

Better Interactions

GROCERS CAN LEVERAGE THEIR PHARMACIES TO CONNECT WITH CONSUMERS.

By Barbara Sax

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he drug channel grabs a larger share in key OTC categories that often require a pharmacist's recommendation.

The food channel's share of the cold/allergy/sinus liquid and tablet segments hovers at around 20 percent, while the drug channel accounts for around 40 percent of both segments, according to data from Chicago-based IRI. In the anti-smoking segment, supermarkets account for only about 8 percent of category sales, while drug stores have a 46 percent share.

Having a pharmacist available to recommend products might boost the channel's share of recommendation-sensitive products.

"Grocery traditionally does not get its fair share of OTC category sales in key categories such as respiratory products," admits Bob Sanders, EVP of IRI's health care practice. Having the pharmacist spend more time with consumers recommending OTCs is one way to increase share, but Sanders notes that a pharmacist shortage puts manpower in short supply. "It's a challenge to have pharmacists spend more time with patients, since they need to fill prescriptions."

A Matter of Trust

For chains that are prioritizing pharmacists' time spent in front of the counter, the effort wins consumer loyalty. "The word 'trusted' is powerful," says Jeffrey Mondelli, VP of pharmacy for Keasbey, N.J.-based retail cooperative Wakefern Food Corp. "Pharmacists consistently rank near the top of surveys that list the most trusted health care professionals. Having a pharmacist available for uncertain patients and caretakers in the aisle provides immediate access to expertise that will improve outcomes. Improved outcomes is a win-win scenario and translates to customer loyalty."

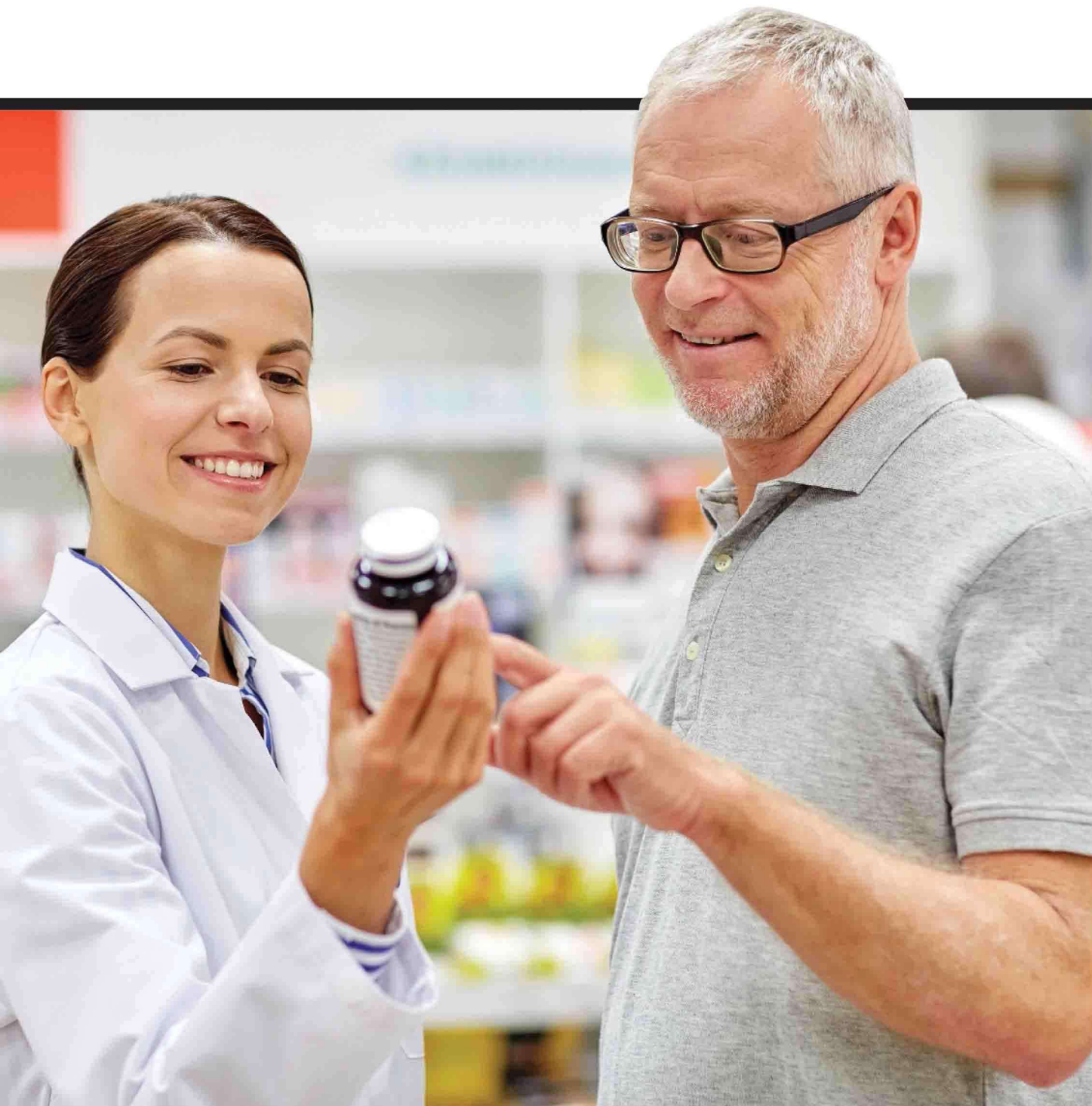
Jenny Rapley, pharmacy communications manager at Boise, Idaho-based Albertsons Cos., agrees. "Having a trusted community pharmacist in stores can definitely help boost sales and differentiate us from stores without pharmacies," she says. "Many times, shoppers come in not knowing what they need, so having the pharmacist as a resource is a tremendous asset."

"There are a lot of OTCs that patients have questions about, and pharmacists have the knowledge about active ingredients and how they can interact with other medications patients are taking," observes Marcus Hurst, pharmacy supervisor at Rigby, Idaho-based Broulim's Fresh Foods. According to Hurst, a majority of consumer OTC questions come from parents concerned about which OTCs are appropriate for their children, and the proper dosing for their age and weight.



Cough and cold season also brings consumer questions on how to treat symptoms. "People are spreading germs at work, school and home; they are looking for safe and effective ways to minimize the duration of their illness and bring them comfort," asserts Rapley.

She adds that Albertsons' pharmacists take the opportunity to encourage flu shots for "all individuals 6 months and older ... so they can do their part to help stop the



spread of disease and prevent further illness for them, their families and communities.” During flu season, some Albertsons stores offer free flu shots in exchange for a food donation to a local charity.

January often brings weight-loss and smoking cessation programs to the fore. “While there are peaks for different categories, smoking cessation is a category our pharmacists get questions on year-round, so our pharmacy teams work to stay

updated on the latest products and programs,” notes Rapley. “Pharmacists make recommendations based on shopper-specific information, such as smoking habits, product preference and cost, and can also provide additional information about insurance coverage, tobacco quitlines and OTC products that support the patient’s goals. In some states, our pharmacists are able to prescribe these medications to have them covered by insurance plans.”

Wakefern’s Mondelli says that patients frequently have questions about drug interactions. “Patients taking multiple prescription maintenance medications often ask about the potential for drug-drug interactions,” he points out. “Our pharmacists use



their knowledge, along with dosing charts and manufacturer-sponsored education pieces, to help customers arrive at informed and appropriate purchasing decisions.”

Albertsons markets its pharmacy services through programs, fliers, signs and overhead announcements. Rapley says that the chain has increased its marketing efforts for pharmacy on the food side of the store via mailers, signage and promos.

For its part, Broulim’s uses on-shelf signage in the OTC section urging consumers to talk to their pharmacists and flagging items as “pharmacist approved.” The chain also teams with manufacturers on promotional messages on in-store audio urging shoppers to talk to their pharmacists about products. “We make sure that our pharmacists’ No. 1 priority is helping customers in the store,” says Hurst.

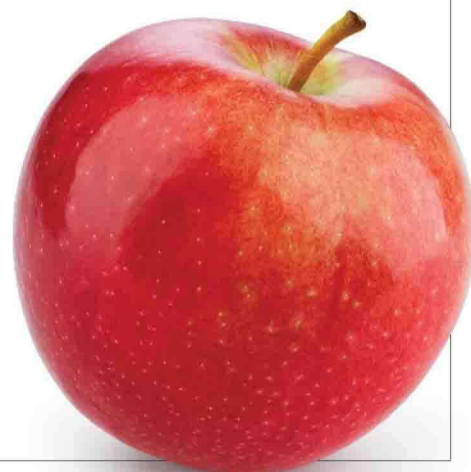
The chain is introducing strep screenings in stores this year, an addition Hurst believes will boost OTC sales. “If a test has a negative result, patients are looking for OTC solutions to treat their symptoms, and pharmacists are on hand to recommend appropriate products,” he says.

An Ounce of Prevention

Preventive services and screening programs offer additional exposure to the OTC department. “Conversations during these events are often one-on-one and very personal,” notes Mondelli. “Informal medication reviews and self-care guidance are often part of the discussion. Wellness events at our locations have included immunization clinics, blood glucose and cholesterol screenings, and consultations with both pharmacists and registered dietitians.”

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According to Kristin Williams, SVP and chief health officer at West Des Moines, Iowa-based Hy-Vee, health and wellness is one of the retailer's three strategic pillars, and the chain tries to incorporate the health-and-wellness message to consumers through a variety of media, including in-store, mobile and digital/social. That message, combined with culinary expertise, can give supermarkets a distinct advantage in the OTC category.

Sue Borra, chief wellness officer at Arlington, Va.-based Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and executive director of the FMI Foundation, notes that supermarkets have an opportunity to harness the expertise of their pharmacists and nutritionists to offer holistic wellness services.

"When customers ask the pharmacist about vitamins and supplements, it's a great opportunity for pharmacists to recommend that, in addition to supplements, the patient may want to talk to the nutritionist about good sources of vitamin C, for example," says Borra, herself a registered dietitian. "Supermarkets with a pharmacy and food connection offer a unique environment for patients to explore many avenues for improving their health."

At Albertsons, the Eating Healthy with Diabetes free grocery store tour, led by local registered dietitians and in-store pharmacists, is one of the chain's longest-standing pharmacy programs. "Beginning in January, this program will be offered year-round and available in Eng-

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lish or Spanish," notes Rapley. "The 90-minute program gives people with diabetes or prediabetes an information-packed experience in their neighborhood grocery store that reviews key information to inspire them to make healthful food choices and learn about glucose meters, additional group classes we offer, vaccinations, injecting techniques, A1c testing and other services available."

Many ShopRite locations operated by Wakefern members feature both pharmacists and registered dietitians. "We have programs centered around this wellness team that are designed to improve diabetes outcomes, among others," Mondelli says, "through improved medication adherence and tailored dietary plans." **PG**