

Planning a refit?

As the New Year is nearly upon us, David Parker asks if changing the look of your pharmacy could be the turning point for increased sales in 2008.

As another year comes to an end, many pharmacy owners are already making their business plans for the next, in a desperate attempt to reverse the blow dealt to them by category M price changes.

The battle to resurrect the "bottom line" will be fought on several fronts; a battle for better gross margin with suppliers, a quest for lower operating costs through internal efficiencies, and a drive for a greater slice of the turnover cake by wresting customers from a competitor.

The most common trigger for a business owner to refit a pharmacy is simply a feeling that "The business has seen better days" or that "it's been quite a while since the last one". However, before embarking on a very disruptive and expensive transformation of your business I would encourage a slightly more analytical review of the current state of affairs.

To begin with base your plans to refit on the practical constraints that your current set-up imposes, rather than the desire for the sexiest light-fittings or more contemporary fixtures and fittings. At an early stage it may be worth informally canvassing the opinions of your customers to see what, if anything, they would like to see improved in the business (although it can be hurtful when the majority suggest a change of pharmacist).



To begin with, draw a rough map of your pharmacy detailing the areas you would like to concentrate on in the refit

was dispensary workspace, or poor kerb-appeal then the planning should have this as its primary focus. If it was limited retail space then you must be certain that the new layout will deliver more linear metres than the existing.

As refit planning is not a daily discipline for

number of specialist companies to interpret, tweak and cost.

An extremely simple and practical way to kick off the planning of a refit is to buy yourself a pad of squared paper and start by marking out the footprint of your pharmacy. Using the same squared paper draw, to scale, a selection of wall bays, gondolas, cabinets, counter units etc that you can cut out and lay over the top of your naked plan. This may seem extremely crude, but serves as a fantastic tool for visualising space requirements and generating permutations on basic layouts. I can still remember the first time I used this in a business. The shop-fitting designer could hardly disguise their amusement at the lack of sophistication, but the pharmacist and staff loved the fact that they could play with variants on their own theme. In fact anyone brave enough to visit Ikea recently may have seen that they offer DIY kitchen design kits, based on very same idea.

Once you have satisfied yourself that a layout exists to address the practical problems you initially identified, then I would suggest that you call in the specialists. A word of caution however; despite any claims to the contrary, refit companies make profit by selling furniture and not by improving your turnover. Be sure that any proposals address your and your

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On the assumption that you've done your homework and that you are convinced a make-over or facelift will help attract new customers, (or leak fewer of your existing) then there are some important practical considerations to be made.

Planning the layout

At its broadest the planning of a new pharmacy layout should be entirely consequent to the practical problems outlined in your initial evaluation. If for example your only problem

most pharmacists, there is a tendency to regard it as a highly complex science, with the result that many will call in the experts, in the form of a specialist refit company, at a very early stage. In my opinion this can sometimes take the project off at a tangent where the focus becomes furniture and fittings, colours and textures rather than patients and practical problem solving. The expert in the latter should be the business owner and it is not beyond the capabilities of most pharmacists to pull together some basic concepts that can be offered to a

customers' practical requirements first and foremost.

What the customer wants!

You may already have involved your customers either by formal survey or by canvassing informal opinion. Either way, once the plans are finalised, let them know what they are, how the shop will be affected during the fit out and what improvements they can expect afterwards. You may choose to do this one-to-one with customers over the months preceding the refit, perhaps verbally, perhaps using a "bag stuffer" information leaflet. Bear in mind that your customers are your customers because they prefer your pharmacy to those of the competitors. As such, the very best you can hope for is that 100% of your customers will still like your pharmacy after the refit.

Although it is often said that nothing is more important than your customer, in the event of a refit I believe there is something still more important: the customers of other pharmacies.

Many business owners planning their first refit get so carried away with the kind of soul-



While contemporary fixtures are important they are not worth basing your whole refit plans on, says David Parker

over of your business in two ways:
1. Each of your existing customers spends more

and the only real way in which it will grow your business.

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searching and philosophical chin-stroking previously reserved for the BBC's "Grand designs" programme, that they neglect almost all commercial good-reason, safe in the knowledge that everyone "will just love the new look darling".

So I apologise for these few sober words: A refit can only generate an increase in turn-

money with you. In reality, as 80% of your business is probably NHS dispensing and a large chunk of the remainder is medicine sales, then unless your refit makes them feel violently sick, the uplift you are likely to achieve on this basis is very small.

2. You take customers away from other pharmacies. This the key success factor for any refit

Although this may seem blindingly obvious, it is amazing how many people refit their pharmacy and just imagine that other pharmacists' customers will come skipping through their front door, shopping basket in hand, to experience at first hand your bold interpretation of pharmacy today. Your refit may be a big deal to you, but to the man in the street who uses another pharmacy, it's hardly the highlight of his day. When did you last sit around the dinner table and chat excitedly about the fact that the butcher you don't use has just updated his flooring, and upgraded his lighting?

However, whilst you may never set the town alight with your refit, you must at least give yourself the best chance of success, by making the money you are spending outwardly visible to the people who are not your customers. This could mean anything or everything from a fantastic new fascia to a high profile local PR campaign. I even know of pharmacists who have stood outside their competitors stores handing out leaflets, advertising the "new pharmacy" and the wonderful promotions and services it offers. To some this may appear a little too brash or aggressive, but I must confess that I was full of admiration for its practicality and direct results.

Whatever your preferred approach, don't just build it and hope they come!



Canvassing the opinion of your customers could prove valuable in coming up with a winning design

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