

Speaker 1: Welcome to the Pharmacy Marketing Simplified podcast. Part of the Pharmacy Podcast Network. Pharmacy marketing simplified focuses on easy and proven marketing tips from pharmacy owners and industry experts to leverage in your independent pharmacy business. This podcast is all about pharmacy marketing and how to be successful in today's competitive marketplace.

Nicolle: Welcome to the pharmacy marketing simplified podcast, part of the Pharmacy Podcast Network. I'm your host Nicolle McClure, president of GRX Marketing, and I'm so excited to have two guests with me today from Smart Solutions, Travis Smith, who is VP of pharmacy automation, and Jessica Gardner, marketing director. Today we'll be talking about the subject of patient communication and how its evolved in the healthcare industry over the years. Welcome both of you to the show.

Travis: Oh thank you so much, it's a pleasure being here.

Jessica: Thank you Nicolle.

Nicolle: Before we get started with our discussion, can you guys just give our listeners a brief company history about Smart Solutions?

Travis: Sure, that's probably easier said than done but I'll be glad to do that Nicolle. Smart Solutions was established in the early '80s by Craig Swett and myself. Craig is president of the company, he handles the engineering and I handle the sales, marketing efforts, and customer relationships. Initially we focused on pharmacy, IVR and workflow products for change. But eventually as our market matured we started working with institutional healthcare, hospitals and independent pharmacies. As I look back and see where we were then and where we are now I see that we've evolved from an IVR company into a real pharmacy communications company.

Currently, today we provide cloud hosted telephone systems, smart call out, inbound IVR, cloud hosted hardware platforms, from small to large in that category, even centralized enterprise applications for larger companies, with speech recognition as well as text to speech capability with those larger companies.

We have a product we call Smart Dial that's for outbound calling to notify patients their prescription is ready to be picked up, and various other messages that we deliver. And we have a smartphone app called My Mobile RX that allows a patient to communicate on a nonverbal basis from their phone to the pharmacy.

We have provided web service interfaces in the past and right now we're in the process of developing some social media offerings that I think are just tremendous. Jessica is our expert there. Jessica would you like to comment on that?

Jessica: I think with such a digital age that social media is becoming very prevalent in our society. Whether it's businesses or personal accounts. So Smart will be taking the next step in working with social media in terms of offering our customers Facebook site, LinkedIn profiles, Instagram sites, and then furthering that into websites and offering

applications as customer refills, delivery, and all those sorts of things throughout the social media platform.

Nicolle: That's awesome that you guys have expanded and recognized the need for those digital services as well.

Travis: Yeah. Well you know Nicolle; in a nutshell we pretty much provide everything a pharmacy needs to effectively stay in touch with their patients and offer world class service as a business. We help them to build their business and we intend on helping them with their marketing, and their patient loyalty and relationships for sure.

Early on we recognized that nothing ever makes up for poor customer service. And as a result we decided we would provide 24/7 technical and sales support, free software upgrades to the pharmacies, typically twice a year. And we also in the last couple of three years have started monitoring each of the IVR systems 24/7 through our unique guardian angel software.

So specifically with our systems we know before the customers does if there's a system glitch, because we're getting constant feedback. I also firmly believe that our technical support's the best in the industry and our systems are the most reliable in the marketplace. And fact we built our reputation on that.

Nicolle: Yeah it sounds like you guys have really gone above and beyond to make sure that the pharmacy owner is taken care of with any realm of using your products so that's great. So Travis it sounds like you have a lot of experience. You've been in the industry for the last 25 years. How have you seen communication in the healthcare industry evolve from when you started Smart Solutions to today?

Travis: That's a funny one to ask, I'm glad you asked though. Communication improvement's been revolutionary. This is an honest story. I remember when we first started this business, I rented, leased, whatever you did back then, my first cell phone. And it was a big old clunker and it had an antenna and all sorts of things. And I remember specifically my first months' bill, it was something in the neighborhood of 25 hundred dollars. And we changed that quickly. We kept the phones but we weren't so prolific in talking.

I can't put a percentage on how much it's changed, but it's gone from a direct telephone and face to face communication to telephone, digital, and internet communication. And that's all resulted in improved convenience and time saving, for the pharmacy and for the patient.

In addition to that accuracy has improved, reducing patient and pharmacy risk and liability. I think essentially we've gone from horses, buggy communication formats to space age communication protocols.

Nicolle: That's a good analogy. How would you ... kind of that same question but focusing more on the long term care and hospital industry?

Travis: Long term care has always been a challenge when it comes to just the volume of business that they do, with specific pharmacy, because typically they'll choose a specific pharmacy to deal with. Originally their big challenge, between the long term facility and the pharmacy interaction, was the difficulty of entering multiple patient orders and trying to avoid communication inaccuracies in both the LTC and the pharmacy side. The process was slow, it was labor intensive and costly from both perspectives. LTC staff member would be calling in prescription for a patient, leaving long messages and errors in transcriptions was a real reality.

In addition, it would take up an enormous amount of pharmacy staff time, either in a live situation or if they were listening to a recording. With Smart Solutions, we process up to 20 plus prescriptions in a single session, and if the LTC's entries are correct, 100% accuracy is achieved.

For hospitals the impact is a little bit different. Traditionally a patient picked up their initial prescription order upon discharge and never returns. With Smart's technology, hospitals can be much more involved with total patient care, with refill availability, overall health counseling and more frequent patient interaction. Specifically with hospital ambulatory pharmacies, inbound IVR and outbound patient reminders improve patient service and compliance by making refill requests easy, but by building the patient relationship with the initial prescription, and enabling follow up with patient reminders for compliance.

The benefit to the hospital is they can now increase their impact on the community by providing personalized counter service or mail order service and retain the patient as a long term customer, building their active patient population. Specifically, with hospital ambulatory pharmacies inbound IVR and outbound patient reminders improves patient service and compliance by making refill requests easy with the hospital and also by building the patient relationship with the initial prescription and enabling follow-up with patient reminders for compliance. If the hospital uses mail order, they can absolutely not only provide the initial prescriptions but retain a long term relationship with the patient.

Nicolle: So definitely helps bringing the long-term care in hospital industry into the future as well. Because in my mind those two industries sometimes seem to lag a little bit behind even retail pharmacy.

Travis: Yeah I think you're right about that, absolutely.

Nicolle: Yeah. So with the creation of mobile apps, you mentioned earlier that that's one of your guys' offerings. How would you say that that has helped businesses communicate better with patients?

Travis: Well the communication's improved so dramatically, I can't put a number on it of course. But in the last hundred years, the phone's become the universal communication tool. I read some of these older history books and how people would, the doctor would have to travel hours to get to some farmer's location to help deliver a baby and things

like that. Well that's all a thing of the past. A hundred years ago, the phone they'll ... or so, they'll introduce the phone, and I remember when we got our first one when I was a kid. And it was really a big deal.

In the last 10 or 12 years, the phone has become a computer. Communication today is faster, more convenient than ever. When we started 25 years ago, cell phones were still a novelty, not everyone had one. Today they're prevalent throughout the world and is a primary way of improving communication to the pharmacy and from the pharmacy.

Smart has created an app called My Mobile RX that allows a customer to enter their refill request or scan their prescription and be informed when they can expect to pick it up. They can even check on a prescription's status. With the social media things that we're thinking of doing, everything that typically is done with social media is done through telephones, or at least that's what my children demonstrate to me every day.

Nicolle: Yeah so it definitely makes mobile apps, social media, all of that, makes our life more convenient, but it also can raise the question of security issues and privacy. So in your opinion do you feel like that those conveniences can also make our lives less private as well?

Travis: Well we certainly know that. We hear stories all the time of people deleting their Facebook account or some other account because it's not giving the right impression of them. But I really can't speak for any individual and their social media proclivities, but for Smart Solutions, patient information and HIPAA compliance is very sacred.

Every patient transaction that we're involved in is encrypted. Even if a hacker were to hack into a pharmacy system, they wouldn't be able to read the messages, records, or emails that Smart's recorded.

For us, patient health information is safe and secure always.

Nicolle: That's great to hear. I'm sure a lot of our listeners that maybe looking for an IVR solution will definitely be comforted by that fact that you guys offer that extra level of security. How would you say that having better communication platforms and technology can not only offer more convenience for patients but also help them be more adherent?

Travis: Well a part of this goes back to what we already talked about, communication from the patient to the pharmacy, and the pharmacy to the patient. With the inbound calling that we provide, the patient has the direct line into the pharmacy computer network. With our outbound calling, and texting services, we can remind the patients to pick up their prescriptions. Because honestly, and it's happened to me many times, I just get busy and I forget, oh yeah, I got to go pick that up. Unless I'm reminded, I'll go days and days and days without going to get say, my Zocor, that I need honestly on a daily basis.

So we provide several types of patient communications. But there are five I think that are core compliance notifications. We do a pre prescription reminder call, where the patient's informed the prescription's due to be filled, and then ask permission to fill it.

Then there are three potential follow up calls to ensure the patient's aware the prescription availability right after a prescription's filled, we can make a call or send a text that says, "Your prescription's ready to be picked up." And then we can set up a couple of reminders, set it 3 or 4 days out, or 5 or 10 days out, depending on the preference of the pharmacy. And then the final compliance attempt, if the patient didn't go for the pre compliance, or pre prescription due call, is a post prescription due call, where we call the patient and ask them if they'd like to refill the prescription again. And if so, they can say yes, and if they actually need to speak to the pharmacy staff, they can speak to the pharmacy staff during that communication. So we deliver the message but we also allow the patient the opportunity to actually speak to someone live if they need to do so.

Nicolle: So, you guys offer, it sounds like you offer a pretty robust system for not only communicating with patients, but also really helping those pharmacies help their patients be more adherent as well, which is awesome.

Travis: We try.

Nicolle: Well you must be doing something right; you guys have been in business for a long time. So where would you say that pharmacies are missing an opportunity to communicate with their patients?

Travis: Well let's think about that just for a second. As we know technology has become such a major part of our society, that it's really important for a number of reasons. For the pharmacy, it has a great deal to do with their profitability, because it takes work away from the staff, and it improves convenience for the patient. It also dramatically reduces risk and helps with providing healthcare, it's a great importance to our society today.

If you don't have the technology preserve, or if a pharmacy doesn't have the technology to preserve or promote their business, they're not providing the services they should to their patients. If the patient isn't being schooled on what they need to be doing with their medications, then the pharmacy's missing out on creating loyal customers. And the pharmacy's missing out on compliance and potential income and profitability.

Nicolle: So, say there's a pharmacy that realizes they're missing an opportunity and they know that they need to get started with an IVR platform, but what challenges do you see that owners run into when adapting new technology?

Travis: I had a talk with one of the major pharmaceutical distributors about this some years ago. And he and I both think it's an educational process for the pharmacy more than the patient. In Smart's early days we worked exclusively with pharmacy chains, and I recall one chain, a pharmacy manager did not want to use Smart Call. I went to visit this pharmacist personally, face to face in another state, and he was convinced that none of his patients would approve or use this system. Now this was in the probably mid '90s, '95, '96, '97, something like that. But fortunately for the pharmacy and us, his district manager overrode his objections, we installed a Smart Call IVR in his store. And at that time we were actually doing the installations because they were very complex.

So, as a personal follow-up, I went again to visit this pharmacy a couple months after the system was installed, and I could not believe the change, he honestly blew me away. He was totally praising Smart Call. He said, "I was so wrong." The pharmacy at that time was receiving 75% of his pharmacy refills through Smart Call. He was just totally ecstatic. His staff weren't being interrupted as frequently, which means that he could actually save on payroll, right? And the ambience in the pharmacy improved so people could focus on their tasks. And they had time when their patients did come in, they were able to actually sit down and counsel with them and have a conversation with them.

So one of the objections too is that a lot of the independents especially think that older patients need to talk with the staff. And in some cases that's true, and we facilitate that if that's the case, with our caller bypass. But the younger generations like the convenience and repetitive or digital or automated voice communication. In fact, I think that some of them would prefer never speaking with a human being.

Nicolle: So, would you say that that is kind of the biggest hurdle in getting a pharmacy owner to embrace new technology, just get over that feeling of, have to talk to every patient?

Travis: Yeah I really do believe that's the case. And I run onto that even today as I talk to pharmacies, say, "You know well I'm kind of interested in telling the patient the prescription is ready but I don't need an IVR." And you know what, that's absolutely okay with us.

But there are many independents that honestly feel that they got to talk to their patients. And I think 15 years ago that was correct, but technology has moved on and some of those patients have moved on. The younger generations, the baby boomer in fact, who I'm part of that group, during the last 15 years, we've had the opportunity to embrace technology, we now use computers, we now use smartphones, and it's been to our advantage. I think that if you were born after 1980, technology is just a given. You embrace technology totally.

The millennials who grew up with technology in their cribs, as I said earlier sometimes happy never having to speak with a human.

So I think the major hurdle is attitude and cost of technology. So the attitude is, no I got to have this personal relationship with the patient. Yes, if that patient requires that. And as I've said before, we facilitate that. But if they don't and they're looking for convenience, that's when the technology needs to step in. And honestly as far as the cost of the technology, for our Smart Call IVR which is our most expensive application, the cost is really minimal. Typically, the cost of a system, amortized over a five-year period is about the cost of a lunch on a daily basis. And the financial benefit's enormous. The ROI analysis that I do for some of these pharmacies really blows them away.

Nicolle: Kind of gets them over from the dark side to the light side to understand why it's important to adapt this technology. So as we discuss today, communication in our industry has changed a lot over the last 25, 10, 5 years. Where do you see it going in the future, in the next 5 to 10 years?

Travis: I personally think that technologically this is the most exciting time in the history of the world. Communication technology along with all the other technologies that we're involved in will continue to grow and improve and technology adoption will also improve. We'll definitely see in the future I think patient applications from the pharmacy, it may launched, where the request to speak to the pharmacy in a video chat, similar to telemedicine like they do today, and that will probably be launch from a wrist appliance of some sort. And we'll also see a unified patient communication portals, that more than likely will be from a computer at home or something like that, a laptop that will allow the patients to access their information, from multiple providers, with a single app, with one secure login. I'm looking forward to that.

They'll also be able to see how medications interact with each other in your specific DNA makeup, that's my opinion. Also cloud technology will become the norm, it's still an emerging technology but it's become so good and so reliable that it's where every pharmacy needs to look at going. Overall patient pharmacy communication I don't think has any limit. They'll become more reliable, more secure, and very specific. Just going into the past a little bit, I remember when I was a young man during muscle car era in the '60s, factory hot rods were being introduced, with main horse power ratings up to say 435 horsepower. And they had big cubic inch ratings.

Today though, the technology has improved to such a significant amount that smaller engines, half the size of those big cubic inch motors, are now producing the same horsepower or more. And the motors, the engines were actually more reliable than they were in the golden age of the hot rods, as I like to call it. I think the same's absolutely true with communication. I have a close friend who owns an IT business, and he says we haven't even scratched the surface, I think that's true.

I don't have a crystal ball or any scientific insight into where it's going to go, but it will improve dramatically, it will benefit the pharmacy and the patient, and you need both there. We as humans now are concerned about personal health and happiness, we sort of all want to live forever. I've seen statistics that say if you're alive in 2025 to 2030 that you'll probably live to be 100, 120 years old. That's a direct result of better medical care and better medical care honestly starts with better medication and treatment regimes. And no single entity's better suited to service that need than retail and ambulatory pharmacies. We might see the day when you, going to your pharmacy, and instead of asking for a specific medication, you say, "Analyze me, tell me what I need." And they can do that right there by some sort of magic, who knows. It would be a lot of fun to see where we go with all of this.

Nicolle: Yeah definitely. It's an exciting time for sure. Do either of you have anything to add before we wrap up our podcast?

Travis: Jessica, you haven't participated much, do you have any comments? I'd like to hear what you feel.

Jessica: No I think that's it Travis I think you touched on everything in regards to Smart Solutions and our products and where technology's going in the next 25 to 30 years, so it'll be an exciting to time watch and see it grow.

Travis: Good. Well Nicolle thank you for the opportunity today, we really do appreciate it.

Nicolle: Yeah, thank you both, I think you guys provided a lot of great information on patient communication, where it's been, where it's going, also enlightened our listeners with more information about your company. So it was great to talk to you both.

Travis: Great. All right, thank you so much.

Jessica: Thank you.

Nicolle: Thank you. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Pharmacy Marketing Simplified podcast, be sure to check out or to reach out to our pharmacy marketing experts at pharmacymarketing.com, or check out all our podcasts at pharmacypodcast.com

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