

Seeing Your Future



Have a vision for your practice when choosing pharmacy management systems and vendors

By Bill G. Felkey



At the recent NCPA Convention in New Orleans, I conducted a continuing education session which focused on evaluating pharmacy management systems. The room was full with pharmacists seeking a process to identify and evaluate an improved pharmacy management system to support their current operations, and to evaluate how well new systems could meet and exceed their future needs.

To a person, every attendee was after greater efficiency, effectiveness, internal and external connectivity options, and integrated support for the delivery of mission-critical services. They were counting on pharmacy management systems to help them address a number of issues. These include handling manpower shortages and patient safety issues, and achieving their vision of medication therapy management. What they don't want is to partner with a system vendor unable to support future growth of their practices.

Clear Vision Needed

One of the first requirements we addressed was the need to have a clear vision that can be succinctly communicated. In other words, where

the practice currently is and where the owner/pharmacist wants to take it. It would be difficult to evaluate product offerings without this goal being firmly held. If the vision is purely distribution focused, then creating a short list of vendors can be accomplished fairly easily. If the vision is to have a springboard for the kind of patient contact that leads to increasing levels of patient-care services, then other systems will be selected for evaluation. My recommendation: don't begin this process of evaluation without some sense of where you want your practice to go.

The forces that are driving change in health care in general, and pharmacy specifically, are numerous. Large-scale government intervention is one factor. Also, health care is finally becoming a digital field. Additionally, there is a need for health information exchanges, greater collaboration, and measures that directly involve patients in participatory care, and increased emphasis on wellness and preventive care. I cannot stress enough how important integration is as an evaluation factor for both internal and external system communication. Your pharmacy management system is the universal hub for all system communication in

your practice. You already have a set of ancillary systems which might include dispensing automation, point of sale, integrated voice response, a Web presence, wholesaler connectivity, and other specialized goods and services that all need to be managed by your system. How well the practice management system integrates all of these other peripheral items should be highly prioritized in your evaluation process. In other words, breaking out of your workflow to interact with stand alone systems should be avoided whenever possible.

Along with listing your goals (and problems you are trying to address), and what you have already invested in other systems, you should plan to educate and involve the key stakeholders (all of your personnel) in providing assistance in your practice management system evaluation. Budget the time for rigorous comparison shopping and site visits for installed users of any system you are seriously considering. I will provide you with evaluation tools to help organize your process upon request. I recommend that you kick the vendor salesperson to the side at some point in the presentation process (whenever possible) and come up with about six patient cases that range from simple chronic medication refills, to a recent challenging episode of care that you can use to properly exercise any system you are considering. Your selected vendor shortlist should compare

how well each of the features actually perform for you, and you should also project not only acquisition costs, but also long-term maintenance fees for operating the systems. Don't be afraid to negotiate. These vendors are so critical to your practice that you could easily consider the relationship to be more of a partnership than a software purchase.

Questions for Vendors

There are several other items to consider. Does each vendor on your shortlist understand your practice? Are they working with leading-edge technologies that they know and can integrate to your legacy systems that you plan to retain? Determine whether they are offering a turnkey solution, and if they will be your primary point of contact when unscheduled downtime occurs. Investigate their reputation for on-time delivery and stable pricing structures. Ensure that they will support and maintain what they deliver and will agree to project quality goals through the implementation process. Learn how they will train your people and install the latest technologies as they emerge to keep your system up to date. Find out how happy their installed user base is with their performance.

Your practice goals will most likely include patient medication safety support. Look carefully at how bar-coding is used to provide technology oversight in your dispensing processes. Are prescriptions scanned? Are medication images available? Are electronic prescribing and robotics fully integrated? How many drug utilization review modules are in play? All of these are questions that will be answered during your due diligence, where you will assign a value of importance to your practice and how well each feature has been developed by each vendor you evaluate. The tools I'll provide will allow you to use all of the criteria that are important to you, and will calculate a final score for how each vendor application performs

When I was preparing my presentation, Will Lockwood (ComputerTalk) sent out a request to the pharmacy vendor community, asking them to provide me with evaluation criteria, features, and benefits for each of their systems, and cross references for each pharmacy practice management system and associated applications for which interfaces already existed. A broad range of management system vendors, automation companies, POS and IVR vendors, along with Internet electronic commerce support companies, started communicating with me and supplied presentation slides to use in my seminar. I also

Dispensing Safety and Accuracy

(This is a sample list of safety and accuracy questions to consider in evaluating the design and features of a pharmacy workflow system.)

Key Questions

1. Does the system require positive barcode scan and operator identification during filling and verification?
2. Does the prescription label print only after the correct NDC has been scanned?
3. Does the system prevent users from bypassing the barcode scanning requirements?
Note: If your staff has the ability to bypass scanning requirements, you are not getting the full benefit from your technology investment.
4. To ensure accuracy, does the system display images of the drug during filling and verification?
5. Does the system automatically print auxiliary warnings on the label?
6. Can auxiliary warnings print in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish?
7. Does the system automatically print a line drawing and description of the drug on the label.

acquired the buyer's guide issue from *ComputerTalk for Pharmacists* that has an evaluation matrix for most of the pharmacy vendors. Attractive tables in this document will supply you with "at a glance" comparisons between a wide array of vendor offerings. This is available online at <http://computertalk.com>.

An interesting vendor category that has emerged recently supports the delivery tracking and management with barcode verified, wireless communication tools that are similar to those employed by FedEx and UPS. These vendors allow you to know the location of your delivery service drivers, how fast they are driving through the school zone, how many orders they have been successful in completing, and whether they diverted to their girlfriend's house for 30 minutes on the run. Other vendors have incorporated outsourcing support to assist their customers when peak activity overcame in-store infrastructure, such as the number of telephone lines for prescription call-ins.

Connectivity Option Checklist

Along with the other resources previously mentioned, I have prepared a checklist for connectivity options that could become part of your customized evaluation matrix. Subcategories include decision support and reference resources, eligibility and reimbursement resources, error prevention and quality assurance, telecommunication infrastructure options, collaboration connectivity, telepharmacy connectivity, delivery and pharmacy surveillance, and practice security issues. This checklist could be used to stimulate the formation of both your goals and specific evaluation criteria when you examine actual applications. Don't be afraid to use evaluation criteria generated by vendors. For example, one robotic vendor has a set of specific criteria in an evaluation booklet that has checkmarks for their product by each of the criteria. Include additional, relevant criteria to these and add criteria from other vendors to flesh out your evaluation matrix from the entire market. Ask each vendor to list the key differentiators they have identified about their product when they have performed a competitive analysis. You will find they are often very quick to point out how they are different from their competition. Are these differences important to you? You decide and then rate each product accordingly.

Look and feel criteria should be a part of your evaluation. Whether you are trying to purchase a new information appliance or a pharmacy practice manage-

Purchasing Considerations

- List your goals, problems, and what you have for puzzle pieces.
- Educate and involve the key people (your staff) who will be impacted to reduce barriers.
- Comparison shop and do site visits.
- Write functional specifications and product matrices-beware the power path (I have a tool I will give you).
- Select a vendor short list.
- Do the deal negotiations.
- Acquire and implement it... easy!

Questions for Vendors

- Do you understand my business?
- Are you working with leading-edge technologies?
- Do you know my legacy systems?
- Can you do a turnkey solution?
- Can I afford you?
- Will you guarantee the price?
- Can you guarantee on time delivery of the software?
- Do you set and maintain project quality goals?
- Do you support and maintain what you deliver?
- Will you train your and my people on the latest technologies?
- Do your customers come back for more?

What to Do With a Web Presence

- Market (virtual welcome wagon)
- Inform (hours, staff, services, location)
- Communicate (e-mail, refills, scheduling, DSM, feedback, IVR, chats, forums, texting)
- Educate with health content and links
- Commerce (products and services)
- Community

ment system, you will need to determine whether the developers of those products appreciate the way you operationally think and communicate. Specifications of whether something functions a certain way are valuable, but how it "feels" to your hands or flows in the way you like to practice will be a subjective determination that no one can answer without interacting with the product or application. Again, avoid power demos where everything works for the salesperson, but it feels like you are pushing

Technology

'Profit Pearls' for New Owners

By Tim Davis, PharmD

When it comes to technology, it is important for a new business owner (and also not so new owners) to be familiar with Web-based communications, automation, and operating systems altogether. As a new owner, you will probably incur most of your cost in technology—it will allow you to grow without your fixed cost growing. Looking at all of the technology available, consider what systems make the most sense for your practice and how they will integrate with and improve your current workflow.

Here are a few things to consider when choosing a(n):

1 Technology Vendor

Interoperability is key—pick a vendor who is able to interact with and utilize the various systems you have in place, such as inventory ordering. Who works best with your current or prospective wholesaler?

Cash flow is an issue for new owners. The vendor you choose should understand the financial needs of the pharmacy. Does the vendor have lease programs or flexible payment terms? Is the technology “scalable”? For example, when starting out the business, if you purchase something on the lower end, will you be able to scale up at a later date?

2 Operating System

E-prescribing capability—It's essential to have as this technology becomes more widespread.

In addition to adjudicating prescriptions, consider systems that can handle ancillary tasks such as managing immunization records, multiple tiered claims, and patient care information such as vital signs, blood pressure, and glucometer readings.

3 Point of Sale (POS)

Which POS system works best with your host operating system? Does the POS system export to

accounting software for tax reporting? Can your system handle OTC inventory, pricing, and reordering. Can it capture signatures at pick up? Consider an electronic check processing system that allows for fewer trips to the bank and bounced checks.

4 Integrate Voice Response (IVR) Technology

Prescription volume—initial volume may not be large enough to justify this investment. Also, when starting, you want to establish personal relationships with new patients. Answering the phone is a great way to add personal touch. However as volume increases, an IVR system may be appropriate to help you manage workflow more efficiently.

Messaging—look into system options (touch-tone or on-hold recordings) that allow you greater flexibility in getting the word out to your patients on a host of information such hours of operation, new services, and general health information, to name several.

5 External Communications

As an independent business owner, it is essential to have a well groomed Web presence. Be familiar with Internet-based communities and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These sites allow you to offer information to your patients on a daily basis. This provides both a service to your patients while gaining their trust and loyalty. But be careful when utilizing these Web-based networking sites to keep it professional and helpful for your patients. Be able to offer your patients the ability to request refills online.

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a rope uphill when you take over. Also try to determine whether scalability is supported by the technology you are evaluating. In many vendor lines, the ability to add additional workstations or higher capacity robotics is available as your practice grows.

Finally, don't forget to ask for assistance in rethinking your workflow. Avoid the temptation to try to automate older, manual processes in the same way they have always taken place. If you are about to invest in a major system transition, try to be open to a workflow that will reengi-

neer your processes for greater productivity and efficiency. I have spoken in this feature about several resources to help you in this process. E-mail me at felkebg@auburn.edu with a reference to this article and I will send you these materials. You can also visit my share site at <http://felkey.shutterfly.com> for additional technology resources

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