

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND BEYOND

THE LIM'S PHARMACY STORY

Peter Guthrey – Pharmacist Consultant



Community engagement goes beyond opening the doors of your pharmacy and interacting with your customers. True community engagement comes from knowing your market, immersing yourself, your staff and your business into their world and embracing their way of life. 2013 QCPP Pharmacy of the Year winner Lim's Pharmacy have done just that, and while their model is not unique, it is inspiring.

Lim's Pharmacy opened 21 years ago in the outer Melbourne suburb of Springvale, a local community culturally and ethnically rich, with vibrant Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, Lao, Thai and other communities. Like all Australian community pharmacies, the pharmacy faces challenges in supporting community health through pharmacy services, such as consumer engagement, health literacy, adherence and unhealthy-lifestyles. For Lim's Pharmacy, the local community demographic poses additional challenges such as language barriers, social disadvantage and managing expectations of customers unfamiliar with Australia's health system.

Lim's Pharmacy exemplifies the fusion of community and customer engagement. Through tireless engagement with customers in-store and the broader local community, owner and pharmacist Richard Lim identifies the health needs of the community and develops strategies to

meet those needs. Upon walking into the pharmacy, customers are greeted warmly. Much like a maître d, Richard or other members of senior staff use this welcome to assess customer's needs and triage them to the appropriate service or staff member. This provides him with a strong understanding of customer needs and any service gaps. It also provides opportunity to link to other services the pharmacy offers.

The following strategies are utilised by the pharmacy to promote community and customer engagement:

Community Leadership

Engaging the community requires active involvement and entrenchment within the community. Richard and the team work with community organisations, local government, local schools and community health services to benefit the needs of their customers, whatever those needs may be. Sometimes these needs relate to patient advocacy, while at other times they involve committee representation or translation services. In addition to serving community needs, this strong leadership supports the pharmacy's profile and customer engagement with the pharmacy.

A testament to the success of this approach is the regard and recognition with which Richard is held by the local community, which I discovered first hand when walking through the street with Richard. He is greeted as a trusted friend more than as a health professional.



Building Local Networks

Developing strong relationships with other health professionals is a key strategy the pharmacy utilises to enhance efficiency and customer support.

"When we first came to Springvale 21 years ago, we visited and invited the doctors out for lunch and became friends. When any new doctor comes to the area we do the same thing. Now, if there are any issues with a prescription or a customer, we ring the doctor up and it is sorted out straight away."

Lim's Pharmacy is an example of a health hub working efficiently and collaboratively. This saves the pharmacy a lot of time and provides the customer with a more seamless experience. Other health professionals which the pharmacy has developed a team relationship with dentists, social workers, diabetes educators, maternal nurses, optometrists and other health professionals. These linkages help provide a higher quality of health care for their customers and the community through health promotion and verbal referral.

Health Promotion

The pharmacy has a broad health promotion program which includes radio, community groups and in-store workshops. This suite of health promotion activities aims to empower individuals to better look after their health through education and promoting links to services.

Health promotion topics are chosen in response to consumer demand and observation. For example, the pharmacy may be approached by a local community association to talk about osteoporosis. Recent topics have included falls prevention, diabetes and a balanced diet.

Much of this health promotion is run multiple times in different languages - Vietnamese, Cambodian and Mandarin to name a few. The seminars in the pharmacy regularly host 35 people, while community groups, such as the Vietnamese Society can attract 60 people in community halls. With limited foreign language service radio stations available locally, many customers tap into 3ZZZ services on air or via online streaming and may hear Richard speaking about a wide range of health topics. Occasionally Richard would also speak with ABC Radio and SBS.

Sponsorship

Lim's Pharmacy's sponsorship is broad and targeted at causes with local community links. In many cases, customers will directly suggest sponsorship opportunities to the pharmacy staff. Sponsorship through such suggestions is powerful in that it supports individuals or causes that enhance quality of life for pharmacy's customers and their community. For example, the pharmacy recently supported Cambodian pop stars Preap Sovath, Oeun Srey Mom and Sopheak Mosoma, to perform at a fundraiser for the Save Cambodian Children Fund. This annual event not only served as an important fundraiser but also an important cultural event for the local Cambodian community.



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Richard Lim

In reflecting on what factors makes it all work, Richard proffers: “You have to run your business like you are in a war zone... You will always have problems, and you need resources to overcome them. You need to have enough stock and you need to have enough staff. If you don't, people will just walk to the pharmacy around the corner.” Specifically, getting the recruitment of new staff right is crucially important to the consumer focussed business model they have adopted. “Recruitment is very important. The staff need to have a similar customer focused philosophy to us. But a lot of this also comes from leadership in the pharmacy and instilling values of what pharmacy is to our staff.”

Like all business strategies, community engagement requires regular evaluation and review. Richard's two key methods of evaluation are informal verbal feedback, and health outcomes. Some customers often come in and say “I heard you on

the radio yesterday” or “I went to the workshop you held at the Salvation Army Hall the other day”. This provides the pharmacy with an understanding of how these activities are perceived by their audience. Similarly, longstanding relationships with customers helps the pharmacy evaluate how well they are supporting their patients; “When you see a customer with diabetes reduce the number of medicines they are taking and get their blood sugars under control, you can tell that what you are doing is working”. These methods of evaluation depend on being accessible and visible to customers.

For Richard, not only has his pharmacy's community engagement brought business success, but it also results in a deep seated personal fulfilment.

“We in pharmacy are privileged to look after the community. You are satisfying yourself by helping people in the community.” ■

