

A Review on Community Pharmacy Engagement and Customer Devotion: A Venue for Improving Customer Loyalty in Your Business

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Abstract— The Community-based pharmacy practice has evolved and nowadays has been a mixed plethora of enhanced pharmacy services and engagement for the stakeholders and business opportunities for most standalone establishments all over the country. Gone are the days where the focus is on product groundwork and dispensing, to becoming client-centered and healthcare adept frontliners within the four walls of a community pharmacy. The pharmacists involved in this shift are practitioners in their own respective communities who have seen the need to adapt to the transitioning process. They are primarily involved in leading and advancing team-based patient care services in communities to improve patient health and safety. An efficient marketing strategy among community pharmacies, amidst competition, needs to be developed based on contemporary information about the consumer's behavior in order to attract clients and develop customer loyalty. To keep the customers, various businesses adapted the concept of engagement and devotion as applied in various service businesses to improve the sales and their marketing strategy. However, this particular practice has not been given emphasis in the context of pharmacy businesses as there are limited studies conducted on this concept.

The conventional 'commodity type' drug stores are now slowly evolving as community pharmacies are offering added health services (such as but not limited to: clinical services, vaccination, online selling) together with counselling activities, and are faced with a new challenge of marketing these services to their customers. Developing the scenario wherein pharmacy engagement towards the customer via the pharmacists' delivery of healthcare services has changed the atmosphere in the community leading to enhanced customer devotion and improved loyalty to the pharmacy business.

Index Terms— community-based pharmacy; customer loyalty; customer perception, pharmacy engagement

I. INTRODUCTION

Community-based pharmacy practice has been long-established and up to the present is evolving as one of the most accessible providers of care to patients when they need it. The transition was dynamic in that it pivoted from focusing on product preparation(compounding) and dispensing to becoming the health care destination from beyond the four walls of the conventional 'commodity type'

drug stores. The shift brings with it the improvement in the image and professional performance of our community pharmacist all over the continent, resulting in better satisfaction, good customer service, and enhanced perceived appreciation of the pharmacist's role in the health care team. Nonetheless, enhanced training and personality development on the part of the community pharmacists are needed to develop better engagement, interaction, and devotion to patients in assessing health care and medical needs, evaluating customer's behaviors to improve health services, and sustainability of the business practice. Furthermore, to better catch and attract new clients, maintain patronage and loyalty in spite of the competitive market environment, there is a need for community pharmacies to develop an efficient marketing strategy [1,2]. Over time, the involvement of community pharmacies in marketing pharmaceutical products has been successful; however, the advent of enhancing the capacity of the business to market other health services to patients somehow presents a new challenge for many pharmacists. There are few and limited written articles that have been published discussing experiences and related outcomes for community pharmacies involved with service marketing [3] although there are several descriptive articles that mentioned concepts on how to overcome this challenge.

Sustainability is important in any business environment, thus in order to continue, and thrive community pharmacies had to think of ways to do cost-cutting practices that could impact the delivery and quality of pharmaceutical services, thereby affecting the pharmacy customer engagement. Observations made and reported by other studies showed that on the contrary, in other business categories, customer engagement turned out to actually be contributing to customer retention [4,5]. In any business, garnering new customers is the key, however, it is a challenging job to keep the existing customers and sustain their patronage. The principle of retaining existing customers is better off as it creates more value for the business as it connotes low operating costs than bringing in new customers [4]. A positive word of mouth (WoM) marketing strategy is created by repeat customers who were satisfied with the services offered by any establishment and it corresponds to a stable source of revenues [6]. In community pharmacies, it is an enduring strategy to bring in new customers because of the positive WoM brought about by the existing customers. In every business, there is a need to develop customer devotion, defined as a combining act of repeat purchase, word of mouth schemes, and constructive feedback in order to retain the existing customers in a certain

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establishment. In long-term business, success has been associated with customer devotion playing a vital role as mentioned by Pimentel RW,2004 [5]. Furthermore, as reported in the study of Aksoya L, et.al (2017) from an international study across eight countries in telecommunication services, it was mentioned that in relation to customer engagement and loyalty this relationship brings positive outcomes on long term profitability in any business [7]. This however has not been verified and established further if also applicable in a community pharmacy setting. Thus, this article review would like to confirm and somehow establish the importance of community pharmacy engagement and customer devotion as a venue for improving customer loyalty in your business.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Based Pharmacists and Other added HealthCare Services

Community-based pharmacy settings are frequently visited by patients because of their convenience and accessibility to provide patient care. Moose, J, and Branham (2014) reported the frequency of visits that patients do in community-based pharmacies ranging to 35 times per year as compared with a primary care physician that is only visited four times per year [8]. The literature proved the necessity of the pharmacists' role in the community as health providers who offer either generalist or specialist ambulatory care services to patients in the communities they serve [9]. The Pharmacists' work has always been associated with the service industry. This includes the pharmacists in the community sector dispensing medicines and selling medical devices and other health products, specifically for the delivery of health and medication-related services.

Traditionally the role of pharmacists evolved from compounding remedies from raw material to providing pre-manufactured dosage forms medications to patients on a prescription basis. However, over the years the role of the pharmacist in the community has evolved greatly and is now dynamically working on the different tasks associated with other health initiatives aside from dispensing. The many tasks would include prescription processing, checking for drug interactions through patient profiling, providing patient advice, promoting healthy lifestyle managing, and monitoring drug therapy outcomes for both patients and populations. The community pharmacist plays an important role in the continuous provision of healthcare services and follow-up checkups for patients as they are the health professional that patients see most often. These services give added benefits to medication and patient care outcomes. Additionally, pharmacists in all sector not only those community-based have continued to develop services that add value and enhance the rationalize medication use process and encompasses a variety of individual and public health services. [10,11].

Here in the Philippines, public health involvement of pharmacists is now encouraged especially with the National launching of the PPhA Immunizing Pharmacist Certification Program (IPCP) by the Philippine Pharmacists' Association (PPhA) last February 2021 [12]. PPhA has designed this national program to help train Filipino pharmacists especially those in the community-based practice to perform safe

vaccination processes and practices commencing from proper storage to preparation, administration techniques, documentation, and clinical skills assessment, not leaving behind the knowledge and skills in the management of adverse events following immunization (AEFI). All these KSP is anchored on the core values and principles of PPhA such as excellence, integrity, trust, collaboration, professionalism, and altruism. The PPhA-IPCP has a practice-based curriculum that reflects a fusion of clinical pharmacy and public health pharmacy. The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) recognized this move by providing the accreditation to the Philippine Pharmacists Association, Inc. (PPhA) as the training provider to conduct the "immunizing pharmacist certification program" [13]. The result of this IPCP training resulted in producing Certified Immunizing Pharmacists around the country and in their respective community pharmacies where they can serve as immunizers for adult vaccines such as Influenza, pneumonia, herpes zoster among others clientele would need their services for. Vaccination is a common value-added service of pharmacists in the community as well as the provision of education and advocacy related to vaccinations [14,15]. Other health-related services that have been rendered in practice by community pharmacists are vital signs taking and monitoring for sugar(glucose) level, liver enzymes(sgpt), and uric acid using portable machines in collaboration with primary physicians.

Customers' perception about the pharmacists and its Effect

As described by Miller and Johnson-Laird in 1976, perception is a process of choosing, sorting out, and interpreting the sensations which have been gathered by sensory organs. The basic concept of perception is shown in the diagram (Fig.1) as described by Chethamron, P et al., (2019) [16].

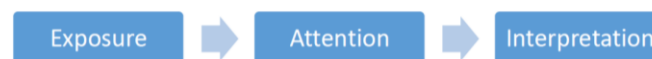


Fig. 1 [16]

Several studies have shown that the customers' perception toward the pharmacists' delivery of services (provisions of pharmaceutical care with accurate drug knowledge, trustworthiness, reliable and prompt services) have developed trust and confidence on their end and promoted the establishments good well in the community. Mediating between the customers' perception about the pharmacist and pharmacy customer devotion is the customer's engagement. It established the idea of customer engagement [17,18,19] and emphasized the importance of pharmacy engagement as a method for customer involvement and making them ready before proceeding to customer devotion. In this process of engagement, the pharmacist's communication skills were enhanced and interaction between the customers was established [20,21]. Ensuring that community pharmacists allowed customers to participate in sharing or exchanging ideas about the pharmacies is very significant, making customers feel the excitement to receive professional pharmacy services, getting them involved, and interacting

with others in the pharmacy made them feel zealous and passionate about their community pharmacies. Furthermore, to retain the customers and increase sales through added health services the pharmacists were the key persons who captured the devotion of the customers, not the pharmacy structure or even the medication price. When customers felt esteemed and pleased with the services offered to them by the pharmacy, they would invite friends to use the service, encourage them to patronize the establishment and would give constructive advice to them to continuously improve services and finally repurchase medications at the pharmacies. It is similar to other industries that showed a high association between the pharmacy engagement process and pharmacy customer devotion [22]. With the advent of increasing demand to innovate the pharmacy in order to cope up with the changing times, independent community-based-pharmacy found it difficult to make the business stand out from the bigger retailers. But the extra effort of practicing pharmacy engagement among its customers initiated by the pharmacists themselves has made a difference and impacted customer devotion that kept them coming back to the pharmacy, even if it is not as convenient as the other pharmacy that is located on every corner. Therefore, affirmation on the studies that previously reported on customers' positive perception about the pharmacists is highly commendable because of its association with the increased satisfaction on the healthcare services offered to lead to devotion and loyalty to the respective community-based-pharmacy.

Extended Community Pharmacy Services: Barriers and Methods to overcome it

Innovative healthcare and clinical services are now provided by community-based pharmacist practitioners in community-based settings beyond preparing and dispensing prescription products [23]. In conjunction with the business innovations, community pharmacies have struggled with the marketing and delivery of clinical services to patients, and not much research has been done to determine successful models for marketing these available and offered services. To overcome the difficulties of marketing the new value-added clinical services to the community, it is important for the community pharmacists to consider the integration of marketing techniques such as but not limited to – customizing or tailoring the marketing to a target population, engaging and establishing relationships with patients, and looking to past marketing successes in developing marketing plans [24]. Pharmacists should also find creative solutions to barriers encountered by being adventurous in exploring new ways to promote pharmacy clinical services offered in their establishments. To develop and implement the applicable marketing strategies of the pharmacy to grow the realm of clinical services offered to patients, and for the development of the profession, it is important that these services can be embraced by patients and the health care community for them to patronize it [25].

Table 1 Summary of the Common Barriers and Methods to Overcome Marketing Barriers in the Community Pharmacy

Common Barriers to Marketing Clinical Services in Pharmacy-Based Pharmacy	Methods in overcoming Marketing Barriers in the Community Pharmacy
Patients’ unawareness of the pharmacists’ role outside dispensing medications [26] Patients’ belief they do not need clinical services [27]	Utilize methods of advertising that have worked successfully for the pharmacy in the past marketing of products if applicable [29]
Patients’ unwillingness to pay a pharmacist out of pocket for the extended services offered [28]	Expand the pharmacist-patient relationship into a marketing opportunity Target specific patient populations who have a need for the service [30] Develop relationship marketing [31] Take part in local and national pharmacy and disease state promotional campaigns Incorporate new innovative marketing ideas

Improving customer loyalty in your pharmacy business

Customer loyalty is defined as the gauge of the probability that customers will continue doing business with your company. In the pharmacy setting, it implies the overall satisfaction provided to the patient/customer with not only your products and services but also at every aspect of the customer journey [32].

According to Ashley et al. (2011), “customer loyalty is a behavior associated with the brand of a product including the possibility to renew the contract brand in the future and how many customers are likely to enhance the positive image of a product” [33]. From this sense, looking at the pharmacy business, it can be concluded that customer loyalty is a behavior of a committed customer, with confidence, and loyalty to the establishment, its products, services as well as an important management challenge that can enhance the positive image of a product being carried. Customers that are loyal to certain brands or in the case of a pharmacy, it might be a brand name of a certain drug but would buy the same product again though there is plenty of other alternative or substitute [34].

Pharmacies are negligent if they do not have a strategic plan with customer retention and growth as two of their most important business objectives [35] Customers represent the

most important public relationship for every independent retail pharmacy (IRP). So, it stands to reason that maintaining a profitable base of customers should be a major goal of every pharmacy. Therefore, every relationship in the pharmacy—including relationships with employees, distributors & wholesalers, vendors, local communities, and owners—can be viewed as spokes emanating from the customer. Fig. 2 illustrates the relationship between these variables.



Fig 2: COMMERCE BEGINS WITH THE CUSTOMER [35] Without the customer, the other relationships (spokes that emanate from the customer hub) are relegated to a level of low-to-insignificance. If there are no customers, there is no revenue. If there is no revenue, neither employees, vendors, suppliers, utilities, rents, nor expenses can be paid. And if employees cannot be hired, drugs, supplies, and OTC items cannot be purchased, the store cannot be leased, and electricity & water cannot be supplied, then the pharmacy cannot exist. And since customers and their purchase dollars are the fuel to any going concern, then pharmacies are negligent if they do not have a strategic plan with customer retention and growth as two of its most important business objectives.

The recipe for improving customer loyalty in your pharmacy business is to provide the avenue to good customer service where they can share and talk about their experiences. Forbes articles reported some ways to expand this customer experience in your community-based pharmacy [36].

Connect and Attract: Do an advertisement in the local newspaper, or collaborate with doctors’ offices by putting flyers with contact numbers for easy access to your pharmacy. Ensure that your marketing strategy is clear enough for everyone and be consistent with the brands that make your pharmacy easily identifiable.

Orient: Creating a customer loyalty program can be a huge asset to your pharmacy. Loyalty can be a simple “spend money, earn points, get money back” setup, or could be more advanced.

Transact, Extend and Retain: As a pharmacist or owner, you need to rely on your staff to help you ensure that each interaction with the customer is as positive as possible and meet the expectations set for each customer experience. Staff who are well trained and can understand the policy, procedure, and technology are your biggest asset here. Invest and set aside some funds in your annual budget for inset training and other types of continuing education for your staff. **“Advocate and Share the Journey”:** Provide your customers with an environment where customers can speak freely with you and other customers. Let them understand that

you value their feedback and that you are willing to listen to them.

“Make Every Touch Point Uniquely Yours”: Do something that your competition can’t or won’t do. Be always creative and learn from others' success stories.

“Fight Through It”: Even when these innovations can improve the overall customer experience and growth of your business, none of these are instant fixes. Surround yourself with a solid, dedicated passionate staff and partners who can support you as you work together to turn a simple transaction at your store into an experience your customers will love and share with others.

III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of various literature gave an illustration that pharmacy customer devotion (PCD) is increased by the positive perceived service quality (PSQ) received by the customer in their visit to any community-based pharmacy, and vice versa. Firstly, the results gave us an idea about the customer's behavior that when he/she has a better PSQ which is exemplified in Thailand’s pharmacy structure [16] this could lead to a more devoted and loyal attitude on the part of the customer for a particular establishment. Furthermore, the practice of exercising Pharmacy Engagement (PE) amongst pharmacies specifically in community-based settings, showed that PE had strengthened the relationship between the pharmacy personnel (pharmacists and staff) and customers, leading to their devotion to the pharmacy and its products, and continued patronage and loyalty with the company. Secondly, the findings in different literature elucidated that customers’ perception toward the pharmacists’ delivery of services has developed trust and confidence on their end thereby promoting the establishments good well in the community. It was also reported that linkage was found to be enthused by the mediating effect of pharmacy engagement with customer devotion. Worth mentioning would be the observation that customers’ perception of the pharmacist does not play role in pharmacy customer devotion, but rather on the collective quality of pharmacy services the customer received.

Another concept elucidated in this paper was the methods that can be employed by the community-based pharmacy in order to overcome the barriers of marketing their extended community pharmacy services and other clinical healthcare services. Here, some methods were specified as directives for community pharmacists to consider, like- the integration of marketing techniques such as but not limited to – customize or tailoring the marketing to a target population, engaging and establishing relationships with patients, and looking to past marketing successes in developing marketing plans.

Finally, this paper concludes that the pharmacy business is diverse than other retail stores because of the different levels of service they have to provide in order to satisfy their customers. On the basis of these findings, as stated in various literature the significance of customer loyalty cannot be set aside in current market situations as this helps boost the sales of the establishment. The success of many conventional and new community pharmacies, therefore, depends on enhancing the trust and confidence of the consumer. Customers are said to represent the most important public relationship for every independent retail pharmacy (IRP). So, it stands to reason that maintaining a profitable base of customers should be a major goal of every pharmacy. The recipe for improving customer

loyalty in your pharmacy business is to provide the avenue to good customer service where they can share and talk about their experiences. Suggestions from Forbes have mentioned a few ways to expand customer experience in your community-based pharmacy such as – connecting and attracting; orienting your customer base; do interacting with the customer; advocating and sharing your journey with the customer and doing something that your competitor can't do. With these, you will be gaining loyal customers that will serve as your ambassadors that will spread brand and product awareness through word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing. Your loyal customers are the most likely to keep coming back to purchase from your business; will increase your revenues and defend your establishments against the competition outside.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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