

Don't forget the day job!

David Parker of David Parker Consulting talks about the importance of remembering what the customer wants, and how to assess whether your pharmacy is in the best location....

In a quiet couple of hours last week I managed to read one of the trade journals from cover to cover. Three articles in particular caught my eye. The first was bemoaning the state of retail pharmacy as a profession and was screaming (albeit to the wrong people) about how much more we brave pharmacists had to offer the world: 'but let us hope' the writer pleaded, 'that the recent pronouncements from the DOH herald a new dawn in our professional interface with the public'.

A second, rather more commercial article was canvassing opinion from independent pharmacists on the constant erosion of their gross margins and asking 'how much longer can it be before a wave of smaller independents goes crashing to the wall?'

The third article was a detailed discussion about the technical and practical intricacies of electronic transmission of prescriptions; useful reading you might imagine given its imminent roll-out!

However, I should perhaps at this point mention that the publication in question was one that had I pulled from a dust-covered box in my loft, whilst rescuing an unused child-seat, for niece of mine with a new addition to her family. The box was labelled 'trade publications 1998-1999'.

So roll forward nine to 10 years and how



Is the location of your pharmacy accessible?

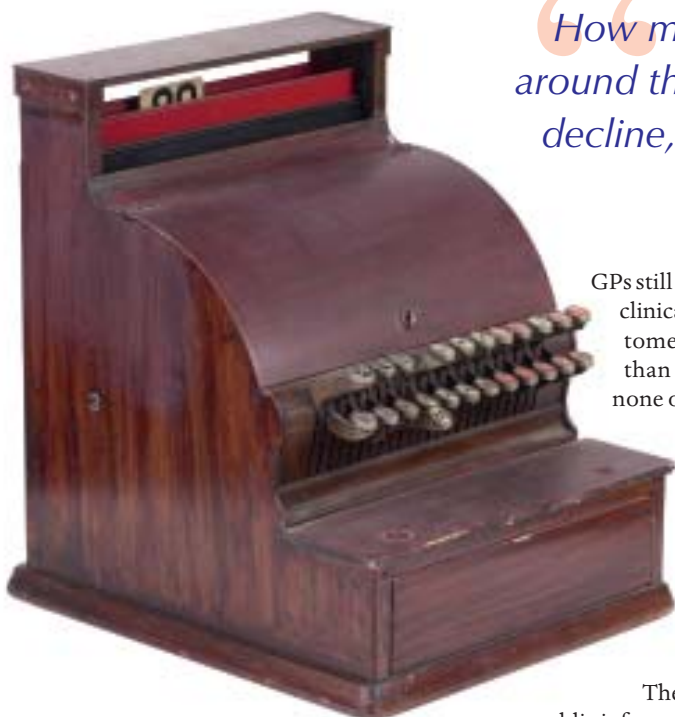
much has changed? Well, believe it or not, electronic transmission is still just around the next corner, margins are still in catastrophic decline (despite being pretty much where they were back then), and very few small independents have gone to the wall.

And from where I stand, the role of the retail pharmacist appears to be no more fulfilling or stretching than it was back then.

to concoct, or the technical excitement of the tablet triangle, (was I alone in feeling smug each time I poured thirteen rows and nine tablets at the first shake?) we now need only know our 28-times table.

When an average day involves sticking 180 labels on 180 boxes, how can we really expect the clinical adulation of our customers? And, if the truth be known, despite all

How much has changed? Well, EPS is still just around the corner, margins are still in catastrophic decline, and very few small independents have gone to the wall



Do customers just see pharmacists as shopkeepers?

GPs still consider us to be, at best, clinical busybodies, whilst customers still see us as no more than shopkeepers. And yet none of the above surprises me in the slightest.

Do we really believe that because of the muffled mutterings in the latest White Paper, the world is going to change their wholesale view of the pharmacist or the profession?

The average member of the public is far more interested in the new face of the iPhone than the 'New face of pharmacy'. And where in the past we at least used to have the satisfaction of the odd cream

the crowing from our industry leaders, I'm not sure some of us are clinically capable of much more than keeping shop.

Once upon a time we did of course all have heads stuffed full of complex appreciation for drugs, their actions and their interactions; but after years of counting tablets, typing labels and repeating 'could you fill out the back for me please?' I can personally confess that, if I ever did have extensive knowledge, it has long since flown the nest.

I was probably not the only pharmacist relieved to hear that an MUR should be a practical rather than a clinical review. Perhaps it's the fact that so many of us are failed medics that makes us constantly crave that professional credibility. No matter why, it is of course rather sad that many bright individuals and a great deal of education has not

been put to better use in retail pharmacy.

However, we are where we are, which, as I pointed out earlier, is pretty much where we were ten years ago. 'Plus ça change... plus c'est la même chose' (the more things change the more they stay the same) as they say. So whilst we may, over the next ten years, become highly valued members of the clinical fraternity I would not bank on it.

This obsession with strategic direction for the pharmacy profession is, in my opinion a misplaced one for the average independent business owner.

The strategy is simply the sea in which all operators must swim, and market forces will ensure that not too many are likely to drown. The really important battles for an independent pharmacist are those fought at a local level; those fought hand to hand with local competitors for their share of their local custom.

For this reason it is perhaps time to look ourselves in the mirror and say 'I am proud to be a shopkeeper!' After all, it is the shopkeeper in us that the average customer wants most of the time.

Ask 100 members of the public 'What three things do you most commonly require from a pharmacy?' and by far the most popular answers are likely to be:

1. Good location / convenient access / open all hours
2. Short waiting times
3. Product in stock first time

Rather depressingly, MURs and diabetes screening would probably only get the occasional mention.

Nevertheless, this is the commercial environment in which real-life pharmacy profit and loss must operate and, although innovative clinical services could be viewed as the cherry on the cake, they should not be allowed to distract you from the day-job.

In the aftermath of the new contract and our constant struggle to re-invent pharmacy services there is a danger of spending 80 per cent of our time on what 20 per cent of the people want.

Like the busy housewife whose husband bought her an iPod for Christmas, we are in danger of neglecting what the customer wants, and giving them what we want them to want.

From a commercial standpoint, it makes sense to focus our efforts where they will receive greatest reward.

For example, many pharmacies have been in their existing location for decades, and whilst this location may have been perfect in years gone by, circumstances change. Doctors and competitors move, parking restrictions change, supermarkets strangle the High Street, etc.

The review of the commercial location of your pharmacy should be a continuous



If your local GP relocates, this will affect the value of your business

rather than a periodic or emergency piece of business planning.

To state the importance of location may be to state the obvious, but once in situ the aforementioned changes can be so gradual as to pass unnoticed in the simple day-to-day operation of the business.

A mind further occupied, re-inventing the 'face of pharmacy', is very likely to lose sight of this most important competitive driver. Often the first time location will be seriously reviewed is when a competing pharmacy has applied to relocate or a GP surgery has announced they are upping-sticks.

tients wait at busy times? Do you know precisely how many times a patient has to return for an owing? Do you know if this is better or worse than it was last year and, most importantly, how you compare to other pharmacies in your neighbourhood?

Do you have a clue as to how many prescriptions each of your local surgeries generates and whether you capture your fair share? When I visit business owners, I am amazed that the majority cannot even make a stab at this last question and are subsequently very surprised by the answer. And yet this is the purest indicator of what the custom-

“Do we really believe that because of the muffled mutterings in the latest White Paper, the world is going to change its view of the pharmacist or the profession?”

Do you truly appreciate how easy it is to access your pharmacy? How easy is it to park? Are other pharmacies better located in these respects than you? Could you be better located?

Likewise opening hours should be reviewed continuously. Even a simple, back of fag-packet, log of items dispensed each hour of the day can help to flag up those opening hours which may no longer be appropriate.

Do you know how well your business performs on prescription delivery, in its simplest sense i.e. taking a green piece of paper from a customer and quickly and efficiently sending them on their way with all of their medication?

Do you really know how long your pa-

er wants and should be the performance indicator that informs all others.

So whilst my views may be criticised as 'less than visionary' by our more strategic cousins out there, I am reminded of a poster I had on my bedroom wall as a teenager, which could be adapted to read as follows: 'Remember yesterday, dream about tomorrow, but be a good shopkeeper today!'

David Parker Consulting Ltd is a specialist in business sales, acquisitions and development. For more information visit www.davidparkerconsulting.co.uk call 0789 423 4873 or email david@davidparkerconsulting.co.uk

