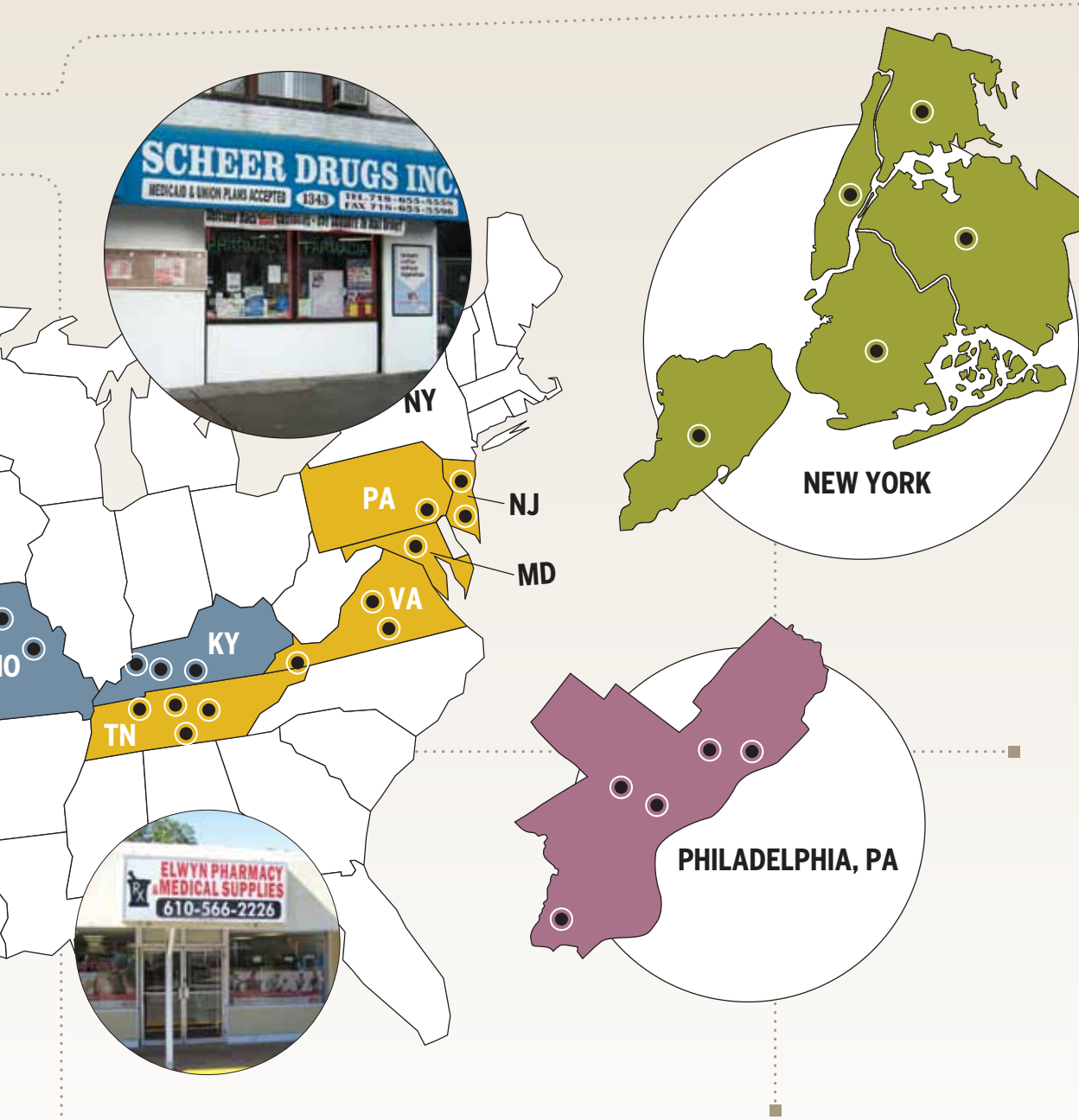


# Spirit of Independence— **Alive and Well**

Winning strategies from successful  
independent pharmacies



PHOTOGRAPHY: BRUCE KNEELAND; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT LEWIS

*By Marsha K. Millonig, MBA, BSP Pharm*

## In visits to more than 60 pharmacies across the United States in the past

three years, veteran industry consultant Bruce Kneeland has documented thriving independent pharmacies of all sizes (from 600 square feet to 34,000 square feet), and in all markets (urban, suburban, and rural).

The challenges facing independent pharmacists are well-documented, and it's doubtful that the headwinds the industry is trying to fight through will recede anytime soon. In that environment,



**Bruce's Road Show Archives**—Coast to coast: August, September, and October 2008; Big Apple: March 2009; Philadelphia: October 2010; and Nashville: October 2011. In case you missed out on any part of this series featuring 60 pharmacies, log on to [www.americaspharmacist.net](http://www.americaspharmacist.net), and catch up!



it is a testament to the independent pharmacist's entrepreneurial spirit and focus on personalized customer service that have allowed them to become and remain successful. That focus means understanding a patient and/or customer's unique needs and finding a way to support them. As one pharmacist notes, "It's learning to never say no." A common thread among all the pharmacies was building a relationship with customers, calling people by name and treating them with respect. In essence, they treat patients and customers like family.

What other attributes did this select group of independent pharmacies and pharmacists share beyond superior service? Developing a business strategy to support customer needs, creating new services both in the front-end and in the prescription department, providing staff education and training to carry out service offerings with excellence, promoting the pharmacy's services, investing in the businesses' continued growth and professional appearance, as well as investing time and energy in their community and the profession.

### **Developing a Business Strategy**

All the independent pharmacists and their staff listen to customer and patient needs and try to differentiate their pharmacy from competitors. Front-end services vary by market size and the communities' characteristics, but commonly offered products and services include gifts, toys, greeting cards, UPS or U.S. Post Office shipping, books and magazines, photo services, and convenience foods and snacks. One pharmacist has installed a refrigerator near the pharmacy's waiting area stocked with refreshments and snacks, so patients "can feel at home" while they wait for their medication. Others still offer a soda fountain. Health-related services include compounding, durable medical equipment (DME), including ostomy and mastectomy fittings, natural, herbal and homeopathic products, and health and

wellness information and programs. Having private label merchandise is a strategy to bring everyday value to customers.

Successful independent pharmacies are **core components of and resources to their communities.** Their owners and employees are actively involved in both community, civic, and religious organizations across the alphabet and in their profession.

### **Health-Related Programs**

Health and wellness programs, such as screenings, are becoming more popular as a way to help customers identify potential conditions that may need treatment or to monitor how well a patient's medication is working. One pharmacy offers manufacturer-sponsored events, surveys and samples on a routine basis. On the pharmacy side, patient-oriented services being implemented include compliance packaging, refill reminders, medication therapy management, immunizations and travel vaccine programs, and disease-state management (DSM) programs. DSM programs range from common chronic conditions such as high cholesterol and diabetes, to more specialized conditions such as HIV/AIDS and infertility. Some have classrooms for health and wellness education classes. Several pharmacists employ or partner with other health professionals to provide expanded services including nurses, nurse practitioners, physician's assistants, and dietitians. Extensive patient counseling services are a must. So are delivery services and mailing prescriptions

to a patient's home. Telepharmacy services are offered in some rural locations. Some offer assistance in wading through health benefit plan choices as well.

Often the pharmacies find partnerships with their local college or school of pharmacy of benefit when launching or expanding innovative services. These partnerships may lead to new venues in rural, underserved communities or other unique practice sites. A number of entrepreneurs provide services that extend beyond the pharmacy's walls to assisted living and long-term care facilities and hospices.

### **Investing in the Future**

Continued investment in new service offerings and the pharmacy's physical plant is a priority for these owners. A professional appearance both inside and outside the pharmacy is a must, including modern décor, immaculate floors, low and wide aisles, bright lighting, semi-private and private counseling areas, and well-merchandised front ends. Employee dress codes are common. Bringing technology into the pharmacy to improve workflow, safety, efficiency, and customer service is also an ongoing investment. Point-of-sale computer systems integrated with the pharmacy's management system are gaining traction because of their capabilities to manage inventory, update retail prices, improve sales and profit margins, and offer customer loyalty programs. Workflow, bar code scanning, robotics, signature capture, and will-call bin management systems are being implemented that integrate with the pharmacy management system and improve safety and productivity. Electronic prescribing capability helps boost efficiency, cutting back on faxes, manual tasks, and telephone calls. Many are now exploring how to implement or integrate with electronic health record systems and local and regional health information exchanges.

### **Promoting Services**

These entrepreneurs promote their services through billboards, circulars, buying group and wholesaler newsletters and offerings, radio, newspaper, and TV. The majority also use their websites and social networking media. Websites allow the ability to provide newsletters, scientifically sound and current medical advice and health information, health tools, and refill requests.

Many offer patients the ability to "Ask the Pharmacist" a question. Innovative signage designs and formats on the pharmacy's exterior help attract new customers. While bag stuffers and clippers help promote new services to existing customers, so do outbound calls using the pharmacy's interactive voice response (IVR) system. A number of pharmacists have employed advertising agencies to help them map out a 12–16 month campaign strategy. Many promotions tie into national health and pharmacy events, for example National Diabetes Month, National Poison Prevention Week, or American Pharmacists Month. In addition, many pharmacists call upon local physicians to explain their service offerings and boost referrals. Also, word-of-mouth from satisfied customers provides continued growth.

### **Community and Professional Involvement**

Finally, these successful independent pharmacies are core components of and resources to their communities. Their owners and employees are actively involved in both community, civic, and religious organizations across the alphabet and in their profession. Many have held positional leadership posts such as serving as president of their local, national, and state associations. All are active in grassroots advocacy. Giving back to their community and profession is a shared value. They provide financial support through scholarships and other innovative programs and fundraising events to their local colleges and schools of pharmacy.

Kneeland's Road Shows illuminate how providing excellent, personalized customer service and engaging in ongoing investment to meet customer needs allows today's independent pharmacy to thrive. His most recent article (October 2011) focused on several thriving pharmacies in the Nashville area. His past articles focusing on Philadelphia and throughout the United States are available to NCPA members in the archives section of *America's Pharmacist* online ([www.americaspharmacist.net](http://www.americaspharmacist.net)). See box on page 16.

Wherever Bruce has traveled, he's found the spirit of independent pharmacy alive and well. **ap**

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