

Fast-tracking Pharmacy-First success: How to scale up your pharmacy business with transformative automation

As Pharmacy First continues to roll out across England, and uptake amongst the population grows, not only will patients gain faster access to treatment than before, but community pharmacies will be presented with significant revenue-generating opportunities.

Aiming to redirect an estimated 12 million appointments from GP surgeries into community pharmacies every year, the challenge for many will be how to handle this extra footfall in a profitable way.

Here we explore how pharmacies can scale to take advantage using technology.



So why is technology important and what role can it play so I can take advantage?

With more footfall and more prescriptions, comes a busier pharmacy environment, for both staff and patients alike. Whilst that sounds great initially, the reality is that many pharmacies operate at a glass ceiling of capacity, with stretched staff already working long hours, following manual and admin-heavy processes. Coupled with strained resources is that floorspace is often limited, with space for both patients to be seen and employees to work. **This is where automation technology comes in.** Automation technology can significantly benefit community pharmacies by streamlining processes, reducing errors, creating space and improving the patient's experience:

Autonomous medication collection points

We all know that at busy periods, especially around lunchtime and after work, overcrowding can be a nuisance, and with Pharmacy First, community pharmacies can expect to become even busier. With prescription collection points customers have the convenience of being able to collect their medications anytime night or day, without needing to come into the store. They simply receive an SMS with a PIN and collect their medications from the collection machine outside.

This saves on average 3-4 minutes for staff to find and hand out each bag, with an average of 800 prescription collections a month that comes to 53 hours saved – time that could instead be spent offering Pharmacy First consultations. And, with fewer patients in-store it means that patients waiting for consultations are not inconvenienced by a crowded store environment with people filing past for counter services as they wait to be seen.



Medication pack-filling automation

Pharmacies that offer Monitored Dosage System (MDS) medication packs to patients know how time-intensive they are to prepare and check, and whilst MDS is highly beneficial for patient medication adherence, their production is a burden on community pharmacy resources. In fact, in a test at one of our customer pharmacy sites, it took an experienced staff member 6 minutes on average to prepare a 28-day blister tray, that's just 10 an hour.

With medication pack-filling machines this production can rise to between 35 and 40 an hour, allowing pharmacies to reallocate the time saved to offer more productive services, and Pharmacy First provides a great opportunity to do just that. Also by eliminating tiresome and error-prone manual-filling the accuracy of pack production is improved with vision check technology, reducing the pharmacy check times too. Both blister and pouch automation systems are available.

Robotic dispensing systems

By automating stock management and pack handling, pharmacies can load, store, and safely dispense their medication packs. Medication is sorted, identified, automatically loaded, and then picked by the robot for dispensing to the pharmacy counter, saving time versus the manual alternative. Think of it as an automated storeroom!

Robotic Dispensing Systems also eliminate stock-outs by alerting staff to low stock levels and re-ordering in time, save space by better organising how packs are put away on the shelves, and reduce wastage by scanning and picking packs based on expiry date.



In summary

By incorporating automation technology into your operations, you enhance workflows, space utilisation, and patient care and free up time to focus on clinical services and patient counselling.

Technology will be a key enabler to help you re-organise your operations and practices to open the door to more patients seeking the services of Pharmacy First. By leveraging technology you'll be at the front of the pack to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the Pharmacy First scheme and scale up your business.

For more information on Pharmacy First this [UK Government blog](#) provides a useful resource.