

Tools of the Trade

Steven Nelson of Okeechobee Discount Drugs once trained in the tool-and-die trade, and his fondness for the technical still shows.

by Mary Gilman

There's no mistaking the pride in pharmacist Steven Nelson's voice as he talks about his work. He's determined to be the best and, as often as possible, the first, in the services he offers his patients at Okeechobee Discount Drugs in Okeechobee, Fla. A native New Yorker who headed south 28 years ago, Nelson has settled into the Okeechobee County way of life, sits on several boards in the area, and even assists the sheriff's department with search-and-rescue operations on occasion. It's a far cry from his Brooklyn boyhood and years spent helping out at his father's metal factory, but a common thread follows throughout: Nelson's appreciation for what technology can do to help him serve his customers.

Nelson and his wife, Andrea, started their business in 1983, rapidly outgrew their original 600 square feet of space, and eventually took over an old Ben Franklin store in town. Their current location is ten times the size of the original, and the Nelsons have another 6,000 square feet in warehouse and showroom space, as well.

From the beginning, Steven Nelson says, he wanted to return as much of his profit as he could back into technology for the store. His professional friends have often ribbed him about the number of "toys" that he's bought over the years, but he doesn't mind.

"I don't consider them toys," he says. "They're tools that help me do



Steven Nelson, above, uses his PharmASSIST Enterprise dispensing system to check all prescriptions going through his store. He maintains individual modem setups for each of his workstations, at right.

two things: one, process prescriptions much quicker, and number two, generate income." And, incidentally, he gets a certain amount of satisfaction when his friends need to borrow something from him because their own equipment has broken down or been knocked out by a hurricane.

Continual Upgrades

Nelson uses pc V, from pc I professional systems in Granbury, Texas, as his pharmacy system. The company's outstanding service and willingness to use his input regarding new features, such as a custom label program, are what have kept him loyal, he says, despite offers from other firms.

For claims processing, Nelson currently has all of his eight work-



stations set up with their own modems, but he's working on becoming a test site for the new DSL line coming into the county. He's looking forward, he says, to being able to process everything over one line, but he's always kept his Internet connections designated and cautions pharmacies against sharing processing with a fax line.

As for his phone network, Nelson says he had to "bite the bullet" some time ago and install an elaborate messaging system "for one simple reason: Would you rather have someone hang up the phone and not get to you and get angry at you, or would you rather have somebody leave you a message and you get back to them? . . . You're going to win some, you're not going to win some, but at least the phone answers for you."

Quality Control

Probably his biggest step in technology occurred about three years ago, when Nelson installed Innovation's PharmASSIST Enterprise dispensing system. He'd

become concerned about the fall-out from the growing pressure for speed and increased productivity in pharmacy.

“Pharmacies have to produce more prescriptions in a shorter period of time,” he says, “and when that occurs — I don’t care what business you’re in — mistakes are going to pop up.” While he’d set up a system of checks and balances for quality control, Nelson still wasn’t satisfied, and began making inquiries about automated systems. Two months after he visited Innovation’s headquarters in Johnson City, N.Y., Nelson agreed to use his store as a test center for PharmASSIST in an independent setting. Nelson, a representative from pc I, and two helpers set up the system themselves in an evening, and went live the following day.

What he likes about PharmASSIST, Nelson says, is that it allows him to verify even those prescriptions that do not fall within the 100-medication range in the system’s automated cells. A “Fill Manual” alert prompts the tech or pharmacist to continue on PharmASSIST’s manual verification setup. He or she scans the stock bottle and the label; if the two don’t match, the fill process is halted.

“If it *does* match,” Nelson says, “the process goes on. It’s filled by the tech and handed over to me, the pharmacist. At that point I verify at the verification station. Also,



Compounding is just one of the services that Nelson offers his customers. He’s shown here with his RDI CORE™ System for producing inhalation therapy medications.

when the tech fills it, it comes up the shape, the color, and the size of the tablet. They physically see what they’re doing. When it comes to the last portion, which I consider the fourth and final check, what comes up is the original Rx, the picture of the product, and the therapeutic class of what the medication is. It tells you the patient’s name, the doctor, the sig — everything is down at the bottom. Does it take a little longer? A fraction of a second, but that fraction of a second keeps you out of the courtroom.”

Lessons Learned

Nelson says that there’s no doubt that some early training as a tool-and-die maker and the work he did as a kid in his father’s factory made him comfortable with technology and hands-on projects. He originally thought he’d like to go into bio-engineering and went through Brooklyn Tech and into Columbia University with that in mind. But, although he’d worked making

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deliveries for a pharmacy as a kid, it wasn’t until an uncle steered him toward a career as a pharmacist that he made the switch, and transferred to Columbia’s college of pharmacy.

“What I really enjoyed,” he says, “was the ability to have somebody come back, look better, and feel better.” Helping people was the deciding factor, Nelson says, and his use of technology has always been a means to that end.

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