

A Blend of Automation Delivers Results

by John Becker

Bruce Gingrich owns and runs LifeChek, a Rosenberg, Texas-based pharmacy chain with 22 locations spread between Port Arthur, near the Gulf of Mexico, and Del Rio on the Mexican border. With plans for a 23rd store in 2009 and more after that, Gingrich has built a group of stores that individually have the look, feel, and management style of an independent pharmacy, but are backed by the cost, operational, and administrative efficiencies of a chain.

Gingrich feels it's his mission to equip his staff with the technology they need to provide their customers with the highest possible level of service. At the same time, he has to spread that technology cost-effectively across a growing group of stores with differing prescription volumes. At what point does script volume dictate moving from counting tray and spatula to automated counting technology to full robotic dispensing system? Gingrich has answered this question — at least for himself.

Gingrich isn't the kind to jump first when new technology becomes available. He uses PDX's pharmacy management system (PMS) and central-office host but hasn't invested heavily yet in point-of-sale systems, installing

them at only five of his locations. He sees the costs as prohibitive and feels the work required to maintain a POS system exceeds the benefits. He also has yet to purchase his first IVR system, saying it's something he probably will install eventually.

"We're getting by just fine now answering the phone," Gingrich says, "and I know our patients and doctors prefer it."

But when it comes to technology that he feels can improve dispensing productivity and accuracy at his stores, Gingrich isn't afraid to invest. He installed his first robot — a 200-cell ScriptPro — seven years ago. Gingrich says it immediately allowed him to redirect staff labor to more productive tasks, and created "a smoother, less stressful pharmacy environment."

"Robotics has absolutely helped us work faster, smarter, and more accurately," Gingrich says. "In our case, we haven't been able to reduce staff," he points out, "but the robot does allow us to fill more prescriptions without adding full or part-time employees."

Gingrich knows he's invested heavily for this level of automation. Each time he adds a robot — he currently has 13, with two more on order — he spends over



Bruce Gingrich isn't one to jump on the newest trend, but when it comes to technology, he's always looking to improve pharmacy efficiency.

\$100,000. And his total robotic investment to date is well into seven figures. What about the ROI for that investment?

"Let's be clear," Gingrich cautioned, "I don't believe there is a return on investment for robotics if you look at it money-wise. It's an added expense and, bottom line, it costs us more to run the pharmacy with it than without it. But I'm willing to spend the money to make my employees more productive and to provide better service."

Gingrich was pleased with how the robot increased productivity when dispensing his top-moving oral solids, but he wasn't happy having to restrict the benefits of robotics to only those stores where prescription volume justi-

fied the investment (for him that means stores doing 250 prescriptions per day or more). Gingrich was also concerned about the 45% to 50% of total prescription volume not processed through the robot at stores that do have one.

"It wasn't good enough to use technology to verify accuracy and safety just for our highest moving products," Gingrich says. "Should we shortcut our safety processes just because a medication isn't on our top 100 list? And what about our stores that don't do enough volume to justify a robot?"

So while Gingrich believes there's a time and place for robotics, he's become an even bigger fan of technology he's found that he says provides some key benefits of robotics at about one-tenth the cost: automated counting. In Gingrich's case, it's the KL16 from Kirby Lester.

Gingrich's exposure to Kirby Lester began when he inherited an early-version counting device through one of his initial store acquisitions. It wasn't until a company representative contacted him in 2007, though, that he took a serious look — and he was impressed with what he saw.

"The cost is next to nothing compared to a robot," Gingrich says, "and it really increases productivity and accuracy for products we don't keep in the robot and at stores that don't have one."

What's got Gingrich so excited?

The KL16 is a small-footprint, stand-alone device, meaning there's no pharmacy management system interface needed. This may sound like a drawback, but it actually keeps things simple. As long as your PMS can print a bar code on your label that includes the 7-digit Rx number, the 11-digit NDC number of the product being dispensed, and the 4-digit quantity, you're good to go. Unlike devices that count mechanically, the KL16 uses an optical counting mechanism, so no calibration is required.

The KL16 also has biometric security that verifies the fingerprint of the staff member using the device. First-time users go through a simple registration process during which an image of their fingerprint is taken and stored. After that, a simple one-second log-on is required prior to each use.

To accommodate peak volume times, multiple prescriptions can be processed with a single fingerprint scan.

Prescription records can be easily retrieved using a variety of criteria, such as time and date, NDC number, prescription number, or dispensing staff member. The unit automatically logs prescribed quantities, as captured by the scan of the prescription label, and counted quantities, useful in researching a customer's claim that he or she was shorted product on a given fill.

Gingrich currently has 13 KL16s across his group of stores, with three more on order. He uses them at stores with robots that do an extremely high volume and at stores without robots doing 100 prescriptions per day or more. And he's got a KL16 in mind for a store that needs a robot but is too small to physically accommodate one.

Gingrich had two main business goals in mind when he went with the KL16: to make things easier for his staff by getting them away from the mundane, time-consuming task of manually counting pills; and to provide greater quality assurance for his patients.

David King, pharmacy and store manager at LifeChek #19 in Houston, says Gingrich hit the mark.

"The device has definitely made me more productive, efficient, and



Pharmacist David King using the Kirby Lester KL16 counter.

accurate," King says. "The feature I like most is how it helps with NDC number verification. Manually verifying 11-digit NDC numbers takes time and concentration. Doing it repetitively hundreds of times each day leaves too many chances for error and is a major source of stress for staff."

"With the KL16," King says, "verifying an NDC number is quick and easy. Offloading this task takes pressure off staff and frees up time for more productive tasks."

It didn't take Gingrich long to see he could reduce his technology investment and still get the benefits of automation.

"Counting technology doesn't do everything a robot can," Gingrich says, "but it does some of the most important things and does them very well. Couple that with saving six figures in up-front investment and significant ongoing maintenance costs, and I'd say it has a place in most pharmacies." **CT**



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