We’re still new enough that we still have the fire to get the word out.”

KEEP IT POSITIVE
With anything the Shannons do on social media, fun and upbeat are the emphasis.

“Keep your message positive,” Jennifer says. “There are so many things that make pharmacy owners upset right now, and rightly so, but we have to stay positive in our message not only so people understand it, but they want to go to bat for us.”

The Shannons have four young children who are featured in a number of videos. They seem to be naturals in front of the camera, and a hit with Lily’s customers.

“One thing our patients say is that they feel like they are part of our family,” Jennifer says. “Everything we do involves our family and our staff. Make your social media an extension of the practice you have built.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT
When it comes to return on investment, the Shannons say they don’t have specific numbers they can put on a financial report. It’s more of an intangible reward.

“I am constantly trying to get our message out to people the right way,” Jennifer says. “That’s not for return on investment, but more to change the perception of community pharmacy, not just here but across the country. Maybe the return on investment is the change in perception.”

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KEY TAKEAWAYS
- Keep your website fresh and up to date with helpful information for patients.
- Producing quality videos doesn’t need to be expensive and time consuming.
- Keep your message light-hearted and positive, and focus on patient concerns.

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