

## AWARD WINNERS' PROFILE

# The repeat success

*Taking repeat prescription business to a higher level, Paul Howie and David Roberts launched an online business as partners – while working in different pharmacies – to increase sales. The duo tell Faras Ghani how myrepeats.com came about and not only won patients' hearts but also the Pharmacy Business Innovation Award 2008...*

When Paul Howie of Lime Tree Pharmacy and David Roberts of Shelley Pharmacy both based in Worthing and in effect, competitors – joined hands to launch a repeat prescription website, winning an award as the last thing on their mind. More due to the fact that neither had a deep interest in the online world or had a lot of time to spare from their day jobs. So being named winners of the Pharmacy Business Innovation Award 2008 was indeed a special and memorable occasion.

Their joint venture, myrepeats.com, owes its origin to the huge number of repeat prescriptions at both pharmacies; it formed almost 90 per cent of their individual businesses. Although the pharmacies had previously worked closely on a number of issues, a joint venture was never on the cards.

'We were both [pharmacies] concerned with protecting our businesses,' Howie said, recalling how the website came about. 'In one review meeting we discussed how we could protect our businesses while also providing a better service to our customers, and this seemed like a good opportunity. It also meant we could split the risk.'

'Today, a lot of people, including myself, are shopping online and use the internet not just at home but at work as well. So we figured that our customers would perhaps use the internet to order their repeat prescriptions online, rather than drive to the pharmacy, submit their requests and follow that up with another visit to collect their prescriptions.'

For Roberts, being a pharmacy inside a surgery often deterred customers from walking in off the street and shopping there.

'Customers assumed that if they were not patients at that particular surgery, they could not use the pharmacy,' Roberts said. 'So we pondered over how we could overcome that and then decided to go with the website.'

After much planning, myrepeats.com was launched in August 2007, and initially covered Worthing only.

However, the success that followed was beyond what either partner had envisioned.

'We arranged for the web company [that had designed the website] to arrange a press release to send to the local paper and the



Paul Howie (left) and David Roberts with the Pharmacy Business Innovation Award 2008

local radio station in order to get some promotion,' Roberts said.

'What we didn't reckon on was that the press release travelled far and wide and was picked up by a couple of national publications and before we knew it, we had questions coming in right, left and centre, all curious about the venture.'

In its initial stage, the website was tested by a select group of customers. 'Following the

initial launch, ten pharmacies contacted us. They thought it was a great idea and expressing their desire to join us,' Howie said. 'We took them up on the offer and by the time the Pharmacy Show opened in October 2007, we had our cards ready.'

'Following that, around fifty pharmacies contacted us and we realised we had to redesign the site to cater to the rising demand.'

In April 2008, myrepeats.com was relaunched and it has since grown to accommodate 321 pharmacies, a far way from just the two when the idea was born.

The day-to-day running of the website is simple. The server is maintained by a web design company. Each individual pharmacy which is a part of myrepeats.com has its own virtual back-office. Once they are accepted to be listed on the website, the pharmacies each get a unique username and password. The pharmacy can then list the surgeries they cater to as well as the postcodes they cover, and delivery options. A majority of the pharmacies offer flexible delivery services, even to a work address.

There also exists an aster administration site, which Roberts supervises in the evenings. Orders placed by patients are stored in a separate system in the pharmacy they have been ordered from.

So how do Howie and Roberts juggle their roles in their individual businesses and those in the website?

It has not seemed to affect Roberts that much.

*“With the advent of the internet, a lot of people are shopping online and use the internet not just at home but at work as well. So it only seemed logical and we figured they would want to use the internet to order their repeat prescriptions online rather than driving to the pharmacy, putting their requests in and following that up with a visit to the pharmacy”*

I don't work in the pharmacy five days a week so I can spend my free time working on the site.

Once a pharmacy is registered, I don't need to get involved a lot anyway. It's not a lot of additional work except the random username or password so Scall.'

Howie, however, needs to spend a lot of evenings working on the site.

We've also had to take on an evening driver as the demand for deliveries has gone up quite significantly [around ten per cent of their total business is done online]. Previously, we only had an afternoon delivery, but now we have a van on the road all day. It has been branded with the website name to act as a promotion for the website while on the road.

While the pharmacies have not felt the need for additional storage space, they may look to employ an administrator for the site. 'We are looking to employ a part-time administrator who can then provide backup and support to the registered pharmacies. I think it's essential we provide maintenance and maybe call up the pharmacies and check if everything is okay.'

According to Howie, their online business is growing by ten to 15 per cent each month.

A lot of the increase in business is through our existing customers who we have encouraged to use the site. It not only increases the sales but also protects our business. Additionally, it helps us expand our scope. Previously around 95 per cent of our business was from just one surgery. Now we cater for every surgery in town. A one time we were doing ten items a month, now we are doing 50 to 100 items in some surgeries.

We have also benefited from our marketing plan - in the form of the branded van, as well as word of mouth and the exposure at the Pharmacy Show. We put in a lot of time and effort to make it an attractive proposition for community pharmacies.'

So how are the two pharmacies gaining from the venture?



Homepage of the repeat prescription website that the duo created

'Well, currently there is a sign-up charge of £100 plus VAT for pharmacies,' Roberts said. 'Originally we planned to charge 10p an item sold via the website, but along came Category M and that idea had to be abandoned. We are now trying to generate revenue through advertising and have limited adverts currently on the site.'

Howie hopes to increase advertising spend on the website in the near future. 'There are advertisements on the pharmacy sites - only are a right now and we hope some day that somebody will want to advertise some OTC products on the patients' page.'

Once the anticipated increase in traffic on the site takes place, Roberts plans to get the health information organisations involved. The aim is to provide complementary information to visitors, in addition to the existing services.

While seeking improvements in the web-

site's design and user interface, Howie hopes other independent pharmacists will join the team and thus help protect their businesses.

'We would obviously like to increase our current user-base. When EPS is rolled in reliably and it goes live, all the big multiples are going to be a big hub sort of dispensaries. In effect, prescriptions can go electronically to any big robot anywhere in the country and patients will be able to order by phone. Our worry is that we will lose a lot of prescriptions that way and I hope other pharmacies will see the threat and sign up with us.'

'If a lot of us get involved then it will not only protect the business but will also create a strong brand in itself that people will come to trust. That will also help in protecting what happens in the future.'

For someone who did not have a huge interest in pharmacy at a young age, winning the award was a huge achievement for Howie. 'I did not have a big interest in pharmacy even though I studied science-related subjects in school. I didn't fancy doing medicine, but reading around those subjects, pharmacy seemed quite a broad spectrum and covered the areas I was interested in. Besides, there seemed to be a lot of employment opportunities.'

'Winning the award was just fantastic, more so because the project we won the award for was done in our spare time. It was great to get the recognition and appreciation as well as feedback we received. And meeting people that evening, it got us huge publicity.'

Regular praise and appreciation also comes from customers upon noticing the award in the pharmacies. And although the future seems uncertain for Howie and Roberts, one is looking at a different profession and the other is being moved to a business he is oblivious about, the award-winning creation has given a solid platform to patients and pharmacists.



Staff at Limetree Pharmacy