



Northwest PASSAGE



Island Drug: ‘service excellence, delivered locally’

by Chris Linville

As a young pharmacist, Aaron Syring, PharmD, saw an entrepreneurial goal come to fruition when he purchased Island Drug in Oak Harbor, Wash. However, within a decade he realized that to grow his business, he would need to expand the pharmacy's footprint. With the variety of health care products and services Syring wanted to provide, space was becoming an issue.

At the time the pharmacy was about 7,000 square feet with limited parking. It was located away from the center of Oak Harbor, a town of some 22,000 residents on Whidbey Island, about an hour and a half northwest of Seattle in Puget Sound. So the decision was made to build a new pharmacy from the ground up. Syring, a 2002 Washington State University pharmacy graduate, had a number of items on his wish list.

“As we started to grow, we decided we needed more elbow room,” he says. “The whole goal was to provide a better customer experience. Our customers have been really good to us over the years, and we wanted to in turn be good to them and make a trip to the pharmacy a good experience.”

By all indications, there have been plenty of good experiences since the 10,000-square-foot facility opened on April 29, 2013. Along with the prescription area, it has a lunch counter; long-term care and durable medication equipment sections; compounding lab; immunization room; a dedicated area for CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure); and gifts, cards, and OTC products.

“We were looking to capture the Northwest theme,” he says. “We wanted something unique, but Northwest at the same time. Our tagline is ‘service excellence, delivered locally.’ That sums it up, whether it is medical equipment, gifts, CPAP, DME, or immunizations, it’s all about delivering a higher level of service to our community. So everything that we did in this project was centered on how we could do it better.”



In the interior, Syring says he wanted “wider aisles and an inviting atmosphere, not the bright white that some of the big boxes have. The customers seem to like the atmosphere.”

As for Syring, he couldn't be more pleased with how things turned out.

“Now we're right in the center of town, on the state highway,” he says. “It makes a big difference being centrally located. We have much more parking, and lots of different ways to access the property, which is convenient for our customers.”

To help get the project off the ground, Syring enlisted the services of Live Oak Bank (www.liveoakbank.com),

which specializes in providing pharmacies with a variety of financial and logistical support for purchases, expansions, and other major projects.

“They worked very hard and efficiently to get the deal done, which is impressive, because there is a lot of red tape and the Live Oak team made it very seamless,” he says. “They were a pleasure to work with on this project.”

PATH TO OWNERSHIP

Syring, a native of Woodland, Wash., has always been interested in how a pharmacy operates. Along with his pharmacy degree, he minored in business at WSU.

“That aspect was always appealing to me” regarding pharmacy, he says. “It was always in the back of my mind. I didn't think it would be a bad thing to put in your back pocket and see where things go. It was worthwhile to walk through some of the processes they expose you to, such as production, management, and things like that.”

After graduation Syring joined Hi-School Pharmacy, a regional chain in Oregon and Washington. He was familiar with the chain, having worked there

for several summers as a pharmacy assistant while an undergraduate.

“That was a really great way to get ready for pharmacy school,” he says. “It helped once the pharmacy classes got more drug related, and a lot of people had a tougher time with it. Because I had been working in a pharmacy for so long and had that exposure, I knew all the drug names, and dealing with brands and generics, it was a lot easier for me to pick that stuff up.”

After graduating, Syring spent a year as a “floater” at various Hi-School sites, before being given a store to manage in Vancouver, Wash. Around the same time his wife, a veterinarian, was looking to get back to Oak Harbor where she was born and raised, and where her father had a veterinary practice. So Syring began looking into opportunities in that area.

Hi-School's president and CEO Steve Oliva has a history of mentoring young pharmacists for ownership, and knew that Syring might be ready to make the next step. He assisted Syring in teaching him the ins-and-outs.

“He was the driving force to get me started in ownership,” Syring says of Oliva.

As luck would have it, a technician at a Hi-School location where Syring had worked had previously been employed at Island Drug, and he told Syring that owner Bill Bulpin was thinking about retiring. Syring met with Bulpin and on July 1, 2004, with guidance from Oliva, officially took over as owner. He was just 27 years old at the time.

POSITIVE IMPACT

Island Drug, which Syring says originally opened in the 1960s, has branched out since he became owner. A location in Clinton, Wash., was opened in 2005, and a third location in La Conner, Wash., was added in 2006. Whidbey Island, where the Island Drug pharmacies are located, has a heavy military presence. Naval Air Station Whidbey Island helps drive the local economy, with active duty and retired U.S. Navy personnel. Otherwise, Syring describes the area as fairly diverse, with a mix of young and old.

For Syring, a big part of patient care is putting staff in a position to make a positive impact.

"Because there are so many variables and different aspects to our business, we are able to challenge people in areas they are interested in," he says. "So if someone takes an interest in compounding, we could send them to school to learn more about compounding, or it might be LTC. We're more diverse than just having a standard retail counter. We've had a lot of flow between departments. A few of the people running our DME department were formerly pharmacy cashiers. They took an interest and liking in DME, and they were able to go vertical in that direction in the company. Those types of things on the business side are rewarding to see. It's good that people have that ability. Our compounding technician has been with us for 25 years. Another person who works with him has been here 10 years. You want people to stay with you as long as possible."

Along with LTC, DME, and compounding, which have been steady revenue producers, Syring has been making more of a push into CPAP.

"Our services are all customer driven, based on what the community needs and requests, and what we need to do," he says. "With CPAP, we didn't used to do that. We only started in 2010, but customers kept coming in and asking if they could get their CPAP supplies here. So we received some training and expanded that service. We're a reflection of the community." He says that a respiratory therapist is on staff to run the CPAP program, and that the pharmacy may eventually offer oxygen as well.

Syring says that while the business aspects of pharmacy are appealing to him, he says the clinical side has always been interesting to him as well.

"Our services are all customer driven, based on what the community needs and requests, and what we need to do."

"The driving force for me is asking what it is that we can deliver that is tangible to the community," he says. "It's safe to say that we are the leading immunization force in [Island] county. When H1N1 influenza was happening, we were the lead location the county worked with to get the vaccine out to people. We dispensed antiviral allocated to the country from the national stockpile. The county sought us out to help.

"We've had a few whooping cough epidemics come through here and we

react quickly to vaccinate people on large scales if needed. Immunizations have been one of the stronger niches for us in serving the community."

TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

Syring says that Island Drug tries to stay on top of technology. Features such as point-of-sale, e-prescribing, refill reminders, and interactive voice response have long been standard. The pharmacy leverages technology and pharmacy staff to offer a first-class synchronized refill program.

Syring has also developed a customer loyalty program and hopes to build on that to make it more targeted and individualized.

"For example, if somebody buys a bunch of Yankee candles, maybe we can send them a coupon right to their phone for 25 percent off next time they come in," he says. "We want to reward more on an individual basis. We're excited about that."

The pharmacy is also has a Facebook and Twitter presence, and has also signed up with NCPA's Digital Pharmacist Solution powered by RxWiki (www.ncpanet.org/digitalpharmacist), which is free to NCPA members.

Going forward, Syring says that being collaborative is a major theme for success.

"We're a reflection of our community, and that also takes into account our business partners as well," he says. "It's the people we've worked with at Live Oak Bank, and our tech partners and prescribers we work with. It's a cool building and it was a cool project to finish, but it's definitely bigger than me; it takes a full team of people and a community effort." ■

Chris Linville is managing editor of America's Pharmacist.