



**In the news :**

## **Systems, software must be at heart of every plan, tech guru tells FMI**

May 2006

By James Frederick

Pharmacy automation should be approached not with “fear and trepidation,” but with the certainty that technology can help supermarket pharmacy operators differentiate their services, create patient-care opportunities and better link the pharmacy to front-store operations, a technology guru told FMI Pharmacy Conference participants.

Chris Thomsen of The ThomsenGroup said in a presentation retailers must continue adapting to new and more innovative technology even as they confront a constant barrage of other challenges to their pharmacy business. “We’re never going to be done with the obstacles. There’ll [always] be something else to deal with,” he said. “But ... automation and technology have got to be part of that, and we’ve got to put a plan in place that will get us where we need to be.”

Thomsen’s presentation ran the gamut of workflow innovations in retail pharmacy, from the simple to the cutting edge. Even improving the lighting in pharmacies can dramatically reduce errors, he said, noting that 73 percent of script errors occur in areas with low lighting.

Other seemingly mundane solutions that could streamline the dispensing process, he said, include using baskets to hold all the documents and containers related to a particular prescription—which he said could be a highly effective organization tool—and cutting down on the number of vial sizes to simplify dispensing and reduce storage space requirements.

Among the cutting-edge solutions are secure self-checkout systems for script refills—now in test in a handful of locations—as well as systems that have gained widespread usage, like robotic picking systems that apply labels to pill bottles, IVR-driven order systems, bar-coding and on-screen imaging of hand-written prescriptions and drugs.

Citing findings by the American Pharmacists Association, Thomsen noted, “The utilization of simple prescription technologies like bar codes and onscreen drug images can reduce medication dispensing errors by one full percentage point.”

The importance of technology in advancing supermarket pharmacy—and the need to stay abreast of new developments in automation—wasn’t lost on conference-goers. Some gave high marks to FMI for hosting a technology expo following Thomsen’s presentation.

“The technology expo just proved that technology continues to advance, even while we’ve got these other issues to deal with,” said Mike LeBlanc, director of pharmacy business development for Winn-Dixie Stores. “Those [vendors] are doing a great job of pushing retail pharmacy forward with innovation and technology, and we can’t ever take our eye off that part of the business.”