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Robot pharmacist

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For a business to “make it” on Main Street, especially when there are large, box stores in the area, the local merchant must offer something the larger store more often than not doesn’t – personal service. But what happens when success leaves little time for the personal touch? For Neal Smoller and Peter Gage of the Village Apothecary, the answer was clear: get a robot assistant.

“We were just getting so busy, that we didn’t have time to talk to the people,” Smoller explained. “Our frustration level increased as the workload increased, because our business was growing so much.”

A good pharmacist needs time to offer advice and consultation. Patients develop personal relationships and loyalty based on these interactions. The Apothecary saw the machine as a way to liberate pharmacists from certain types of work to clear up time for the sort of service that distinguishes the business from others.

“We saw the problem, our staff was letting us know that they were now spending most of their time filling prescriptions rather than having the time to fully answer customer’s questions,” Smoller said.

The seven-foot tall robot is the Kirby Lester 60 — KL-60 for those in the business — and it fills more 60 of the store’s most popular medications at a rate of 150 prescriptions per hour.

The shop continues to be staffed with 3-4 pharmacists plus support personnel at all times. “The robot has not replaced any of our workers,” Smoller emphasized.

Even if a customer is destined to be served by the KL-60, first they meet with a human who records their info. If the prescription is one of the shop’s 60 most common medications, the order is electronically shuttled to the robot, which dispenses the medication into a vial, prints the label, attaches it to the vial, and sends the filled prescription out where a pharmacist checks the label and puts the top on the vial.

The robot is fingerprint-protected so that only a pharmacist can fill the machine with the necessary medications at the beginning of the day, and take the filled prescription, Smoller said.

While not getting too specific, Smoller said the robot cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Beginning this fall, the Village Apothecary will provide even more services to the public with an education/clinic program Diabetes Self Management Training.

The 10-hour program run by the pharmacy’s newest employee Casie Shultis, a clinical technician will present information on nutrition, lifestyle changes, and fully explain what diabetes is and what someone who has it needs to do.

“The local community has really been supportive of us,” Smoller said, “because of the passion we show towards their care.”