



From planning to progress:

# Key strategies for Specialty Rx

A strategic conversation with seasoned pharmacists from **Intermountain Health**, **Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist**, and **Zeal Specialty Pharmacy**



# Our expert panelists



## **Regina Schomberg, PharmD, BCPS**

Regina is the AVP of Retail and Specialty Pharmacy Services at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist. She brings over 30 years of experience in pharmacy practice, including acute care, retail, and specialty services.



## **Daniel Madrid, PharmD, MBA**

Daniel is the Community Pharmacy Director at Intermountain Health, a VPL customer. Daniel has 11 years of pharmacist experience, including retail, health system outpatient, and specialty pharmacy.



## **Jonathan Ogurchak, PharmD, CSP**

Jonathan is the CEO and Co-Founder of Zeal Specialty Pharmacy, an independent pharmacy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Part pharmacist and part techie, Jonathan has continuously pushed the industry's status quo over the last 15 years.

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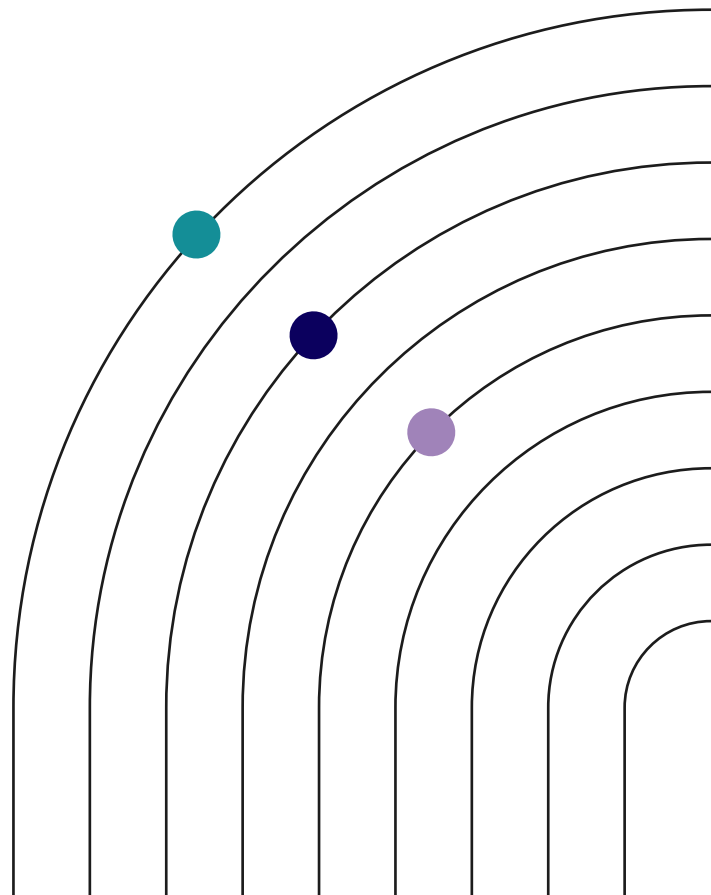
# Strategic planning in specialty pharmacy

When it comes to strategic planning in specialty pharmacy today, the stakes are high. With more patients every year entrusting their care to specialty pharmacies, there's little margin for error to promote the best possible outcomes.

United under the ultimate goal of providing excellent patient care, specialty pharmacies can learn from the experiences of their predecessors to overcome the unique challenges they face when establishing their business.

In the following white paper, we invite three industry experts to share their thoughts on strategic planning in specialty pharmacy. Our featured panelists reflect a varied representation of perspectives including health system pharmacies and independent specialty pharmacies.

Each of them knows the challenges of starting and growing a specialty pharmacy business intimately well. They offer their experience and industry insight to help other specialty pharmacies tap into their full potential and unlock key opportunities for growth.



# 01.

**Infrastructure, hiring,  
and accreditation**



# 01. Infrastructure, hiring, and accreditation

When starting a specialty pharmacy, you of course need a physical space to run the business. Depending on the circumstances, this could be an existing pharmacy, a retrofitted space, or an entirely new building, to name a few options.

As your business grows, it's important to consider not just your shelf space for medications, but also your inventory space for supplies. For example, gel packs, coolers, and other packing supplies will be competing for space within your specialty pharmacy as well.

**When considering the health system perspective, there are often more resources available to help you get started. However, to unlock those resources, the challenge is proving the value and long-term success of the new business. Daniel offers more on this point below.**

## Finding (or building) infrastructure



"Your considerations for space will change over time. When your specialty pharmacy is in its infancy, you'll first need to prove that your program can bring value to the organization as well as to your patients.

As we all know, money talks. So, consider the highest revenue-generating medications that your pharmacy has access to within the organization. Where are potential 340B savings? And where does the organization potentially have unmet patient needs?

Luckily, meeting those needs doesn't require a lot of physical space to start, and beginning a specialty pharmacy doesn't require much shelf inventory. You can order products as referrals come in. In fact, you can probably begin dispensing many of these medications out of an existing pharmacy within your system.

Once you've gathered enough data to demonstrate the value of your program to your C-suite, you can then consider what a standalone specialty pharmacy might look like. I can promise that supplies such as coolers and gel packs will quickly become a pain point for space.

The specialty pharmacy that I managed in Denver, Colorado has grown significantly over the years, and now we have four freezers and one refrigerator dedicated solely to gel packs. The team there is trying to balance the inconsistencies of the supply chain with how much space they have to store extra supplies.





We're at a place in our growth where we need to either explore a new space for our pharmacy or partner strategically with our counterpart specialty pharmacy in Salt Lake City.

So, as your pharmacy grows, you'll need to consider space and scale. For example, will you need walk-in freezers or walk-in refrigerators where you can unload an entire pallet of gel packs? What kind of receiving dock would you need for that? Does it make more sense for your system to have a central fill pharmacy where you can fill specialty and non-specialty products together?

You'll also need to make decisions that involve space versus efficiency, such as boxes or coolers that come assembled or unassembled. Obviously, an unassembled flat box takes up significantly less space, but if your pharmacy is dispensing over 100 cold chain products per day, you could probably devote an entire FTE just to box assembly. These are just a few of the many considerations for scaling a specialty pharmacy within a health system."

**Starting a specialty pharmacy independently can involve some of the same challenges in varying flavors. While you may have more liberty to choose the location of your new pharmacy as an independent, it's important to plan with foresight to make the most of your resources. Jonathan highlights this point below.**



"I think a lot of the points that Daniel mentioned are the same challenges that we have to overcome on our end as well, specifically regarding evaluating space and managing it effectively.

For Zeal Specialty Pharmacy, we wanted to get ahead of this issue by ensuring that we didn't outgrow our infrastructure too quickly. Right now, we deliberately operate in a facility that's a little bit larger than our current needs. This allowed us to obtain our licensures and accreditations so that we don't have to revisit them as quickly if we expand beyond our walls.

Another key consideration from an infrastructure perspective is not just the physical makeup of the pharmacy, but patient demographics and acquisition as well. We're also looking at our patient funnel and identifying new patients to build that funnel as effectively as possible to ensure a steady stream of revenue."

# 01. Infrastructure, hiring, and accreditation

## Hiring and human resources

With a physical space for your specialty pharmacy established, the next consideration is the employees you'll hire to staff the business. As Regina puts it, the most important decision you'll ever make is who you hire.

**At the same time, hiring doesn't have to be overly complicated. While you want to prioritize employees who bring advanced skill sets, you can also find success training generalists to become specialists. Regina expands on this in the following paragraphs.**



"When starting the human resources component of your specialty journey, the most important decision you'll ever make is who you hire. This is especially true when you're just starting a specialty pharmacy.

In particular, you really want to hire pharmacists and technicians with advanced skill sets. In specialty pharmacy, there's the dispensing component, but you also have the proactive patient outreach.

Navigating outreach requires specialization in benefits investigation, prior authorization, and patient assistance. Technicians who bring this unique skill set have a better understanding of how best to communicate with patients and address their needs.

At Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, we've had success leveraging the payor expertise of our managed care sector. This gives us the benefit of understanding what payors are looking for and the questions they're asking.

With pharmacists, we found that as long as they are teachable, adaptable, and willing to learn, you can turn a generalist into a specialist very easily. The major opportunity is to advance the skill set of traditional community pharmacists and ambulatory care pharmacists. The specialty practice is really a wonderful opportunity to combine those skill sets and elevate the practice for pharmacists who are already in their careers.

Again, with specialty pharmacy practice, you have dispensing and patient outreach, however, these don't have to be done together. Specialty pharmacies can consider creating remote positions for patient outreach.







Offering off-site employment opportunities can be a significant motivator for teams, such as by creating a sense of autonomy and ownership over certain service lines or patients. Off-site opportunities can also be a key retention strategy, helping keep team members on the job.

Lastly, when we look at the growth of specialty pharmacy into the future, we have to make sure that we expose students, interns, and residents to the practice as well.

My team works closely with local pharmacy programs to lecture on specialty pharmacy practice. We offer student and residency opportunities with us as well. As leaders, we have to look out for not only our current practitioners, but for the pipeline development of practitioners to come.”

## Considerations for accreditation

In addition to planning for adequate infrastructure and hiring, another key factor for your specialty pharmacy is accreditation. According to Regina, accreditation is a looming topic that everyone gets nervous about because it’s a necessity.

**However, accreditation doesn’t have to be intimidating. Regina breaks down a few methods for balancing the accreditation process and taking care of patients at the same time.**



“Most payors and manufacturers accept the two most common accreditations: ACHC and URAC. So, don’t be overwhelmed by the process. Choose one accreditation to work towards at a time.

Meanwhile, you have to go ahead and take care of some patients because you need patient data to even seek accreditation.

Typically, we think of the process like this: Start a service, find a location, and get accredited. But it doesn’t all happen simultaneously. So, break that down, review your standards, discuss with your colleagues, and phone a friend to see what they did well and what they would do differently.

You could engage an accreditation partner as well. There are many of them out there who could offload some of these responsibilities. Or you can look at someone in your facility who might have that skill set or that regulatory background.”

# 01. Infrastructure, hiring, and accreditation

**From Jonathan's independent specialty pharmacy perspective, accreditation can be made easier with the help of technology.**

While pharmacy isn't typically the most tech-forward industry, there's a substantial opportunity to leverage technology to assist pharmacy processes both regulatory and operational.

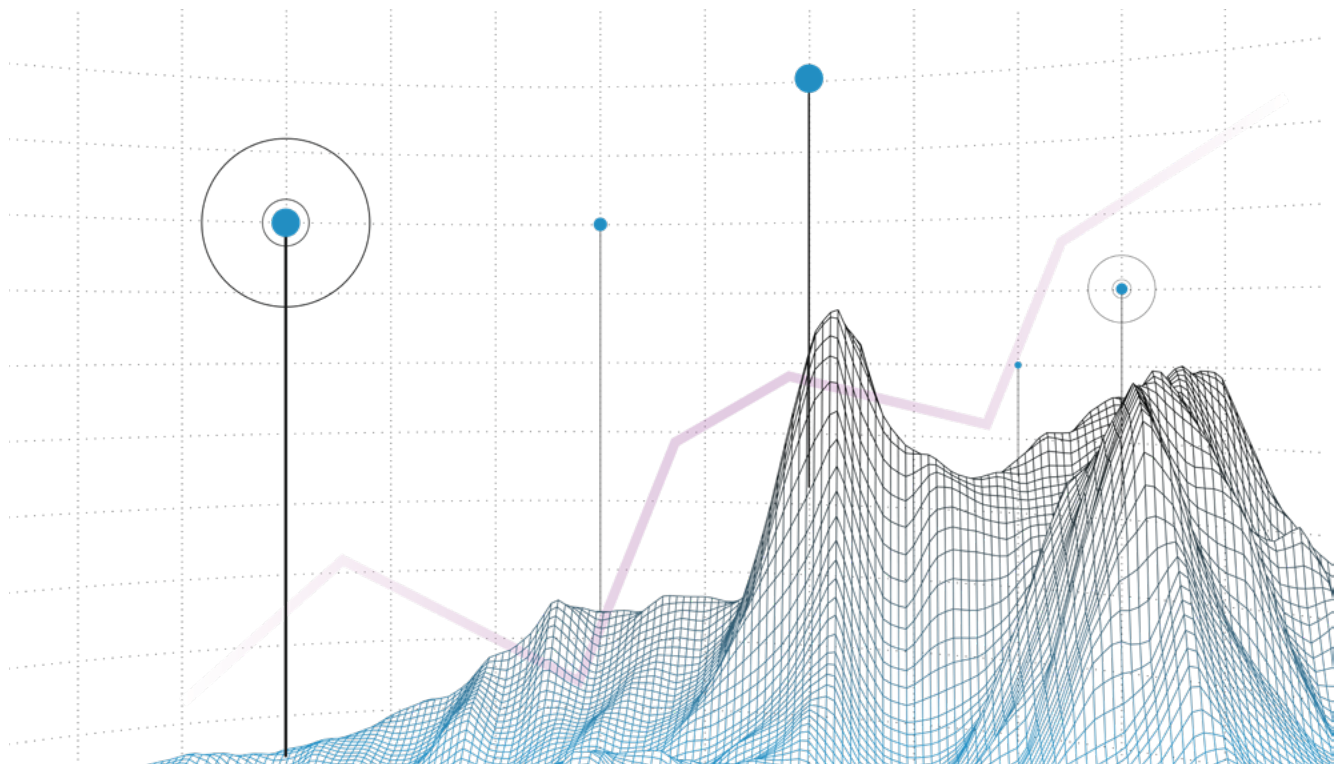


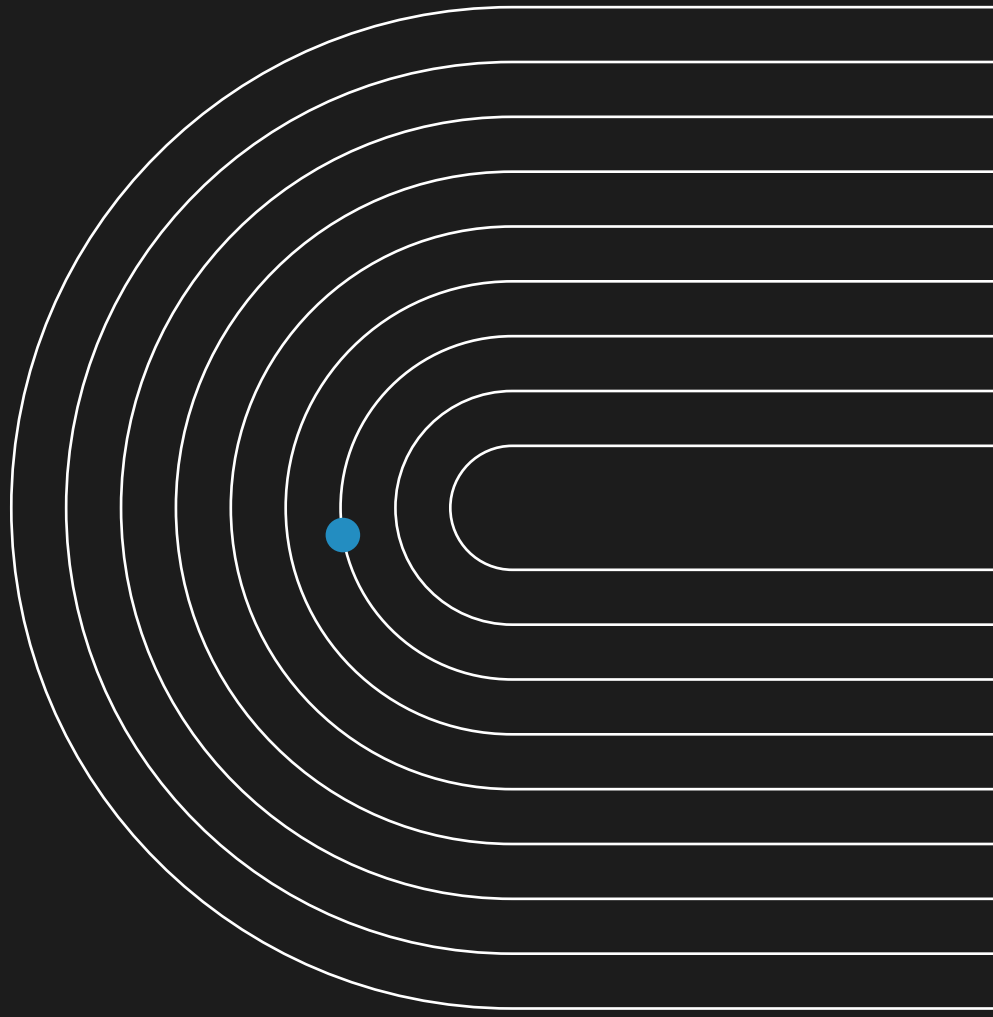
"Accreditation and licensing are where my pharmacy is looking to find ways to optimize processes and be more efficient. We eventually put the technology in place to do this.

When there are activities in a pharmacy that are more regulatory as opposed to revenue-generating, you still need to make sure that you have this capability. So, how can we find ways to leverage the technology to be more efficient in this arena?

With pharmacy in general, you don't necessarily think of it as the most cutting-edge. This is because, as an industry, we're privy to the rules and regulations of our state boards and other regulatory bodies.

But I think that's where a lot of us have shared experiences when it comes to the pharmacy workflow. If we can find ways to streamline care and reduce some of those possibilities for error, it helps to cut down on costs for the pharmacy, the patient, and potentially other stakeholders."





**02.**

**Scaling the business  
with software solutions  
and partnerships**

## 02. Scaling the business with software solutions and partnerships

Once your specialty pharmacy has a physical location and employees, and you're on the path toward accreditation, you may begin to shift focus toward building operational efficiencies that will help you scale your business.

**For Regina, it's a no-brainer to partner with vendors who can leverage their expertise to handle certain tasks within the specialty pharmacy. Below, she offers her own experience working with a partner to improve efficiency.**

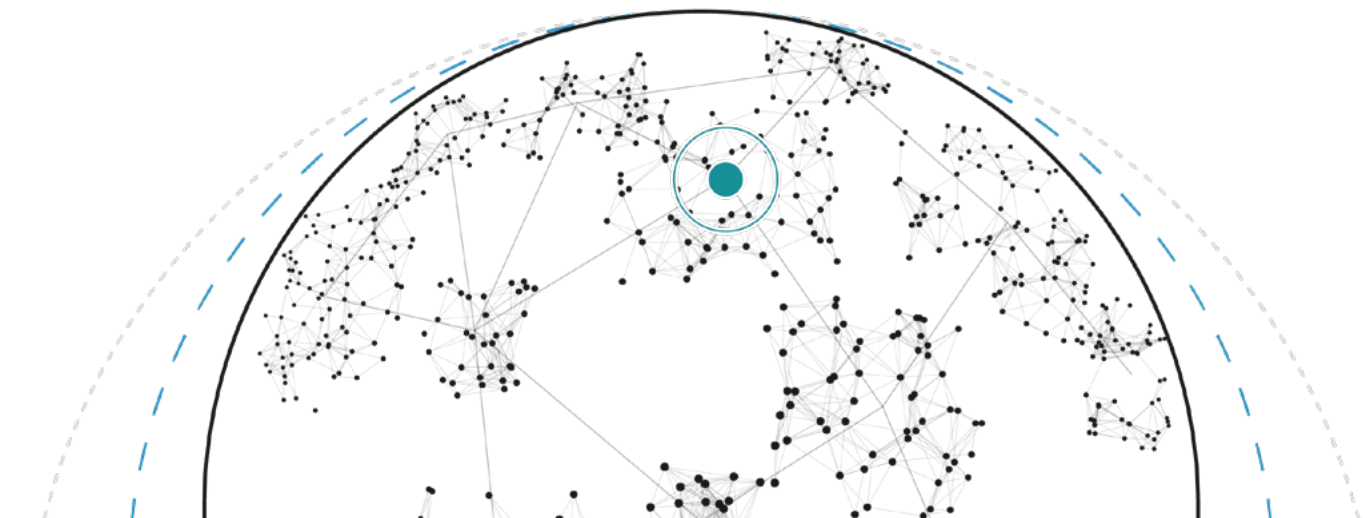
### Engaging partners to boost efficiency

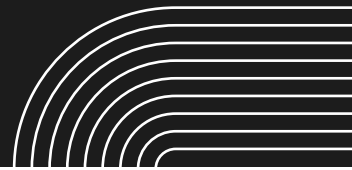


"It's advantageous to offload responsibilities at some point in your journey. You may not need to engage partners initially, but keep an inventory of tasks that might be better served later on by a partner with expertise in that area.

When it comes to engaging partners, the initial costs might feel prohibitive, but look a little bit deeper. How much FTE compensation are you paying to do some activities that could easily be handled by a partner?

At Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, we managed our own patient/provider satisfaction survey for years because we thought the alternative would be too cost-prohibitive. But really, if you dig into those numbers—and the skill sets of those outside partners—it makes wonderful financial sense. Utilize your team for direct patient interaction and then allow your partners to do what they do best."





**Daniel thinks about efficiency in terms of saving time and money, but most importantly, without compromising patient safety. Considerations include using software solutions to reduce workloads and documentation redundancies.**



“In the beginning, your team may have the time to verify every step of the dispensing and shipping process like mine did. But as you grow, you’ll need to focus on efficiency to prevent overstaffing your program.

Consider what kind of programs can be utilized to reduce the workload on your existing staff. **At our health system specialty pharmacy in Denver, we use VPL as our shipping solution** and Asembia-1 as our clinical patient management system.

Those vendors together create an integration that sends the patient’s address directly from Asembia-1 to VPL’s shipping queue. This helps us be faster while also preventing errors.

**As we all know, errors can cost a lot of time and a lot of money. VPL houses our proof of delivery for all of our carriers in one place and for much longer than the carriers are willing to have that information. This not only saves the pharmacy team time, but also the risk from payor audits.**

You should also consider programs that can be standardized or programs designed to work seamlessly together. For example, our dispensing software is the Epic Willow Ambulatory module. This saves our team a significant amount of time when updating medication records, redirecting prescriptions, and researching insurance benefits.

Double documentation is another inefficiency that plagues organizations using clinical software that’s different than their EHR. Our specialty pharmacy in Salt Lake City has successfully utilized text and email refill assessments using Microsoft Forms. But then they need to import that information into the clinical management software.

Within the next year, our pharmacy will begin using Epic. We’re eager to discover how we can utilize Epic features like MyChart to send refill assessments. Potentially down the line, we can autofill those assessments as well.”

## 02. Scaling the business with software solutions and partnerships

**From Jonathan's perspective starting an independent specialty pharmacy, creating efficiencies may look like a combination of existing products, in-house software solutions, and good old-fashioned barcode scanning.**



"We're looking at how we can use software to make ourselves more efficient in the independent realm. This includes partnerships as well as tools that we've built ourselves.

As an independent organization, we're not an Epic user yet. We'd love to have that budget someday, but we're not quite there.

From a growth strategy perspective, if we can find ways to leverage technologies to make ourselves more efficient, we don't necessarily have to add the headcount that you may otherwise need to keep growing.

We can also potentially build some capabilities for current initiatives that we can then upsell in another opportunity in the future. For example, at the outset, we wanted to focus on building bidirectional messaging, similar to Daniel's Microsoft Forms model.

We built ours right into our OnQ software so that we can have bidirectional text messaging between our patients and clinicians. Whether it's for something transactional like shipping status or healthcare-related like deploying clinical questionnaires, we can now do those things remotely via text and email.

Then, we can pull that information right back into the patient's chart. We can standardize that data and measure the impact of our work as a pharmacy. Those things really do help improve and optimize our operations across the board.

To name another example at our pharmacy, we have a separate dispensing system from our patient management system. So, we needed to find ways to tie the two together to improve efficiency. To do this, we leveraged things like barcode scanning to minimize duplicative data entry.

This frees up a lot of extra time. Instead of using additional personnel resources, you can find ways to optimize different areas of your business. I would much rather invest in system improvements before looking to hire more people to save on costs and added risk."



## Demonstrating growth and value

Streamlining pharmacy operations with technology can boost efficiency and, ideally, help your business grow. And as your business grows, it's important to closely follow and document this growth to demonstrate your value both internally and externally.

**This is especially the case from the health system perspective. As Regina illustrates, it can be incredibly rewarding to demonstrate the value and revenue potential of your specialty pharmacy early and often.**

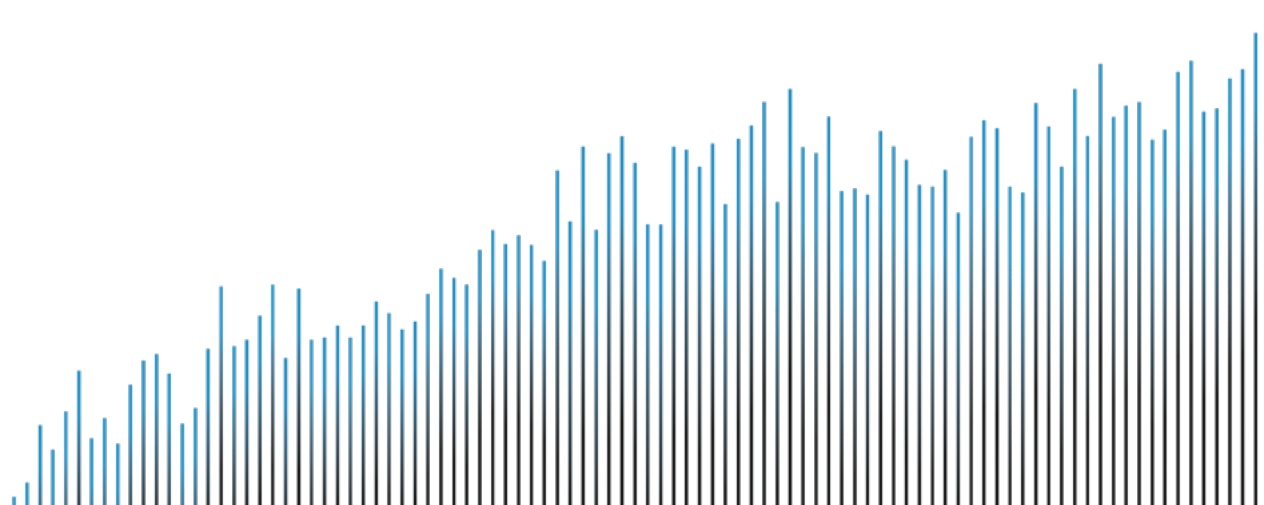


“From the health system perspective, revenue-generating areas are not as common, and they're not understood very well by leaders. Hospitals are more cost-center based. So, when you bring an idea to the table that generates revenue with very good margins, ears perk up as Jonathan said.

In specialty pharmacy, you have to take advantage of the opportunity and seize it quickly. It can be challenging, but also rewarding. A good friend taught me that you have to think big, start small, and move fast. You have to tell your story over and over again with specialty pharmacy and growth.

Demonstrate this value with data, show financial numbers, show patient experience numbers, and align yourself with section leaders and leaders among specialty practices that can sing your praises.

Make sure you educate your leaders as well because, most likely, conversations about specialty pharmacy growth will happen when you're not in the room. As a pharmacy leader, you want to make sure they have the tools to understand what that growth looks like and what your needs are.”



## 02. Scaling the business with software solutions and partnerships

**As Jonathan notes, moving quickly and strategically is just as imperative in the independent setting. Unlike health system pharmacies, independent specialty pharmacies may not necessarily have a C-suite to report to, which can come with its own challenges and opportunities.**

For example, without a C-suite, independent pharmacy leaders must plan and execute their own strategy, but this also gives them more control when doing so. In addition, independent pharmacies are responsible for building out a pipeline of both drugs and patients.



“From the independent perspective, I can say that the concept of moving fast really resonates on our end. You have to be able to pivot quickly when you’re running things on your own.

You don’t necessarily have the same C-suite that you need to report to, but you still need to make informed decisions on what you’re doing and how you’re going to grow your organization.

Our focus initially was on licensure accreditation. But just because those boxes are checked, that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to have patients or pharma companies knocking at your door to bring in business.

I’m reminded of a conference I spoke at a couple of years ago about this concept and somebody stood up in the middle of us talking to say, “Wait a second. I’m an accredited retail pharmacy. Where’s my business?”

As much as I’d love to say that if you build it, they will come, you still have to do some work to build a pipeline of both drugs and patients. Just because you have the boxes checked doesn’t necessarily mean that you have what it takes to take care of patients consistently.

In terms of building clinical programs that work and building value-based offerings that work—like making sure that the patients are satisfied—you’re only going to be as valuable as your ability to demonstrate that capability.

And while you want to make sure that you are perfect, in some cases, perfect can be the enemy of good. Allow yourself to continually make improvements based on internal goals, stakeholder expectations, and patient needs.”







**03.**

**Patient access,  
satisfaction, and  
outcomes**

## 03. Patient access, satisfaction, and outcomes

In the final part of our white paper on strategic planning in specialty pharmacy, our panelists delve into the patient experience. This includes strategies to optimize patient satisfaction and outcomes.

Next, they discuss shipping as an extension of pharmacy services to improve medication access, as well as navigating contingency planning for unexpected weather events.

**To start, Daniel illustrates the correlation between patient satisfaction and the value of a specialty pharmacy program.**



“By nature, specialty pharmacy is a high-touch service line. So, it’s an easy opportunity to exceed patient expectations.

Patient satisfaction data can be used to show your program value to manufacturers for limited distribution drugs, to payers for network expansion, and even to your C-suite for provisional resource allocation.

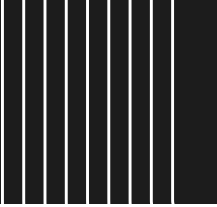
When I explain specialty pharmacy to someone who doesn’t know what it is, I usually tell them that these medications are considered special because they truly do require our teams to assist in procurement. Otherwise, the medications would be relatively unattainable for our patients.

To illustrate, patients wouldn’t be able to afford these medications without the work of our teams. Patients would also be more likely to suffer complications if medication efficacy, compliance, and adverse events weren’t addressed by our clinicians at regular intervals.

At our pharmacies, our patients sing the praises of our teams who are dedicated to benefit investigation and financial assistance. Communication with patients is key to satisfaction.

Imagine, for example, having a life-changing diagnosis and not receiving the medication on the day that you were told you would receive it, or not receiving a call from the pharmacy when the doctor promised that a medication would be there.

Specialty medications often come with a higher degree of concern from our patients. There’s a sense of urgency, potentially even a higher sense of risk, and we need to be empathetic to that.



Patient dissatisfaction resulting from delays due to a carrier or wholesaler issue can often be avoided with a simple courtesy call or, better yet, an automated text.

Keeping patient feedback visible to your team is also helpful in fostering the drive to promote a positive patient experience. Luckily, accreditation requires pharmacies to measure patient satisfaction.

With the data already available, you and your teams can set improvement goals to keep these metrics visible. Additionally, organizations like NASP offer a patient satisfaction survey hosted by a third party. This allows your organization to benchmark your results against another organization.

I will add that patient satisfaction is often heavily rooted in convenience and speed, for better or for worse. I think this is even more true for the future. For example, requests for digital refill assessments are increasingly common.

Organizations should plan for some of those system solutions that we discussed previously, as those can boost efficiency while maintaining the same level of quality and patient satisfaction.”

## **Maintaining patient satisfaction when partnering with third parties**

Another consideration when partnering with third-party vendors is ensuring the continuity of care and patient satisfaction. When contracting a partner who doesn't necessarily work under your pharmacy, they essentially become an extension of your brand.

While these partnerships aim to improve efficiency and enhance the quality of care, it's often inevitable that these partnerships can cause some difficulties. For example, a patient may call with a complaint about a shipping issue that's outside of your pharmacy's control.

In cases like these, there's little you can do besides accept the error and apologize to the patient. In the worst-case scenario, this can be incredibly costly both in dollars and the invaluable cost of patient safety.

## 03. Patient access, satisfaction, and outcomes

**In cases like these, there's little you can do besides accept the error and apologize to the patient. In the worst-case scenario, this can be incredibly costly both in dollars and the invaluable cost of patient safety. Below, Jonathan explains how to navigate delicate situations like these.**



"Of course. To your point, those delivery partners really are an extension of your brand. Whenever there's a problem, and that package doesn't arrive on the patient's doorstep, they're not thinking it's a FedEx problem or a UPS problem, they're thinking that it's a pharmacy problem.

Where we've found the most success is by building strong partnerships with carriers to help mitigate some of this risk. Having those relationships allows you to communicate with patients proactively to minimize the damage of any problems that arise.

For example, a package may not arrive due to forces that are beyond our control. However, instead of letting the patient sit around and wait for a package that isn't coming, we can leverage our partnerships to communicate these issues to our patients and also hold our carriers accountable.

We're not always going to be perfect, especially when relying on third-party services to provide the full spectrum of care to our patients. The key is to find those solutions that you can count on to resolve problems more effectively."

### Contingency planning for unexpected weather

When you're shipping highly sensitive medications to your patients, there's another critical variable to consider: the weather.

**Next, our panelists share their experience navigating weather disruptions in their pharmacy practice, as well as how they plan for resilience when shipping to different states, during different seasons, etc.**





“It was a huge winter storm that led to one of my first big headaches in specialty pharmacy. As I mentioned, I managed a pharmacy in Denver that primarily ships to Colorado and Montana.

I remember this exceptional storm was headed for the Western US, so we thought, “Okay. Let’s get everything shipped out before the storm hits tomorrow.”

However, FedEx’s hub for all of our shipments is located in Memphis, Tennessee. To our detriment, a different storm system was headed for Memphis. All of our shipments made it there before the Denver storm hit, but then sat there for a day or two with the FedEx planes unable to leave Tennessee due to weather.

There was such a backlog of deliveries out of Memphis that we had to replace a lot of products in both Colorado and Montana, and Montana wasn’t even experiencing the storm.

This was costly for us, and it was absolutely bad for patient care. The matter really helped us understand that we need to consider weather patterns beyond just our final destination.

Each year, we get better at navigating bad weather, and we now plan for weather issues by checking all three geographies daily. Depending on the time of year, we will also pack our coolers with whichever of the three geographies has the hottest or coldest temperatures. We also work with patients and providers to try and adjust shipments for potential weather disturbances.

Ultimately, patients need their medications despite bad weather. Right? We also plan for continuity by ensuring that we have multiple options for redundancy. We have local couriers and carriers available to us when we’re planning for inclement weather.

For example, we could have avoided a FedEx delay resulting from a storm by utilizing a local courier here in the Denver metro area, and that’s what we do now.

This type of redundancy can be an investment. Keep that in mind because your second and third options probably aren’t your cheapest, but this strategy does prioritize uninterrupted patient care and safety.”

## 03. Patient access, satisfaction, and outcomes

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“To add to Daniel’s thoughts, whether it’s the weather in your area or outside of your area, utilizing those regional couriers and pivoting quickly is a must.

Shipping in the southeast, we do get ice, but we don’t get as much snow. Really what we have to be resilient around is tropical storm and hurricane planning. We know the cone of a hurricane can change direction quickly. In these scenarios, we have to think about getting medications to patients before they evacuate their area.

A good example from just recently is tropical storm Debby, which was hard to predict. We didn’t know exactly where it was going to arrive. It could have been anywhere in the areas that we were shipping to. In order to get ahead of this, we pivoted to RPCs to get patients the medications they needed despite these hard-to-predict weather events.”

JO

“It’s funny that both Regina and Daniel mentioned Memphis, Tennessee. Being from Denver or Pittsburgh, you’re used to a little bit of snow on the ground. But it’s crippling to most of our major carriers whenever there’s just a little bit of a dusting in Memphis. We saw a lot of that firsthand.

We leverage technology to look at weather forecasts and predict delays. In these cases, we change our cold chain packouts and bump up the estimated shipping time by a few days. Even if it does sit on a tarmac for a little bit longer due to a transit issue, we can reroute the package back to our pharmacy.

This way, the drug doesn’t have any risk of spoilage, and we can make sure that we send out a secondary shipment to the patient. Early in my career, we were shipping a lot of medications without qualified packouts. It’s amazing to see how the industry has adapted over time.

I remember a day when it was my job to write off a \$20,000 or \$30,000 shipment just because a patient would call with a question about a package sitting in the sun or in the cold for too long. We want to make sure the patient is safe, so the key is finding those nuances, planning contingencies for the weather, and optimizing infrastructure to be resilient in the face of those challenges.”

## Patient outcomes and medication adherence

While continually working to improve last-mile logistics and get medications to patients' doorsteps safely, there then comes the challenge of medication adherence.

In the specialty pharmacy industry, the nature of patients' diagnoses can be complex and sometimes devastating.

Certain social determinants of health can contribute to these conditions as well. In other words, the circumstances beyond just the clinical care that the patient receives which often end up being responsible for a majority of their health outcomes.

**These factors significantly influence medication adherence and patient outcomes. However, they are often beyond the control of the pharmacy. Regina shares some insight on this challenge below.**



"Many healthcare professionals feel responsible for controlling all the elements that can negatively influence adherence. However, we have to look at the areas that we really can control.

Just because a patient has their medication in hand, doesn't mean that they're going to be adherent to their treatment. You can even give them their medication for free, but that doesn't mean that they're going to take it.

I think it's a process of promoting patient education and understanding, as well as cross-team collaboration, which aligns already with the specialty pharmacy practice. This also includes decreasing the fragmentation of care by keeping patients within the health system when possible. This way, providers and pharmacists can work collaboratively to best care for our patients.

And lastly, while digital interaction is wonderful, sometimes folks just need an empathetic person to listen to them and understand them. Yesterday, I heard a teammate tell a patient, "I'm honored to be working with you and helping you through this uncomfortable portion of life." That's really what helps us create a foundation of trust with our patients which ultimately drives adherence and better outcomes."

# 04.

## Big questions

To close, our panelists offer their rapid-fire insight on several key topics that may have been missed, including additional industry challenges, defining success, and the evolving specialty pharmacy landscape.

### **Daniel, what do you believe are the biggest headwinds facing specialty pharmacy today?**



"Right now, in health system specialty, it's 340B manufacturer restrictions. There are limits on contract pharmacies for IDNs which are preventing us from recognizing the full 340B benefit that we once did.

I'd also add DIR fees and PBM reimbursements. There's less visibility than ever into DIR fees. We're seeing worsening rates of reimbursement and our organization is finding it harder and harder to evaluate that."



## Regina, how do you define success with your specialty pharmacy services?



“As a leader, I think it’s multi-pronged. Of course, there’s the financial opportunity that specialty pharmacy brings to a health organization. Along with that, it brings us the ability to interact with patients and providers in a way that we haven’t before.

I think success is not only financial, but should also focus on patient and provider experience as well. Measuring patient and provider satisfaction is key to defining the success of your specialty pharmacy.

Many times, to Daniel’s point above, we can get focused on the decreased margins, the decreased reimbursement rates, the manufacturer carve-outs, and the 340B implications. But really, we need to look at the root of why we do what we do, and that’s our patients.”

## Jonathan, looking back to when you started your specialty pharmacy, what would you have changed and why?



“Looking at the landscape of where pharmacy is today—even compared to 12 months ago, five years ago, or 10 years ago—it’s a very different market that we’re facing right now. In terms of what I would do differently, we started out looking for partners to pair our technologies with to be more efficient.

Like I said before, we’re not an Epic organization. We don’t have the mandate from the top down that dictates how we use our technology. So, we had to shop around for these vendors. I think that, right now, it’s more difficult to find one-size-fits-all solutions.

In doing things differently, we would have been more diligent in developing some of these solutions ourselves before jumping right into it. Now, we sometimes find ourselves spending more time on temporary fixes for things that are out of our control. Instead, we could have just put our own solutions in place that we eventually ended up building and deploying anyway.

Having more insight, I probably would have focused more on building our own solutions as opposed to throwing a Band-Aid on it, so to speak, and making it work. That hindsight perspective is always a little easier.”

# Conclusion

A successful specialty pharmacy strategy requires a combination of agility, foresight, and an unwavering commitment to patient experience and outcomes. To this end, strategic planning in specialty pharmacy must include everything from planning adequate space for specialized packing materials to developing contingency plans for unexpected weather events.

All these challenges can be made easier by partnering strategically with vendors with expertise in these areas. With the right technology and collaborative approach, many of the barriers to specialty pharmacy growth can be eliminated.

Fortunately, much of this work has been done already by experts in the field, like those who shared their insights today. With the right approach, fledgling pharmacies can capitalize on this wisdom and transform it into opportunities for pharmacy growth and buy-in from leadership.

This is an edited and condensed version of a panel interview from our webinar: Strategic planning in specialty pharmacy.

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