

Remedy for an underdog

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BROOKLINE - A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR doesn't always make the medicine go down, but for independent pharmacies threatened by large chain drugstores, it's still a sweet idea. In an effort to keep their stores alive and competitive in an industry increasingly dominated by giant chains, small, independently owned pharmacies are looking beyond just the personal touch to find a niche.

For Pelham Drug in Brookline, that niche is in adding chocolate raspberry, bubble gum, bananaberry or 39 other flavors to sometimes hard-to-swallow children's medicines.

The technique is one that brings parents - tired of battling with their children at medicine time - to the Coolidge Corner store from as far away as Worcester and Cape Cod.

"I'm at my wits' end trying to get my daughter to take her medicine," said Sarah Springer, a Lexington mother whose 2-year-old, Alexa, had her first dose of raspberry flavored antibiotics Thursday. "She took both spoonfuls willingly, happily, with no fight, which is amazing."

James Krasnow, owner of Pelham Drug for 34 years, doesn't charge to flavor prescriptions filled at the store. But he does

Small independent pharmacy finds flavoring drugs not only helps children but also odds of surviving competition with giant chains

charge \$2 to flavor prescriptions filled elsewhere.

In an industry that saw 5,000 independently owned drugstore closures in the past five years, keeping open the doors of the remaining 29,000 family-owned pharmacies has become a challenge, said Todd Dankmyer of the National Community Pharmacists Association.

In Massachusetts, 363 pharmacies - the bulk of them independents - closed between 1980 and 1995, according to Alan Sager of the Boston University School of Public Health. Nationally, 23 independent pharmacies, on average, go out of business each week as chains, such as Walgreens, Osco, and CVS, grab a bigger share of the drugstore business, and insurance companies cut back on reimbursements for prescriptions.

"Niche marketing is one way independents have survived, and niches are probably the reason they will survive in the future," Dankmyer said.

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Small pharmacies seek niche in battle against drugstore chains

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Krasnow – who says bubble gum is by far the most popular flavor – gets his flavoring concoctions from Washington-based FLAVORx Inc., a company started by Harold Kramm two years ago.

“When I heard about FLAVORx in a pharmacy journal, I thought it would be right for us,” said Krasnow, who has used the flavoring product for almost two years. “Our pediatric medicine [business] has increased two-fold since we started offering the flavors,” he added, declining to reveal his store’s revenues.

Kramm, who has operated his own drugstore for 35 years, began experimenting with medicine flavoring almost 10 years ago after learning that his grandchild would not take the medicine used to treat her cerebral palsy.

“Giving her medicine four times

a day became an ordeal and she would end up in the hospital,” Kramm said. “So I started experimenting, and it took me about three years to get it right, and I had to throw away a lot of expensive medicine.

“The medicine doesn’t work if you can’t get the kids to take it,” said Kramm. The added flavors, he said, means 98.6 percent of his young customers complete their entire medicine regimen.

Before starting the privately held FLAVORx, Kramm offered the flavors in his own store for six years. Now, they’re displayed on charts – much like those in ice cream stores – in the more than 300 pharmacies across the country that use FLAVORx. In Massachusetts, six pharmacies use the technique.

“We only sell the flavors to independent pharmacies and we send them a 200-page guidebook on how to make the flavors,” said Kramm.

He would say how much FLAVORx grosses annually.

Added Dankmyer: “I know a lot of independents are having great success with FLAVORx products.”

Krasnow said he sends “flavored medicine all over the world” because of his proximity to Children’s Hospital and the hospital’s tendency to refer patients to the pharmacy. “Last week we sent some to Venezuela and we’ve Federal Expressed medicine to children in Israel, India, and Saudi Arabia,” he said.

Among Pelham’s other patients: A young girl from Worcester who takes daily antirejection medicine after a recent organ transplant, a child who travels around the country trying to find a matching donor liver, and a Venezuelan child suffering from a rare illness.

“They can make pills into a liquid suspension in the right dosage, and flavor it for the children,” said Margaret Hughes, a nurse practitioner

at Longwood Pediatrics in Brookline. “We have a lot of problems with kids who don’t want to take medicine because it tastes awful, so we send a lot of kids to Pelham.”

The rest of Krasnow’s business comes from word-of-mouth.

That’s how a Cape Cod customer discovered him when her newborn was sick during the middle of a snowstorm.

The child’s medication was turned from the adult dosage at a nearby pharmacy into liquid form. But the infant could not tolerate the medication’s bitterness. That’s when she called Krasnow.

“Four hours later, I walked a woman with a tiny baby inside her coat. The chain pharmacy near her wouldn’t put any flavoring in the medicine,” said Krasnow. “She had driven all the way from the Cape to get the medicine flavored so her little baby could get better.”