AFA PHARMACY'S JOURNEY TO AUTOMATED DISPENSING AND FULFILLMENT

THIRTY MADISON

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Thirty Madison exists to deliver on healthcare's biggest opportunities: access and affordability; patient outcomes; and patient experience. As such, the company's specialized brands focused on personalized care for patients with ongoing conditions. When Thirty Madison launched its first online order fulfillment center, AFA Pharmacy in Missouri City, Texas — their long-term vision was to leverage automation technology to meet projected volumes and create a better pharmacy experience for their patients. That's when they began looking for providers who could help them start working toward implementing automation, even though it would be some time before they needed it.

According to Omar Khokhar, Pharm.D, pharmacy manager for AFA, Thirty Madison chose Tension, a leader in packaging equipment and automation systems for the e-commerce and pharmacy industries, for several reasons. "Tension already knew their APIs could integrate with our upstream platforms because they'd worked with our pharmacy management software before," he says. Tension was also known in the industry for having a cost-effective prescription fulfillment system that could process high volumes of unit of use drugs efficiently.

To build out Thirty Madison's innovative mail-order pharmacy, Tension recommended its LDU-Flex Pharmacy System utilizing Tension's LDU and PharmaPATH back-end pharmacy workflow software system. The LDU (Linear Dispensing Unit) is a unit of use picking, labeling, verifying, and dispensing machine that can process over 1,000 items per hour. The PharmaPATH software drives the LDU Flex Dispensing System. The AFA Pharmacy front-end software receives and processes orders, checks inventory and then sends orders to the PharmaPATH workflow software. From there, the PharmaPATH orchestrates everything, managing all order routing to the LDU and to the dispensing, verification, packaging, and manifesting workstations in the workflow.

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CASE STUDY

THE WORKFLOW SOFTWARE SYSTEM

Today, AFA operates out of a 40,000-square-foot facility that includes a warehouse and fulfillment center. Jenny DeRose, Pharm.D, AFA's pharmacist in charge, says the pharmacy — which specializes in hair loss treatments and prescriptions covering conditions such as birth control and hair loss as well as migraine treatments and migraine prescriptions — currently processes 4,000 to 5,000 orders daily. "It wasn't always like this," she explains. "At first, we weren't processing anywhere near that number of orders, we knew we weren't ready for automation right away." At the same time, however, the team at AFA was eager to get started with Tension's PharmaPATH — even before they installed the LDU, which would ultimately automate processes.

"It wasn't really their standard operating procedure," DeRose says, "But Tension agreed to let us use the software to fulfill orders manually until we installed the LDU." To do that, the company developed an entire manual pharmacy using PharmaPATH that mirrored what the automated workflow would eventually look like. They started by analyzing the specs for AFA's fulfillment center, making recommendations on how best to configure the workstations and processes. "They even coordinated with our contractors to make sure all the specifications we needed to accommodate the workflow were clear," says Khokhar.

DeRose adds that the company also helped make sure the system was futureproof. "In addition to automating, we knew we wanted to install Parata machines and potentially add cold chain to our processes at some point," she explains. "So, Tension was sure to carve out space for us to implement these when we are ready."

LDU FLEX WITH PHARMAPATH AUTOMATED DISPENSING

Gaining experience with the PharmaPATH user interface before installing the LDU was invaluable for AFA, says Khokhar. "It gave us so much insight into best practices in terms of packaging, verification, and shipping that implementing the automated process was seamless." So once order volume began to increase steadily — they felt ready to install the LDU Flex System.

Not much changed from a software or workflow standpoint, explains Khokhar. "The only different bit of software introduced was related to the LDU — and even then, Tension held our hand through the whole process." In fact, Tension's lead developer stayed on-site for about four weeks once the LDU was operational to ensure everything went as smoothly as possible. "He told us from the beginning, it's a new system that is learning you as much as you are learning it — and there will be hiccups."

This level of support is something DeRose didn't quite expect. "Everyone at Tension is incredibly responsive," she says. For example, at one point, the pharmacy was experiencing some small errors with its conveyor transition arms. When the provider for the conveyor couldn't figure out the errors, one of Tension's coders stepped in to troubleshoot. "Even though I know they have other clients — I always feel they are completely dedicated to us."

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Tension reps now visit AFA quarterly for regular maintenance on the LDU and conveyor system. Khokhar adds, they are always available for one-off visits to resolve a specific issue.

HOW THE AUTOMATED PROCESS WORKS

Thirty Madison's upstream platform is connected to the PharmaPATH software at AFA so it can push orders to the pharmacy for fulfillment. With this, once orders have been processed by Thirty Madison they go directly to the PharmaPATH to be routed to the LDU and other workstations. Depending on what's in the order, the LDU will dispense the medications. AFA has operators behind the LDU who stock the channels to be sure there is always enough product and at the front side of the LDU to handle any dispensing issues.

Once products are dispensed out of the LDU into totes, they go to a manual dispensing workstation. This allows for slower moving medications to be added to the order if they weren't stocked in the LDU. It's also where anything that needs to be hand counted is dispensed. After the dispensing and labeling stations, the order moves on to pharmacist verification — where a pharmacist physically checks the order to ensure the right products have been dispensed. The PharmaPATH software also allows for virtual verification. From here, the order goes on to packaging, where operators choose the most appropriate packaging, whether bubble mailers or boxes. They then pack the order along with all required documentation such as patient leaflets and medication guidelines — and send it off to the shipping workstation.

"Tension's software is just so good, it's almost foolproof," says DeRose. "When you scan something — the software tells you exactly what to do next." Khokhar agrees, saying the software is so intuitive it's almost impossible to make a misstep.

ENHANCED VISIBILITY INTO INVENTORY

Tension's PharmaPATH includes a customizable dashboard that companies can use to for at-a-glance visibility into their operations. For AFA, the dashboard focuses on tracking inventory and monitoring what orders have been fulfilled. Initially, the data only included the name of the patient and the products received. As orders increased, Tension added a tracking number to the dashboard and eventually added the patient's address and the lot expiration date. AFA uses this information to see what they've dispensed throughout the day — to manage inventory and ensure they hit output targets. "Tension has been very accommodating in customizing our interface for us," says DeRose. "They're always happy to add things as we define our process a little bit more," Khokhar adds.

When Thirty Madison launched AFA Pharmacy, they had a vision for where they wanted to go — and that's where they started with Tension. "When we began working with the software and saw the business growing in a way we didn't necessarily anticipate, we realized we had to pivot," Khokhar explains. No matter what it was, even if it was outside the original scope of the project, Tension always said, 'Anything is possible.' "Any ask we have — Tension always makes it happen," he says. "That's how we know this system will always be able to evolve with our business."

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