

FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENTS

From multiple fronts, Paul White works to maintain community pharmacy's core values

By Nancy Wharmby

“

When I graduated from pharmacy school, I never thought I would own my own business, and I certainly never thought I would host a radio program, become a grass-roots lobbyist, fight mandatory prescription mail order, let alone tweet,” Paul White says. “But here I am, in my 45th year as a pharmacist, fighting to survive.”

White, pictured at far right, with son Brad, owns four pharmacies in northeastern Ohio. All four stores opened as Medicine Shoppe Pharmacies, and three have left the franchise system and are now named Medicine Center Pharmacy. The fourth remains a Medicine Shoppe.

“Ironically, all the interns and externs coming to us from the pharmacy schools are passionate about counseling, working with the patients and working with physicians to

influence prescribing patterns,” White says. “While that may be the reason we all became pharmacists, it certainly isn't the reality we face in our stores. I worry about whether these students will still embrace their profession and fight for its survival when they see the burdens placed upon us by third-party insurance programs, government regulation and even our own competitors.”

Like most pharmacists, White has some resentment toward \$4 generics and other programs that devalue the professional service offered by a pharmacy. He says that in his company, there were many heated discussions about matching those programs. Some pharmacists believed that it was in the best interest of the customer, while others thought it devalued the profession. But for White, it all

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came down to watching the customers. When he realized that some customers were taking one or two prescriptions to the big box stores to participate in their \$4 generic programs but leaving the remainder of the prescriptions at the Medicine Center, he knew it was time to act. Recognizing both the danger and inconvenience in having prescriptions filled in multiple pharmacies led to the Medicine Center’s \$3.79/\$9.99–30 day/90 day program. This program allowed

those customers to keep all of their prescriptions at the Medicine Center Pharmacy.

“It’s great that we are able to serve the customer and offer them the safety and convenience of filling all of their prescriptions,” White says. “But the simple economics of a \$4 prescription are a slap in the face to the consulting and professional service that we offer with every single prescription we fill.”



Kristen Barbari is the managing pharmacist at the Louisville Medicine Center.

Pushing Back on Mandatory Mail Order

Along with many other independent pharmacies across the United States, White’s stores were hit hard and experienced a significant loss of business as a result of mandatory prescription mail order. It started with several large, publicly owned, local companies, but when a consortium of

local school districts, the county government, and the city government all moved toward mandatory mail order, White and a group of 12 other local independent pharmacists decided it was time to work together. The group met with local government leaders, county school board members, and patients to provide information and literature. They explained the effects to the community tax base when millions of prescription sales dollars leave the state. They also explained the loss of a relationship between the customer and their pharmacist, along with the loss of customer service to the community and its citizens. Their campaign, “Our customers deserve a choice; Our businesses deserve a voice,” ultimately resulted in both the city and county governments reversing their mandatory mail order decision, though unfortunately the consortium of school districts did not. Mail order still exists as an option for the city and county employees, but their local independent pharmacy is once again available to serve them.

Going on the Air

Along with wondering how to survive, they also wonder where to advertise. The Internet and cable TV have diluted once traditional forms of advertising, and it seems as if no one vehicle reaches as many people as it used to in the past. White has consistently advertised on local radio for more than 25 years as the voice of the company, recording his own commercials. Early in 2011, a radio station came to White with the idea of an hour-long show every Friday morning from 9–10 a.m., and “Health Matters with the Medicine Center Pharmacy” was born. White invited his son Brad to join him, and together they enjoy educating both customers and listeners on a variety of health related topics.

The company’s marketing manager was able to obtain

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sponsors for the show to help defray the cost, and those sponsors each have commercial time during the show. Working through a local hospital, physician guests have been secured in the areas of oncology, orthopaedics, ear, nose and throat, dentistry, pain management, gastroenterology, diabetes, and many more. There have also been public service guests from local nursing homes, a local attorney discussing living wills and medical power of attorney, the Veteran's Administration and others. The show has become a forum for health related topics, as well as related areas of public service. The show can be heard on the company's website at www.medshoprx.com.

Each week an email is sent to the customer base announcing the topic and guest for that week. It is also posted on Facebook and Twitter. Customers are invited to email a question or call in during the live show to have their questions answered. The goal is to open a dialogue with customers and remind them that their Medicine Center pharmacist is available to answer their questions all day, every day. Paul, Brad, and all of the Medicine Center pharmacists are the health care professionals who are always accessible.

"Working with the physician guests has also provided a unique opportunity to explain our services to each of those physicians," Paul White says. "It allows us to explain to the orthopaedic surgeon that we are ABCOPP [American Board of Certification in Orthotics, Prosthetics and Pedorthics] accredited and can both sell and bill for DME products. It allows us to introduce our compounding facility to the pain management physician and our blood pressure screenings to the internal medicine physician."

White continues, "The physician appreciates the free publicity and we gain a valuable relationship that we would not be able to achieve by simply making a marketing call

to a busy office. Customers, physicians, friends and family comment on the show and we know our listening audience and our customer base are benefiting. As a result, we know our business is benefiting as well."

Building Businesses

In 1976, Paul White received a postcard from Medicine Shoppe International, a franchise system based in St. Louis, explaining a new concept in pharmacy. It had information about a professional pharmacy, a 15-minute guarantee and the opportunity to be independent. White was hooked and



Brad and Paul White on the air hosting their weekly radio show.

together with his wife, Susan, opened his first pharmacy in July 1976 in Canton, Ohio.

It was a slow start and three years before White had a day off. Slowly and consistently, the business began to grow and in 1981 he was able to hire a second pharmacist whom he shared 50/50 with another independent pharmacy operation in a neighboring community. As it turned out, 1981 proved to be a good year as the company moved from a manual typewriter to an electric typewriter to crank out all those prescription labels. And all these years later, he is still convinced that those typewriters were faster and more efficient than any Intel Processor from Dell.

In 1987, two new divisions were brought to the company. The first was a mail order division specializing in diabetes products called Diabetic Express. The second was an IV infusion supply company, Professional Pharmacy Services. The company continued to grow and diversify, always looking for that specialty niche that set them apart from their competitors.

In 1988 Medicine Shoppe was in the area doing site selections and directed White to a great location in the neighboring town of Louisville, Ohio, and his second Medicine Shoppe opened in November of that year. Growth came quickly and steadily in that market, fueling excitement to open a third store in 1991 in Minerva, Ohio, and a fourth

store in New Philadelphia, Ohio, in 1994. In 2000 Paul opened the ½ Off and Hot Buys Store, a unique close out arena that he is sad to say began with the purchase of the inventory of several independent pharmacies that had closed their doors. The last addition was a closed door pharmacy that opened in 2010, servicing several nursing homes, group homes, assisted living facilities and correctional facilities. As their franchise licenses expired, three of the stores left The Medicine Shoppe franchise system and were renamed Medicine Center Pharmacy. The store in New Philadelphia remains a Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy.

The company has always been a family business. White always refers to his wife Susan as the best technician the company ever had. She worked side by side with him as his technician for most of the early years and often went to union meetings and local companies trying to sign up large groups of people as Medicine Shoppe customers. Today, she is the secretary of the company and is responsible for financial statements and payroll. Brad White graduated from the Purdue University College of Pharmacy in 1996 and joined the company as a pharmacist. In 1997, Brad became manager of the New Philadelphia store and under his leadership, the New Philadelphia Medicine Shoppe became the second PCAB (Pharmacy Compounding Accreditation Board) accredited pharmacy in the state

Paul White describes his wife Susan as "the best technician the company ever had."



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of Ohio and the first Medicine Shoppe in the country to achieve that certification. Paul's daughter Joy graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in accounting and joined Susan in the office in 2006.

Continuity and Diversity

Today the company employs 70 people throughout the different divisions and is most proud of the continuity and longevity of their staff. The average length of service with the company is 7-1/2 years, and seven employees have been with the company at least 20 years. There are 13 pharmacists in the company with diverse backgrounds and specialties. One pharmacist came to the company after retiring from Merck and provides marketing services, promoting the company to local nursing homes and physicians. Twelve of the 13 pharmacists are certified to provide immunizations, and others specialize in consulting and provide that service to the nursing homes that the company services. With its ABCOPP accreditation, the company can provide DME products to its Medicare patients.

Paul White says that it wasn't that many years ago when the question was "How do we thrive?" Today the question is "How do we survive?" All independents are looking for that answer and it seems to White that the only answer is change. Don't get comfortable, don't get complacent. Look for your niche; that thing you do better than any of your competitors and focus on that. But also know that tomorrow it may change. Years ago White focused on the diabetes mail order business and home infusion therapy. Later he sold the diabetes mail order company and closed the infusion

therapy business, then added drive-thru windows, delivery, a compounding pharmacy and mastectomy products. Most recently, the company's most significant growth has been through both the closed door pharmacy and the compounding pharmacy.



Paul White and Mark Giangardella, managing pharmacist at the Canton Medicine Center.

From the time when almost every pharmacy had a soda fountain to the days of a pharmacy inside a 150,000-square-foot superstore, and everything in between, pharmacy has always been about helping people. While it may be difficult to do that in today's challenging business climate, it is still the goal that drives every decision. White continues to worry about the next generation and has no plans to retire, hoping he makes a difference so that his grandchildren will be able to shop at the Medicine Center Pharmacy. So, call him a lobbyist, a radio personality, or whatever else comes to mind, but please don't forget, he is an independent pharmacist making a difference in his community and the life of every patient under his care. **ap**

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