



# A MID-AMERICAN ROADSHOW

Twelve flourishing pharmacies  
in the heartland.

**Editor's Note:** Kneeland will be conducting a "Guerilla Marketing" continuing education program at the NCPA 2016 Convention, Monday, Oct. 17, at 4:15 p.m. in New Orleans. The session will provide more details on some of the marketing programs these road trip pharmacies use.



by Bruce Kneeland

photography by Bruce Kneeland

One of the secrets of success is to learn from and build on the success of others. In today's pharmacy world, as one deals with rejected third party claims or the distress of losing a patient to a competitor, it is easy to get discouraged.

One way to overcome that disappointment and renew your commitment to exceptional patient care is to learn about your peers who are succeeding in these tough times. But where are these successful pharmacies, you say? And, what are they doing?

To answer that question, and under the sponsorship of the Independent Pharmacy Cooperative (IPC), I set out on a road trip to visit a dozen pharmacies in mid-America, that broad expanse of flatlands between the Appalachian and Rocky mountains. My wife and I drove 5,671 miles and visited 12 carefully pre-selected pharmacies in 10 states: Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas.

It was a wonderful learning experience. What follows is the first of a two-part article that will summarize a number of things the first six pharmacies are doing. The final six will be featured in the October issue.

I hope that by learning just a little bit about what these amazing pharmacy owners do, you'll be inspired to adopt or adapt an idea or two that will help you do more and be better.

So buckle up and hold on, you're about to take an amazing road trip. First stop: Amarillo, Texas.

**MARTIN-TIPTON PHARMACY, LLC** ([www.stores.healthmart.com/MartinTiptonPharmacy](http://www.stores.healthmart.com/MartinTiptonPharmacy)) is located near the central business district of this economically diverse Texas Panhandle town of about 250,000. In the largest city for 100 miles or more in any direction, owner Mark Vogler, RPh, faces as much chain competition as anyone.

Vogler is an energetic and outgoing professional who takes pride in the patient care services he provides in his 4,500-square-foot location. Vogler says making sure his staff enjoys coming to work is central to his management philosophy. One way he strives to do that is by ordering lunch for the staff on special occasions. I was in the pharmacy in late April and the staff was looking forward to its Cinco de Mayo luncheon.

One of the unique things Vogler does is manage a relationship with the Panhandle AIDS Support Organization. The program has a number of complicated requirements, and Vogler says staying on top of them takes a lot of time and specialized expertise. In simple terms, what he does is provide medication and other pharmacy services to members of the group. Reimbursement comes in the form of receiving the medications for free from the organization, providing enhanced care to the patients, and then billing the organization for the services he provides.



He also works with the local mental health department on a clozapine program. These two programs are somewhat synergistic, according to Vogler. The clozapine program has complicated protocols to comply with the Food and Drug Administration-required risk evaluation and mitigation strategy (REMS), including coordinating and monitoring lab results, patient registration, and improving compliance. But Vogler believes that being known as the pharmacy in town that is qualified and able to do these types of things enhances his image with prescribers and other referral sources.

Martin-Tipton is a family-owned pharmacy, and the family plays a big part in the pharmacy's success. Vogler says his wife does outside sales by helping to maintain relationships with prescribers. She also works with other local businesses

***Martin-Tipton owner Mark Vogler, with pharmacist Mel Smalley, tries to instill an enjoyable work environment. The pharmacy's locally ground coffee and mini-soda fountain are popular with customers.***

and is active in the Chamber of Commerce. His daughter manages their marketing efforts, including their website and Facebook page, and his son is studying pre-pharmacy.

But not everything at Martin-Tipton is clinical. As the store is close to a business district, he draws people in with a mini-soda fountain machine, frozen treats, and microwavable meals. He even has an ATM and stocks a line of locally ground coffee and packaged jerky, which seem to appeal to his customers.



**VALU-MED PHARMACY** ([www.valumedrx.com](http://www.valumedrx.com)) is one of three pharmacies operated by Justin Wilson, PharmD. The Midwest City, Okla., pharmacy I visited is housed in a medical office building in this suburb of Oklahoma City. Wilson is one of those amazing guys who finds time to serve. He is a past president of the Oklahoma Pharmacist Association, serves on the state board of pharmacy, and is an NCPA officer.

Upon entering the pharmacy I was greeted not only by Wilson but also by Carl Britton, Jr., owner of In Their Face Marketing, the marketing company Wilson uses. Britton specializes in social media, providing strategic recommendations and then executing on that strategy with professionally done and carefully timed Facebook posts.

Wilson says his social media campaigns generate positive customer comments and are effective in persuading current patients to take advantage of the other professional services he offers. They also, he says, bring in a steady number of new patients. He is committed to the strategy and promotes his Facebook page on the outdoor digital sign he has installed in front of his pharmacy on the town's major highway.

One of his enhanced care services is travel health. By working with the Oklahoma State Department of Health, his Midwest City location earned certification to become a

*Valu-Med Pharmacy's Justin Wilson (left) talks with a patient. At right, technician Cheryl Weeks helps things run smoothly.*

yellow fever vaccination center. His immunization service also includes flu (the pharmacy administered 2,000 shots last season), pneumonia, and shingles. To support the travel program, he uses a website called Travax. This allows him to provide travelers with the right vaccinations along with providing health tips and specific product recommendations geared to the area where the traveler is going.

One of the newest services Wilson offers is medication synchronization. He is taking advantage of a combination of technologies made possible by the integration of his Computer-Rx pharmacy system with PrescribeWellness's synchronization module. He finds people respond positively to his staff's invitation to participate (offered to carefully preselected patients) and he now has about 70 patients enrolled. Wilson has been providing this service for almost two years.

Wilson says finding ways to deal with patients as people is critical to his success. That is one reason he devotes so much time to his social media presence. And he points out that the happy birthday calls the PrescribeWellness service provides get a lot of positive feedback from patients who were thrilled to be remembered on their special day.

Looks matter, and **AUBREY PHARMACY** ([www.aubrey-pharmacy.com](http://www.aubrey-pharmacy.com)) in Aubrey, Texas, is a nice-looking pharmacy. The town of Aubrey is a rapidly growing bedroom community on the northern edge of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. Sensing the growth to come, owner Steve Coomes, BSPHarm, bought a corner lot about six years ago and moved his 2,500-square-foot pharmacy into a brand new 8,000-square-foot facility, complete with a drive-up window.

To help manage this busy pharmacy, Coomes is doing something I have not seen others do. Tapping into the technological expertise of his store manager, Don West, CPhT, he has implemented an online personnel management and business document retention system. West says that each person on staff has a personal Google

email address and access to shared documents on the pharmacy's intranet.

West says they use the intranet to make and report on job assignments and keep track of work schedules. If a team member wants to switch times, all that person needs to do is post, and when other team members sign in they see the request and can respond. Coomes says the system simplifies a wide variety of personnel management duties and has improved productivity.

Coomes is not afraid to couple his passion for patient care with good business sense. One thing he has done is aggressively implement a medication synchronization

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*Pictured at top left is Bruce Kneeland, wife Donna, and Aubrey Pharmacy owner Steve Coomes. At top right is Aubrey Pharmacy technician Brittany Horton.*

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program. He says he has 195 patients on it and that the program, coupled with taking better advantage of his pharmacy management system's inventory control module, has allowed him to reduce his inventory by \$30,000 while at the same time dispensing more prescriptions.

Along with medication synchronization, Aubrey Pharmacy uses the Dispill System to help people with complicated drug regimens be more adherent. He says the pharmacy has upward of three dozen people on the program. Al-

though that might not seem like many, Coomes says these patients take 15 or more prescriptions per month, representing a sizeable number prescriptions.

Like Valu-Med in Midwest City, Aubrey Pharmacy has hired professionals—The Crouch Group—to create a website and develop content for his Facebook posts. His website ([www.aubreypharmacy.com](http://www.aubreypharmacy.com)) features a number of videos that carefully explain what Aubrey Pharmacy does and how his services benefit patients. Coomes says to other pharmacy owners, "If you're not doing something special with social media, you have missed the boat."

### Roadside Attractions

What's a road trip without stopping to see something new, different, or in some cases, simply outlandish? One great roadside attraction in Amarillo, Texas is the Big Texan Steak Ranch. Opened in 1960 on the original Route 66, this "interestingly" designed business has become a road trip icon. The building is decorated with a large steer and eye-catching exterior, and an over-the-top billboard along the interstate heading into town generates plenty of consumer interest. But, that's only part of the story. The real talking point of this amazing business is the free 72-ounce T-bone steak challenge. If you can eat it all in under an hour, including a salad, roll, baked potato, and shrimp cocktail, you get the meal free—if not, you pay the full menu price of \$72.

If you are famous the world over for making baseball bats, then one thing you might want to put up outside your corporate headquarters in Louisville, Ky., is a statue of the world's biggest baseball bat. The carbon steel bat leans against the company's five-story building on West Main Street. The enlarged replica is designed to look like the one Babe Ruth used in the 1920s. Weighing 68,000 pounds and measuring 120 feet tall, the bat has been a downtown fixture since 1995.





*Under new owner Michael Butler, College Hill Drug has invested in a new waiting area, improved lighting, a durable medical equipment section, and respiratory therapy services.*



**COLLEGE HILL DRUG INC.** ([www.chdrug.com](http://www.chdrug.com)) in Texarkana, Ark., is the newest member of a three-store chain owned by Michael Butler, PharmD. Butler acquired this busy pharmacy about six months before my visit. Some of the things he shared about the transition could serve as a checklist for others who aspire to grow through acquisition.

One tactic Butler used just after being introduced by the previous owner was to take two weeks to simply watch and listen. During that time, he did not try to change any processes or procedures. Instead, he got acquainted with staff and watched customers as they came into the pharmacy. Only after going through the observation stage did he start to make changes to improve the appearance and product selection of this 9,000-square-foot pharmacy.

Among the changes Butler has made:

- He cleaned up and rearranged the store's large front end and added a comfortable pharmacy waiting area.
- He took advantage of rebates from the energy company to replace all of the lights with LED bulbs. Butler says the electrical savings are more than \$150 per month.
- A durable medical equipment department was added, including DME offices along with a whole row of medical equipment strategically placed along the main aisle to the pharmacy. That way, Butler says, "Everyone coming into the store knows we are in the DME business."

- A respiratory therapist was brought on to the DME team. This person handles the bulk of the outside sales work and is managing the rapidly growing continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) business.
- Key staff members worked in his other stores so they could get a feel for the culture of the company.
- Staff members were provided with logoed shirts and name tags.

Butler says one of his most important management philosophies is, "This is a people business and we must never get so busy that we don't stop, smile, and talk with our customers." So, he has made a special effort to train his staff to say hello and offer to help whenever they come in contact with a customer.

During my visit, Butler was on site to help "gear up" for the carefully planned change over from their current pharmacy system to the McKesson Enterprise system. Since then, Butler says the changeover took place and now, with a month under his belt, it is working fine. He has plans to implement Ateb's Time My Meds program. With all of his stores now operating on the same platform, he says he is ready to close another deal for a fourth store in Arkansas.

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Ashley Thompson, RPh, is the owner of **METROPOLIS DRUG IN METROPOLIS, ILL.** ([www.stores.healthmart.com/metropolispharmacy](http://www.stores.healthmart.com/metropolispharmacy)). This town of about 6,500 is on the very southern tip of Illinois, right across the Ohio River from Paducah, Ky. And much to my delight, it boasts having the largest Superman statue in the United States. Thompson knows how to build on the town's Superman theme (the fictional Metropolis is where Superman/Clark Kent worked) and boldly advertises Superman souvenirs and displays a variety of Superman collectables in the store.

The pharmacy is clean, well-lit, and tastefully merchandized. She is a stickler for keeping the store clean, so she has developed a list of cleaning duties and ensures that each task is done on a daily basis. The end result is impressive—and, in my opinion, one that needs to be replicated by many other pharmacy owners.

Thompson believes that people skills are her most important asset. Thompson is a self-described hugger and says she knows several patients who come in for their medication and to simply talk. She refers to these conversations as “mental health visits.”

Metropolis Drug still has personal charge accounts and a robust delivery service—even delivering non-prescription

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*Metropolis Drugs' Ashley Thompson (middle) is pictured with parents Carla and Mike Souders. The pharmacy has embraced the town's Superman heritage.*

### Arkansas Pharmacists Association—Advocating for Community Pharmacy at the State Level

While traveling from Texarkana, Ark., to Metropolis, Ill., I took the opportunity to stop in and meet with Scott Pace, PharmD, executive director of the Arkansas Pharmacists Association, along with his colleague, John Vinson, PharmD, vice president of practice innovation. The Arkansas association has an impressive record of accomplishment in the area of minimizing PBM abuses and advancing the practice of pharmacy by working with the state legislature on a number of professional services and reimbursement issues.

Part of our discussion revolved around the question of how to get more pharmacists to join and become involved in the association. While a number of pharmacy matters need to be addressed at the national level, Pace reminded me that it is at the state level that the majority of licensure, practice, and other issues are resolved. Pace says he takes pride in the skill and dedication of the APA's team of professionals, and even more importantly with the large number of practicing pharmacists who volunteer so much time, effort, and energy to the association.



***Arkansas Pharmacists Association Executive Director Scott Pace (left) visits with Bruce Kneeland.***



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items to people who live in town. Thompson says she and her sister both own pharmacies in town and compete directly with a Walgreens. She adds that Paducah, Ky., is only 10 minutes away and offers up a number of independent, chain, big box, and grocery competition. Thus, she says, she finds that delivering prescription and non-prescription items provide her with a competitive advantage, and boosts both her front-end and prescription sales.

One trick she uses to keep team members happy is a policy I find appealing. Staff members are able to consume any snack the store stocks during their shift. This benefit, along with excellent human relationship skills, means she has several employees that have worked in the pharmacy for more than 25 years.

With a 5,000-square-foot pharmacy and a nice front end, Metropolis Drug has found a market for silk flowers. She says she stays away from fresh cut flowers as a florist nearby does a great job with them. Thompson says most of the silk flowers are sold when customers are going to the cemetery, like on Mother's Day or Memorial Day. She also has a nice selection of and sells a lot of baby items. It seems Metropolis Drug serves people when they coming or going.

Katie Butt Beckort is the third generation owner of **BUTT DRUGS** ([www.butttdrugs.com](http://www.butttdrugs.com)). With a name like that, you need to find a way to deal with the innuendos and have a sense of humor, and Beckort and has done that masterful-

*At Butt Drugs, having a sense of humor is important, as marketing manager Trista Melton demonstrates with one of the pharmacy's popular T-shirts.*

ly. The pharmacy is on the main business street of Corydon, Ind., the state's first capital. As such, it attracts a fair number of tourists, and everyone knows tourists like to buy T-shirts. Butt Drugs sells a lot of T-shirts!

While not a pharmacist, Beckort understands the pharmacy is the heart of her business, and she provides the pharmacy staff a variety of technology, including a Parata Max and an Eyecon pill counter. Beckort says its professional approach results in having most of the town's physicians shop in her pharmacy, and, she says, the physicians routinely refer patients to Butt Drugs when their patients need hard-to-find medications.

The pharmacy provides a delivery service, accounting for an estimated 15-20 percent of its prescriptions. As the pharmacy is in the center of the town's main business street, a drive-up window is not feasible. So, they have implemented a curb-side "delivery" service. Patients not wanting to leave their car can pull up right at the back door, honk, and someone will come out to take care of them.

In describing Butt Drugs, you would say it is charming. It features an old time soda fountain (the malts are terrific, trust me) and a juke box. The walls are filled with apothecary bottles, many of which have been donated by custom-

ers. The shelving and décor create a nostalgic feel that just makes you feel good.

Beckort's front end features a number of locally sourced items such as popcorn, gift baskets, wines—and the previously mentioned T-shirts. To enhance her customer service appeal, she has a pay station for utilities, department store, and other bills, along with an ATM. She also sells lottery tickets.

Beckort hired Trista Melton to serve as the store's marketing expert. Melton oversees a number of marketing programs, including an electronic newsletter. She artfully approaches customers to enroll them and to expand the database of recipients. One clever feature of the newsletter is a free product with no purchase necessary. Melton also maintains the website, updates the pharmacy's Facebook page, and works closely with the downtown merchant's organization to capitalize on the various promotions it provides.

After leaving Corydon, I am proud to say, I Love Butt Drugs.

Now you know a little bit about the first six of the 12 amazing pharmacies on the road trip. To find out about the next six, you'll want to watch for the October issue of *America's Pharmacist*. ■

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#### Roadshow Continues in October

The September issue of *America's Pharmacist* saw Bruce Kneeland and his wife Donna visit six outstanding community pharmacies. But that's just the half of it. In the October issue, Kneeland's 5,671-mile journey will see him visiting six more pharmacies: Bandy Pharmacy, Salem, Ill.; Greentree Pharmacy, Kirkwood, Mo.; Towncrest Pharmacy, Iowa City, Iowa; Redline Pharmacy, Hastings, Neb; Patterson Pharmacy, Clay Center, Kan.; and Harris Drug, Rocky Ford, Colo.