

Customer Service Drives Technology Purchasing

By Stephen Stephens, RPh

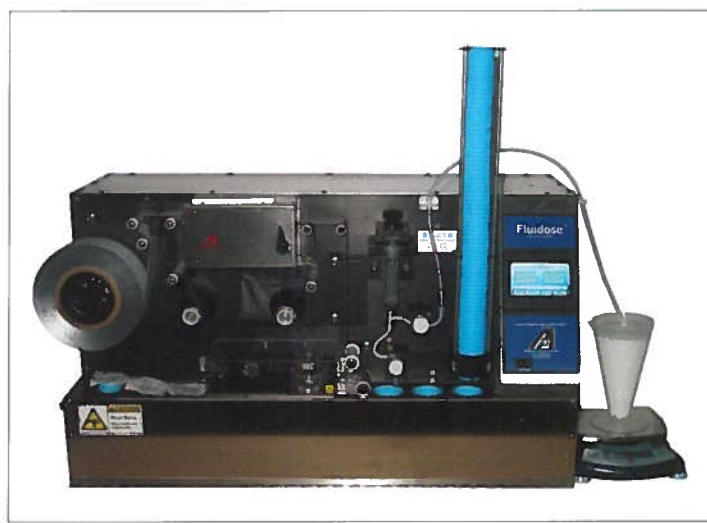
It is well known that in pharmacy's efforts to continuously improve patient safety, technology investments warrant a significant focus. In fact, most pharmacists rely on automation to drive improvements in areas such as inventory optimization, recall management, and bedside bar code scanning. Investing appropriate effort in evaluating different technology options prior to acquisition—such as developing an RFP, weighing the value of different features, and comparing costs—is a given. However, subsequent to identifying the right technology, ensuring its long-term operational efficacy should become the facility's primary goal.

At Memorial Medical Center, a 500-licensed bed acute care teaching hospital that is part of the Memorial Health System, we use a robot to facilitate 80% of our bar code repackaging needs. As the facility sought to expand bar code scanning to the bedside, we identified the need to develop an effective system to bar code those products that could not be managed using the robot, including oral liquids and solids, such as Schedule II narcotics and low-use items. Once we launched our bedside initiative, it became evident that our limited experience in repackaging oral liquids would be a challenge. With a very short timeline from acquisition of our new unit-dose, oral liquid packaging system to operational go-live, we knew we would have to rely on the expertise of the vendor to ensure a smooth transition to the new packaging processes.

Point of Failure

Choosing the right liquid unit-dose repackager for our operations was straightforward, as the machine does one thing and does it well; the product verification process is accurate and recalls are easy to manage. The challenge we faced was developing competency in repackaging among the staff. Following the repackager installation, we discovered our staff was familiar with the necessary processes, but not independently competent.

To address our training deficits, we took a train-the-trainer approach led by our pharmacy education and training team, which comprises a pharmacy manager, a technician lead, the operations manager, and the pharmacy supervisor. Our vendor worked quickly to set up a conference call with their technical support in order to provide instruction on repackager setup, troubleshooting



procedures, software operations, reporting options, and production steps. Given the concerted and immediate effort of the vendor, we were operational following the telephone training—a testament to the device's intuitive software and the thorough approach of customer service.

Gauging the Quality of Customer Service

A technology investment intended to improve patient safety will only be as effective as its operability. Accordingly, maintaining ongoing vendor support will facilitate a smooth transition to the new processes associated with the technology, while also ensuring the projected outcomes of the change over time. As such, it is key to evaluate the vendor's commitment to customer service, just as you would evaluate the features the product offers.

The physical proximity of a service representative to your facility may seem to be the best indicator of quality service, but our experience has demonstrated the significant value of near-instant support from well-prepared technical support staff via the telephone. Reporting quality often is another indicator of quality service. Some companies sell hardware and software outright, but

require additional fees to provide the level of quality reports necessary to inform practice change. This approach is often indicative of organizations that do not prioritize customer service. Assessing the value of standard reports can be accomplished by testing likely scenarios—in our case, we reviewed the effectiveness of the given reports for a recall situation and found the tracking data to be highly effective.

Talking with other pharmacy directors who have worked with the vendor under consideration is an excellent resource. Ask how long it takes for calls to be returned, ascertain the average time for issues to be resolved, and find out how the vendor responds to suggestions for change. Overall, the vendor should be quick to respond to any client contact and be receptive to client comments.

Ideally, the best vendors leverage their broad experience by sharing expertise with customers who need to come up to speed with new technology implementations. Currently, we utilize the liquid repackager's software to generate bar code labels for products without bar codes on the individual unit-of-use, such as nebulizer medications and topical ointments. However, setting up these processes was a new and difficult venture for us, and only through the assistance of our vendor in guiding us through training process were we ultimately successful.

Furthermore, a vendor that supports pharmacy's efforts to work to full capacity makes the best partner. With any new technology implementation, the creation of specific policies and procedures (P&Ps), while often time-intensive, will reduce long-term delays in achieving project goals. Keep this in mind when viewing product literature, as excellent user manuals can ease the development of P&Ps. We were able to produce comprehensive P&Ps

without much effort due in large part to the detailed user manual and the intuitive software.

Identifying Excellence

In our experience, stellar customer service is the result of a corporate culture dedicated to excellence in quality. For example, there are many vendors that provide hardware and software solutions, but once the system is installed, the vendor presence will slowly (or quickly) dissipate. Or, as mentioned, following implementation if the client wishes to realize the full capabilities of the technology—whether these include reporting, maintenance, or the adoption of new or updated features—it becomes clear that this will require additional purchases. These are hallmarks of organizations that do not prioritize exceptional customer service.

By the same token, the cornerstone of building beneficial relationships with vendors is appreciating the value of excellent customer service. We are committed to reaching out to our vendors and thanking them for their efforts; making a manager aware of their staff's commitment to going above and beyond is always a good policy. Putting the effort into developing strong vendor relationships clearly pays dividends in terms of customer service and response time; likewise, rewarding excellent service reinforces this same benefit. ■



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