

Community Health

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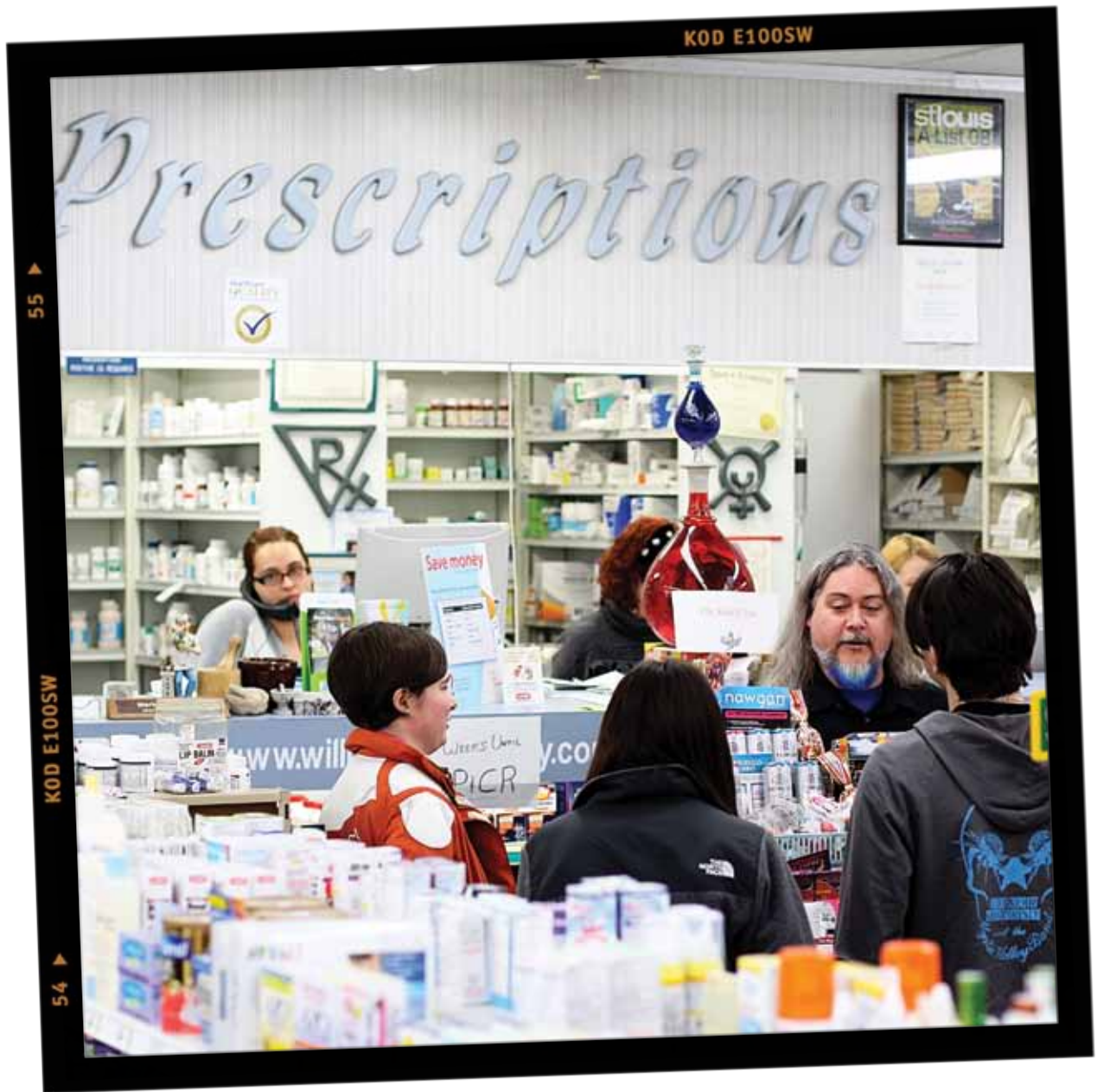
4 GREAT WAYS
TO START YOUR
DAY OFF RIGHT

DON'T LET YOUR
HEALTH BE A
FASHION VICTIM

WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATE?

*(It might be more than
you bargained for)*

TIME WELL SPENT:
THE VOLUNTEER
VACATION



THE RIGHT PRESCRIPTION

THOUGH BIG-BOX RETAILERS LOOM LARGE, NEIGHBORHOOD PHARMACIES' EMPHASIS ON CUSTOMER SERVICE KEEPS THEM VITAL ON THE HEALTH CARE LANDSCAPE

BY HALEY SHAPLEY



MAIN PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE COTTA; ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY DREAMSTIME.COM

IT'S IN DIFFICULT TIMES THAT DARWIN'S "SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST" THEORY IS TRULY TESTED. TAKE INDEPENDENT NEIGHBORHOOD PHARMACIES, FOR EXAMPLE. DARWIN MIGHT LOOK AT THAT INDUSTRY'S SITUATION—ONE IN WHICH GIANT NATIONAL RETAILERS ARE POPPING UP ON ALMOST EVERY CORNER—AND EXPECT THE BAD ECONOMY TO BE THE FINAL STRAW FOR THE LITTLE GUY.

But a funny thing happened to these neighborhood pharmacies during the recent economic downturn. From 2000 to 2008—before the financial crisis hit—the number of independent pharmacies in the U.S. declined about 9 percent to 22,728, according to the National Community Pharmacists Association. But in 2009, during the worst of the recession, the number of neighborhood pharmacies grew to 23,117. So while most businesses were suffering, the neighborhood pharmacy business actually stabilized.

Though many independent pharmacies have crumbled under the pressure of big-box retailers, such as Walgreens, CVS, Walmart and Target, many still exist—and are thriving. So what's their secret? It likely has something to do with the personal touch and connections that are forged over the neighborhood pharmacy counter. The big guys might know how to undercut prices, but the little guys know *you*.

Although it's a nice perk, a friendly greeting isn't all that community pharmacists provide. They're also some of the most accessible health care professionals around, and finding a good one could be, quite literally, the difference between life and death.

This was the case for Richard Sutton, who relies on North Shore Pharmacy in Huntington, N.Y. When Sutton and his wife grew concerned about the number of medications their doctor had prescribed, they took their questions to their pharmacist. He warned them that there was a severe negative interaction between two of the medicines.

Since then, Sutton's been sold on the services of his community pharmacy.

"[The pharmacists] are often better informed than the doctors who write the [prescriptions]," he says. "While we

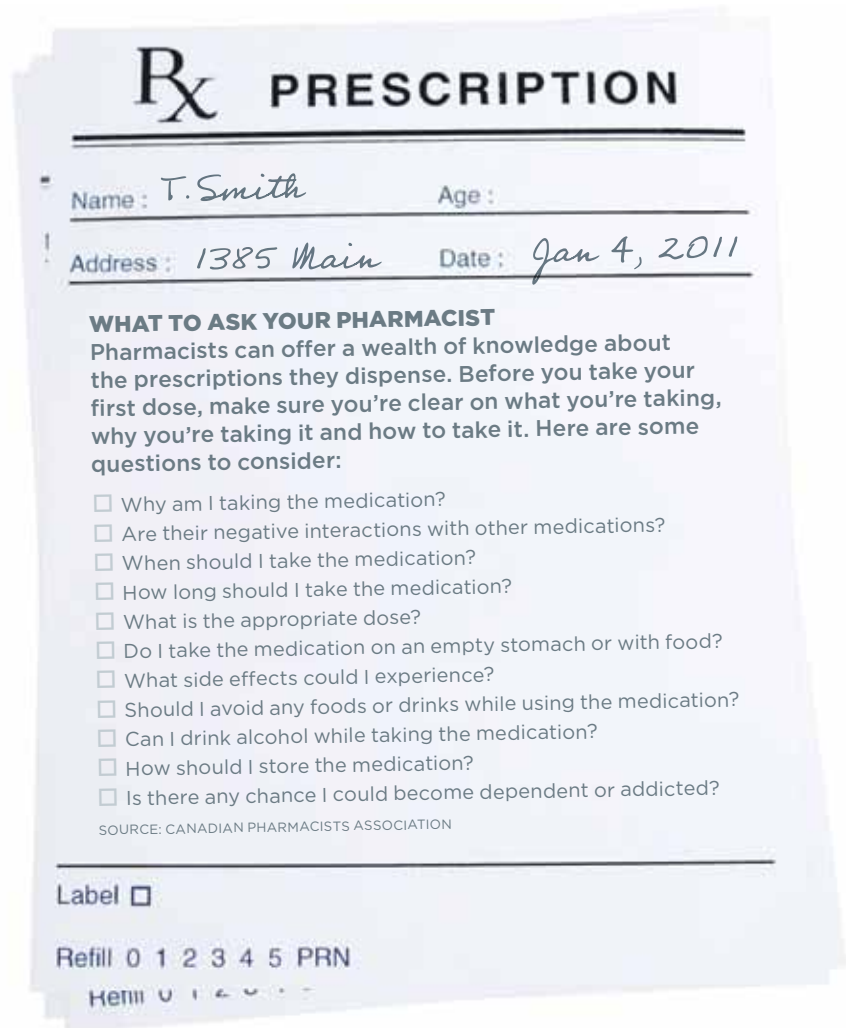
may stop at a large, discount drugstore for sundries, we would never consider moving our prescriptions anywhere else. The personal service, including sending our medications to us if we're on the road, is reassuring. We're very grateful for the attention we receive."

Service Sells

It's this personalized service that helps

independent pharmacies stand out, even as mass retail behemoths and mail-order businesses increase their presence. What sets local pharmacies apart is their continuity of care, says Ernie Gates, president of Gates Healthcare Associates, a pharmaceutical and health care consulting firm.

"Patients are speaking to the same pharmacist at an independent [pharmacy] most of the time," says Gates, who ran his own pharmacy in Massachusetts for 17



PRICE VS. SERVICE

In today's tough economic climate, cost matters more than ever to consumers—but service still trumps all. A 2010 study from J.D. Power and Associates found that cost competitiveness accounts for 24 percent of overall satisfaction among customers of brick-and-mortar establishments (compared to 10 percent in 2009) and for 41 percent of satisfaction among mail-order customers (compared to 19 percent in 2009).

“Consumers are spending more on health care expenses in general due to various employer-implemented changes in insurance coverage,” said Jim Dougherty, director of the health care practice at J.D. Power and Associates, in a press release. “High-performing pharmacies aren't necessarily those with the lowest prices. Rather, pharmacies that are focused on service garner the highest levels of satisfaction.”

years. “The owners are able to maintain an active, local presence.”

Brett Williams, who has owned and operated the Williams Community Pharmacies in the St. Louis area since 1982, is definitely familiar with the benefits of this kind of care. He took over the original Williams location from his father, who was also a pharmacist.

“We all really care about our patients. We know them by name, we know their children, we know what's going on in their family—we're part of their family,” Williams says. “It's like you're going to your uncle, and your uncle's going to take care of you.”

At mass retailer pharmacies, pharmacists are often so overworked they can't provide the same level of care and service, Williams says. Local pharmacies offer perks like charge accounts, delivery services and custom drug alterations, known as compounding.

“With therapies becoming more potent and more people being treated in their homes, it's all the more important to have a pharmacist looking out for you,” Williams says.

The Extra Touches

Besides the relationships that are forged at neighborhood pharmacies, there are many other benefits that keep the stores

from being forced out of business by larger retailers. One of the most notable perks is compounding, or altering medications for a patient's comfort and/or safety.

Sometimes, patients have unique needs when it comes to medicine, so they can't take products as they're originally manufactured. Children, for example, may need only 0.2 milligrams of a medicine that's available commercially in dosages starting at 1 milligram. Compounding pharmacists can safely make this alteration. They can also make a solid medicine into a liquid for people who aren't able to swallow pills or create a medicine without preservatives, which can trigger allergies.

Though many neighborhood pharmacies employ compounding pharmacists to safely alter medications for patients, chain pharmacies generally don't have the equipment to provide this service, according to www.WellnessHealth.com.

Another benefit mom-and-pop pharmacies bring to the table is their strong community presence. Moody Healthmart in Sparta, Ill., is spearheading efforts to help revitalize the local economy. When it came time to grow the business last year, they decided to build a brand new store on the main downtown intersection. It was a gamble, but they feel like it's paying off. Although Sparta's downtown area is still a work in progress, it's now poised for fur-

ther development, and the pharmacy has increased its visibility while retaining a loyal customer base.

“People know us. They know what we do for them,” says Seamus Kloos, pharmacist and co-owner of Moody Healthmart. “They know if it's an emergency, they can call us at home or on our cell phones, and we'll go in after the store is closed.”

Do They Have Staying Power?

There are, of course, challenges to being the little guy. While many chain stores offer groceries and household items, independent pharmacies typically have a much smaller product range. Also, the hours are often shorter—few neighborhood pharmacies can compete with the convenience of chains' 24-hour locations.

But neighborhood pharmacies can generally compete where it really matters—at the cash register. In most cases, people who frequent smaller pharmacies will pay prices comparable to those at bigger stores, and patients with insurance will have the same co-pay no matter where they go.

“People should know that independent community pharmacies are always competitive price-wise, and it's the service that really sets us apart,” Kloos says.

If a patient comes in and is concerned about the price of a prescription, Kloos will personally call his or her doctor to see if there's a less-expensive medication available.

“We're in the unique position of being the first health care professional a lot of people talk to, which makes us very valuable,” Kloos says. “We make a difference every day in the quality of [patients'] lives.”

Penny candy on the counter may have gone the way of the horse and buggy, but the mom-and-pop pharmacy endures. Every city seems to have one, and these independent retailers aren't disappearing any time soon—which is a good thing, given the complexity of prescription drugs today.

Neighborhood pharmacies fill an important niche in the modern health care system. A friendly face and a watchful eye behind the counter may not be written on the prescription, but in many situations, it's just what the doctor ordered. 