

Moving Technology Forward with Beta Testing

by Will Lockwood

You've probably heard the term "beta testing," and you may have wondered just what this means.

Ballin Pharmacy, a mid-volume pharmacy in the heart of Chicago and within walking distance of Wrigley Field, doesn't just serve the community with professional pharmacy services and an apothecary-style front end focused on items such as surgical supports and stockings, breast pumps, vitamins, and OTC pain relievers. As a beta test site for Kirby Lester, it's also a proving ground for putting new automation technology through its paces in a neighborhood independent pharmacy environment.

What's Beta Testing?

You've probably heard the term "beta testing," and you may have wondered just what this means. It's pretty simple, really, according to Jason Mattson, who along with his father, Bill, is the team of pharmacists that runs Ballin Pharmacy. "We get whatever the newest technology is after it has already gone through all the vendor's testing," he explains. "We take the machine and use it in the pharmacy, looking for any kinks or software issues. We offer Kirby Lester our opinion on any little tweaks they may want to make." The technology the pharmacy tests is market ready, so it's really a matter of looking for the refinements that can only come from real-world experience. "Kirby Lester is looking at it from a technical, computer standpoint," says Bill Mattson. "And they are very good at developing the technology from our experience." What the Mattsons do, Bill explains, is look to make sure that the technology works the way they need it to for those times when they have a dozen customers and a crying baby in the pharmacy and need to fill prescriptions

The Evolution of a Technology

Bill Mattson knows a little something about both indepen-

dent pharmacy and counting technology. Bill has been working at Ballin Pharmacy for 43 years, starting in high school with a part-time job, returning after pharmacy school to eventually become a partner, and finally buying the store in 1995. His son, Jason, came on board after pharmacy school, too. The Mattsons also run another retail pharmacy and are opening a third, closed-door pharmacy. When it comes to counting automation, Bill says he has four versions of the technology from Kirby Lester. "One of our sites has a counter from maybe 25 years ago that was there when we bought it," notes Bill. "So we've seen the progression."

Gone are the days when all you did was pour pills into

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Bill and Jason Mattson of Ballin Pharmacy in Chicago. They have worked with Kirby Lester as a beta test site, helping to develop technology that fits what pharmacists need.

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a chute and watch the counter until you got the right number. The first major advance, according to Bill, which has persisted as a key component, was the addition of barcode scanning to verify that the stock bottle and prescription label NDCs match. This was an important advance in safety that required only that the Mattsons' pharmacy management system from Liberty Computer Service print a drug NDC number bar code on the prescription label. The next iteration of the technology took another big step by offering two-way integration with the pharmacy system. "The barcode scanning on Kirby Lester's most recent models, the KL20 and KL30, now not only verifies we've pulled the right drug to count," explains Jason, "it also pulls up all the data for a prescription from the pharmacy system, like patient name, doctor name, and the directions."

Screens

Of course, all this information has to appear somewhere at the counting station, which brings us to another piece in the evolution the Mattsons are tracing. "Originally, the screens only told you the count and the size vial to use," explains Jason. "This has progressed through showing the name and image of the drug you are counting on the KLI6 to the complete drug and prescription details avail-



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able on the KL20 and KL30 screens." The information on the screen becomes a valuable part of another growing role for bench-top counting devices: workflow.

An Increasing Workflow Role

A great example of this is the opportunity for pharmacists to verify that a prescription is correct right at the counting station, according to Jason. This step is confirmed by a scan of the pharmacist's fingerprint, which is both a control to make sure it is a pharmacist who has verified and a way to record this vital step. This verification can be turned off at will. "You might not want to interrupt the counting task," explains Jason. "So you'd turn off verification there and move the task either to a separate verification component Kirby Lester offers or to a workstation run by your pharmacy system." The latter, he goes on to say, is what the Mattsons plan for Ballin Pharmacy once they turn on the workflow features in their Liberty software. The important thing, Jason emphasizes, is that there's flexibility to apply the technology to your workflow as you see fit.

Jason offers order collation as another good example of a feature built on the integrated flow of data that helps manage workflow. "If there's more than one prescription for a patient, you'll see all of them listed at the bottom of the screen on the counter when you scan one of them," he says. Knowing how many prescriptions you are expecting for a specific patient helps in a couple of ways, in his opinion. You'll know if

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you are missing any prescriptions in a batch and, if for example you have a customer waiting, you'll see all his or her prescriptions and know that they are the priority.

Tracking and Recording

Bill Mattson also has some useful workflow elements he's noted that help make sure significant actions are taken and recorded. "We've had a lot of changes in NDCs recently when products change to a new manufacturer," he says. This results in a situation where a technician may pull a stock bottle with an NDC that hasn't been updated in the pharmacy system yet, with a halt on the count and fill as a result. "We can review the prescription's details on the screen at the counting station, confirm that the difference in NDCs is in fact okay, and keep that pre-

scription moving," he continues. This override is then recorded through a fingerprint scan. Bill also likes some new features they've been beta testing that allow an alert that a double count is required based on class of drug or dollar value. Similarly, he can set an alert for cleaning, either after a specified amount of use or after counting a specific drug. These actions are also confirmed and recorded through biometrics. All this information can be collected and reviewed in a variety of customizable reports.

Beta Testing Surprises

Many of the features the Mattsons use during their beta testing are ones that suit their pharmacy operations. But sometimes, as with the pharmacist verification step mentioned earlier, they are testing something that they don't plan to use in Ballin Pharmacy. That's all

right by them, though. First of all, they have a responsibility to try it all out to make sure their colleagues who do adopt the technology are getting pharmacy-proven tools. And then there are times when they are exposed to a feature that they might not have otherwise considered. "A good example is the cassettes that are the major new feature of the KL30," says Jason Mattson. These offer the ability to preload top movers or medications that are typically dispensed in larger counts. When a cassette is loaded, explains Jason, the machine automatically reads a bar code that confirms the correct drug and begins to count. "We found that this lets us step away and do something else," he says. "This is a feature that we didn't feel would benefit our store, but now we can see the benefit."

An Opportunity and a Service

The opportunity to be a beta site and test out all the options on some of the latest technology has been a positive experience for the Mattsons. Certainly, it helps them in their own efforts to run the best pharmacies they can. But it also offers a chance for them to be a real help to their fellow pharmacists. "When we're working with Kirby Lester and trying out all these different options," Bill Mattson explains, "it's so we can give them our opinion on what's good and what they can add that pharmacies are going to like." Considering that the Mattsons' assessments are based on over 15 years' experience with counting technology, their colleagues can feel confident that any new device they may be considering and that has passed through Ballin Pharmacy has gotten an honest and thorough road test. **CT**



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