



## News Release

### Rx robot

Small downtown pharmacy takes on chains

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Roger Naik normally arrives at work a few minutes, not four hours, before his pharmacy opens at 9 a.m. But this week there was a new employee to meet and greet.

Also to assemble and plug in.

The as-yet-nameless, stationary robot at the downtown Market Pharmacy near Grady Hospital can load a pill bottle in 30 seconds.

The pharmacy owner hopes passing that time savings along to customers — or using the extra time to talk to them about prescriptions — will help set his store apart from the large drug chains. He maintains the chains don't rush to fill prescriptions so customers will shop while they wait.

“We can do better than them,” he said.

“This will free us up. Give us more time to manage patient care. We can tell them how to take [the drugs]. What the side effects are,” said Naik, whose flesh-and-blood employees will keep their jobs with the addition of Whatzitsname.

“One day, this will be [as common as] a cash register,” he said, affectionately patting his *aide de clamps*, for which he paid \$190,000.

The robot works like this: It grabs an empty bottle, pastes on a label and passes it to one of 252 compartments, each with a circuit board. A blast of air causes pills in the compartment to levitate before they are sucked out. Sensors in a nozzle count them as they drop into the bottle. An electronic arm twists on a cap, and the finished product is placed in slots divided alphabetically by patient surname.

No high-techie himself, Naik sought mechanical assistance after peering into the future of his business. He saw aging boomers requiring more medicine. More complicated diseases demanding new treatments and conversations with pharmacists. More types of drugs, many with similar names — raising liability issues for stores. And more CVS and Walgreens stores popping up all over.



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“We have to stay on top of our game,” said Naik, who wanted to start using the robotic timesaver before his big rivals did.

He has commissioned one of about three dozen devices manufactured by Parata Systems of Durham, N.C., and at work in U.S. pharmacies.

Charles Lelly, Parata’s vice president of product services, predicts 100 will be in use by year’s end. By next year, several thousand could be operating if a planned deal with one of the big drugstore chains goes through.

“We think we’ve built a better mousetrap,” said Lelly, whose firm has at least three rivals in the market.

Harold Cohen, editor in chief of the online trade magazine Drug Topics, says the automated assistants can help the mom-and-pop pharmacies.

“It’s definitely a way for independents to compete with chains,” Cohen said. Customer service “is their best ammunition. [Druggists] are more out front [interacting] with people instead of doing the mundane task of counting pills.”

Separate trade groups represent independent and chain pharmacies, but numbers from both indicate the indies are losing ground.

The National Community Pharmacists Association, a collective of independents, reports its stores declined steadily from 45.6 percent of the overall market in 1999 to 41.9 percent last year.

The slippage, according to the National Association of Chain Drug Stores, is from 38.4 percent to 34.1 percent, with not only chain pharmacies but also supermarkets and big retailers cutting into the independents’ share.

Naik hopes his robot is a solution. He’s considering a Name The Robot contest, which Lelly said some pharmacies do. But the automated helper is not exactly anthropomorphic.

As Naik observed of the big device that neither zips around the store nor emits witticisms: “These are not Hollywood robots.”