

CASE STUDY

AUTOMATING LONG-TERM CARE PHARMACY SERVICES FROM THE GROUND UP



**Michael Ashmore, RPH,
CPh, BCGP**

Senior Manager, Long-Term
Care Pharmacy
~ Giant Eagle, Inc.

INTRODUCTION AND INTENDED OUTCOME

Established in the 1930s, Giant Eagle has grown from a single grocery store into a trusted supermarket brand with locations across Pennsylvania and Ohio. The company's success is rooted in its community-centered philosophy, which is what led them to open their first in-store retail pharmacy more than 40 years ago. Fast forward to today, and you'll find the vast majority of Giant Eagle's 227 supermarkets now offer comprehensive pharmacy services.

Their community focus is combined with an aggressive growth strategy and tradition of innovation. With this, the company's leadership is always looking for new ways to add efficiency and better serve their customers. That's why they decided to act when a series of acquisitions put them in an ideal position to develop a long-term care (LTC) pharmacy to support assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and other similar healthcare providers. Recognizing that an LTC pharmacy had unique parameters and regulations to meet, Giant Eagle brought Senior Manager for Long-Term Care Pharmacy Operations, Michael Ashmore, on board to build out a scalable, future-proofed organization.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

The first step, Ashmore says, was setting up a state-of-the-art system that could handle the initial prescription volume but that was also flexible enough to grow with them as they expanded their scope of services. "A critical part of designing the right system is deciding how you want to deliver medications to the facilities."

While there are several options, Ashmore knew automated strip packaging technology with its multi-dose capabilities would be the best option for Giant Eagle and their customers. "What this allows an LTC pharmacy to do is sort a patient's various medications into individual packages based on what dose needs to be taken and when,"

CASE STUDY

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he explains. “This is especially helpful for elderly patients who are often on several different medications.” For nurses and staff in long-term care facilities, it simplifies and speeds the process of administering prescriptions while also improving medication compliance.

“Giant Eagle has always been a technologically-advanced company. We know what it takes to gain market efficiencies. Automated strip packaging is the way of the future and exactly where we need to be,” says Ashmore. With this decision, Ashmore began researching and evaluating what equipment and services different vendors across the country offered. “It’s a major investment — and when you’re filling prescriptions for large numbers of beds in long-term care facilities, you need a machine that will run flawlessly for eight or even 12 hours a day, every day.” More than that, he was looking for a true partner — one who was flexible and innovative and cared about Giant Eagle’s vision.

Ashmore says he found everything he wanted with Noritsu.

THE NORITSU DIFFERENCE

“What struck me about Noritsu immediately is that they were genuinely interested in what we were trying to achieve,” Ashmore explains. “There was a real openness and commitment to helping us design the system in a way that would work for us.” That includes spending a great deal of time with Giant Eagle’s IT department, which was trying to write middleware to tie the Noritsu equipment into the retail system to manage the LTC pharmacy operations.

When it came time to install the equipment, Giant Eagle’s dedicated Noritsu sales representative was on-site with three technicians. “Once the automated packager was in place, Noritsu stayed for days helping us test and train to make sure everything worked and our staff was comfortable.” This was especially complicated because, at the time, they were also merging the retail software with the system. Noritsu collaborated with them for months as they worked through it. “I’m not sure another vendor would have done that for us,” Ashmore says.

The result? Giant Eagle formally opened its long-term care pharmacy in mid-July of 2021. “Today, we’re running the LTC operation in a closed pharmacy setting using Noritsu’s automated strip packager.”

Aside from the fact that their equipment is so incredibly well built, Ashmore believes the two companies also have shared goals. “I feel Noritsu truly cares about patient outcomes just as we do at Giant Eagle,” he explains. “I’m all about patient care, especially geriatric patient care, because these people are part of the generation that got us all here. We owe them a debt of gratitude.” That’s why Giant Eagle’s primary objective from the start was to make administering meds faster and easier, so nurses and staff have more time to spend on care. “Noritsu helped us realize that goal.”

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LOOKING AHEAD: AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

Based on the success of the partnership, Ashmore is looking to leverage what they’ve done with Noritsu on the LTC pharmacy side and apply it to other areas. To begin, Giant Eagle is already building out a compliance pharmacy for the retail side. “The beauty of it is we already know the software our IT team and Noritsu built at the start of the project, while not ideal for LTC operations, works seamlessly for the retail pharmacy.”

Down the road, Ashmore also wants to explore opportunities of partnering with a nutraceutical provider and adding supplements to customers’ medication packages to increase convenience and adherence. Having previously helped with hospital discharges during his training, Ashmore also sees an application for using the Noritsu system to help patients synchronize their medications after a hospital stay. “Sometimes when a patient leaves the hospital, they are not always clear about how to combine medications they were taking previously with new medications,” he explains. “If we can play a role in simplifying that process with compliance packaging, I think we can help reduce readmissions — which can happen when medications aren’t taken properly after discharge.”

With Noritsu’s highly-scalable system, Ashmore knows he can do all he envisions and more. “Our central fill pharmacy is already filling close to 50,000 prescriptions daily to support our stores,” he says. As Giant Eagle adds new services — like compliance packaging within the retail pharmacy, that number will likely grow. “But I know some operations in the United Kingdom and Europe are running as many as 30 or 40 Noritsu packagers. That means no matter how much we grow — they’ll be able to keep pace.”

Is Staffing Becoming an Issue?

Save on labor and increase accuracy with a Noritsu pharmacy automation solution



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Provide additional versatility, safety, and convenience to the facilities you serve



Offer the same convenient packaging and products as your mail-order competitors



Improve your bottom line with a more efficient workflow and increased labor savings



Compliance Packaging

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