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retail

P H A R M A C Y

Are consultation areas worth the investment?

Will the costs associated with installing consultation areas make it difficult for small businesses to keep up with the multiples? Hannah Pike investigates



Neal Baumber, Barrowbygate pharmacy

Incentives in the community pharmacy contract in England and Wales have led many businesses to install a consultation area. In addition to construction costs, this invariably involves the rearrangement of store layout, often sacrificing floor space with an associated risk of reduced income from retail sales.

While the larger multiples may have ways of balancing these risks, independent pharmacists may be wondering if they can afford to do it.

Currently 1,300 Boots the Chemists stores have a consultation area of some description (which may be a booth or a screened off area) and 500 stores have a separate consultation room. Using the recent refurbishment of a store in Leamington Spa as an

example, a spokesperson for Boots says that no stock lines have been reduced after the refit; rather, more lines have been introduced. This has been achieved by reorganisation, better use of wall space and ergonomic display units. However, she acknowledges that they had a large floor space to start with.

Jonathan Buisson, NHS strategy manager at Alliance Pharmacy, commented that at Alliance the decision to reduce any stock lines would be at the discretion of the branch and area manager, but that using the space for providing extra services, such as medicines use reviews and smoking cessation services, would bring in as much revenue as the loss of retail space.

Alistair Buxton, head of NHS services at the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee

points out that although it may appear "easy" for the larger stores to install consultation areas, they still have to make a robust business case since all store space is assessed for how it will generate maximum profit.

Based on 2006/07 contract figures, community pharmacists can now carry out 400 MURs per year, generating £10,000. Ash Soni, an independent community pharmacist from Streatham, London, has installed a consultation area at a cost of about £10,000. To make room for this he cut back on stocking some items such as toiletries, but says that sales of these items were already falling because of competition from supermarkets. Mr Soni points out that to make £10,000 profit from sales he would have to sell £40,000 stock. "The main problem is the

Contraception

Last week (beginning 12 February) the fpa published a survey on people's knowledge about sex and reproduction. Widespread misunderstanding about some of the most basic facts — facts that pharmacists and their staff might be able to make sure customers know — was revealed. For example, in response to the question, "What would stop a woman from becoming pregnant if she did it immediately after sex?", 29 per cent thought that short bursts of vigorous exercise (jumping and dancing around), douching or urinating would stop fertilisation, or said they did not know if it would not work.

Half of the respondents gave the wrong answer or did not know when a woman's most fertile time is. See www.fpa.org.uk for more details.

Nit time

Parents who struggle to keep their children's hair clear of nits should take a peek at www.nits.net. This site, organised by Community Hygiene Concern, advocates combing wet, conditioned hair twice a week for three weeks as the best method of keeping lice (and eggs) at bay. And with most children back at school after their half-term break it is a good idea to check them over this week.

Natural health

Readers of *Retail Pharmacy* who are interested in natural health and the health food industry may find themselves drawn to Brighton next month. The 12th Natural Trade Show takes place on 11 and 12 March. Further details from www.naturaltrade.com

initial cost of putting the consultation area in," he explains, "After that, the revenue generated from MURs is greater than sales from that square footage".

Mr Buxton adds that 85 per cent of the average independent pharmacy's turnover is linked to NHS services, with just 15 per

cent coming from sales, including over-the-counter medicines. However, he notes that not all small pharmacies have electronic point of sale systems that help them calculate which areas of the business generate the most income.

Noel Baumber, an independent pharmacist from

Grantham, Lincolnshire, spent about £2,500 building a consultation area (see picture), which he also uses to stock items relevant to private consultations, such as hosiery. He says that rather than losing out on retail sales, he has seen the opposite. "Having a private place to show customers the

range of incontinence products, for example, has significantly increased the sales of these items".

Rather than wondering if they can afford to build consultation areas, it appears that pharmacists should be asking themselves if they can afford not to.

Wider marketing of OTC Imigran

Advertisements promoting the first OTC triptan are due to hit the small screen in the next six months as GSK shifts its marketing campaign from the pharmacy profession to consumers. Debbie Andalo reports

Although it is seeing week-on-week increase in OTC sales of Imigran Recovery, GlaxoSmithKline thinks that it will take until the end of this year at the earliest before it can say whether the POM to P switch has been a success. But the company's marketing director for OTCs for consumer health Tim Brooks said: "We didn't really start the full launch to the consumer until the last few months of last year and if you ask me now how's it going I would say it's too early to say. However we are having a commercial impact and we are seeing a growth in sales."

Sumatriptan switched from POM to P in May 2006, reflecting the government's commitment to increase patient choice in self-medication. It was significant for community pharmacists because a key role of the profession is to give advice about acute self-limiting illness. Neal Patel, communications director at the National Pharmacy Association says: "It's typical for a consultation in the pharmacy to start along the lines of the customer saying 'I've tried everything for migraine — do you have something else which might help?'."

Protocols and training

However, before OTC sumatriptan can be sold, pharmacists must follow a strict protocol, which was a condition of the product's P licence. They have to complete a patient questionnaire with the customer about their migraine and general medical history. Patients can download the questionnaire from www.imigranrecovery.co.uk and complete it before going to the pharmacy but the pharmacist is still expected to go through the questions with the customer. Alternatively, a pharmacy assistant could go through the questionnaire with the customer but the final decision for



Website for patients

a sale must still be taken by the pharmacist, who has to give written approval at the bottom of the questionnaire.

Although there is no audit trail to discover whether questionnaires are completed before sales, GSK is in the process of carrying out a randomised study to check whether pharmacists are following the proper procedures. Mr Brooks says: "We were required by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to carry out a post-use clinical study which we are doing." He is confident, however, that community pharmacists will follow the correct procedures because it is part of their professionalism.

GSK has produced a training manual for pharmacists about offering OTC sumatriptan and this has been backed up with 10 regional workshops and seminars. There was also the option of distance learning training. Training was made available two months before sumatriptan achieved its P status because GSK wanted to be sure that community pharmacy could handle the

switch with confidence. Last October, GSK extended its training programme to pharmacy assistants, producing an NPA-accredited training pack called "Managing migraine in the pharmacy: a guide for pharmacy assistants".

According to GSK, pharmacy has been enthusiastic about the POM to P switch of sumatriptan, and the company sees this as a barometer of the profession's willingness to embrace professional change and become proactive health care managers.

The switch is also having a noticeable impact on how patients manage their migraine. The City of London Migraine Clinic, a medical charity that helps patients manage their migraines says the change from POM to P has made a difference to patients. The clinic's medical director Anne MacGregor says sumatriptan already had the confidence of patients because it was a prescription-only medicine but patients were concerned that they might not be prescribed the amount of sumatriptan they required, particularly because it should be taken as soon as a migraine attack begins. She says: "What patients are doing now is buying an extra packet of sumatriptan over the counter, on top of what they are prescribed by the GP so they know they will always have some available when they need it. [The switch] has taken away a lot of fear."

GSK has no regrets about the move of sumatriptan from POM to P and believes it can be of benefit to the 60 per cent of six million migraine sufferers who never seek treatment for the condition from their GP. This gap, with the commercial and professional benefits it brings, is now starting to be filled by community pharmacy.

Make the most of public relations

Every business can benefit from public relations, and community pharmacies are no exception, says Judy Viitanen

Good public relations encourages people to talk and think about your business in a positive way, building your reputation, image and goodwill — all important to successful pharmacy practice. PR should be a vital weapon in your business armoury to enhance your commercial and professional image, and so help to increase sales. It is also a cost-effective way to get good publicity without advertising. And if there is a problem facing your business it helps you deal with it effectively.

Making the most of local publicity and media opportunities is the starting point to maximising your PR profile. Regional news media are highly influential. Local newspapers look for local stories and health is a hot topic, so the chances of getting a story about your pharmacy published are good, providing you follow the right approach. Standard PR tools that will help you tell your story include:

- Press release: a prepared statement of fact and comment, for example, a pharmacy refit or new service.
- News feature: detailed information on a newsworthy topic, such as pharmacy smoking cessation services.
- Picture story: a brief descriptive caption alongside a photograph, for example a VIP visit to your pharmacy. A good photo adds visual appeal to local media and can sometimes become the story.
- Letters to the editor: a reaction to news, editorial features, or letters from other readers.
- Opinion articles and columns: the local press strive for a lively mix of news and opinion. You could offer to write a regular health care feature or advice column. By establishing yourself as an expert, able to advise and comment on a range of health issues, you will develop strong working relationships with your local media.

Media relations

Use an up-to-date media list. Details of local newspapers in your area can be accessed at www.newspapersoc.org.uk and local radio

station contacts are available from www.radio-now.co.uk. Keep a record of local media contacts and editorial deadlines. Telephone and introduce yourself and get your name in their contacts book as a source of expert comment. Keep a cuttings file of your press coverage.

Press releases can be sent by e-mail, post or fax, to the health correspondent or the news desk. But do not badger them: if they want to cover your story, or find out more, they will call you. If they ask for more details co-operate and work to their timescales. They have deadlines and if you jeopardise those deadlines, they will simply drop your story.

If your release is covered, well done! But do not be discouraged if your release does not make it into print. Many factors beyond your control influence the media's decisions to cover a story. Persevere and try again next time.

Press release ideas

All releases need a strong "hook" — an angle that will appeal to editors and give your story a good chance of gaining coverage. So, what makes a newsworthy pharmacy press release? For starters, exploit your pharmacy's natural PR opportunities, for example, the opening of new premises or a pharmacy refit, or a milestone event. Have you received an accolade or won an industry award? Do not forget one of your best assets — your staff. Have any employees been recognised for outstanding achievements?

Journalists love real-life stories so develop some anonymised patient case histories. Examples that would resonate with the media include preventing medication errors or interactions or managing a patient's chronic condition, with significant benefits.

Be involved in your community. Sponsor events and associate your pharmacy with good causes. If public figures like the local MP or Mayor are involved, your newsworthiness will increase. National pharmacy events, PCT initiatives, or linking your pharmacy with health care awareness campaigns are ideal for your press

announcements. Monitor national health care news into which you can hook.

Publicity ideas for local activity-based pharmacy PR include:

- Talking to local community groups or clubs
- Developing a pharmacy newsletter
- Joining a local business organisation — become a figurehead
- Organising competitions in co-operation with a local paper
- Networking — meeting and talking to local opinion-formers

Finally, the best PR is the recommendation of a satisfied customer, so encourage loyal customers to spread the word.

With minimal financial outlay and a little hard graft and commitment, you will achieve positive publicity for your pharmacy. So, develop media contacts, communicate PR messages succinctly, build on your successes. For more ambitious projects, consider employing a PR agency. Daily rates range from £300 upwards.



Judy Viitanen was formerly head of PR at the National Pharmacy Association. She is managing director of PRimage Services Ltd, a specialist health care PR and integrated marketing communications consultancy (tel: 01727 874137; website: www.primage.org)

“ PR should be a vital weapon in your business armoury ”