by Chris Linville



AN INTELLIGENT

From left, USave co-owner Bill Snodgrass and partners Travis Covey and Anne Maciejewski.



For almost 50 years, USave Pharmacy has stood as a cornerstone of health care in North Platte, Neb., a town of more than 23,000 residents in the west-central part of the state. The pharmacy covers 6,000 square feet and has three drive-thru lanes, providing standard retail prescriptions along with a full suite of clinical offerings.

"People know they can come to USave and we'll do our darndest to get people what they need, and answer questions to their satisfaction," says co-owner Bill Snodgrass, RPh. "We deliver, we mail out, we basically do everything. We've got very strong volume and it's a busy place. It's worked really well for us."

USave got its start in the early 1970s, initially leasing space in grocery stores. In 1978, the business went to a standalone format to allow for drive-thru lanes. Bill Snodgrass and Mike Hamik have been co-owners from the beginning, along with another partner, Bill Hamik.

Travis Covey, PharmD, started with Bill Snodgrass and Mike in 1999, working in a small town outside of Omaha at a time when USave was adding stores in the eastern part of the state. A North Platte native, Travis eventually moved back there and became a partner. Anne Maciejewski is another partner.

Along with the North Platte location, USave has a number of other affiliated locations in Nebraska. They are independently owned by the store managers but have much of their accounting and other business operations handled through the main location in North Platte.

SHIFT

USave Pharmacy embraces AI to maximize efficiency and serve patients more effectively



All photos by AMP Studios

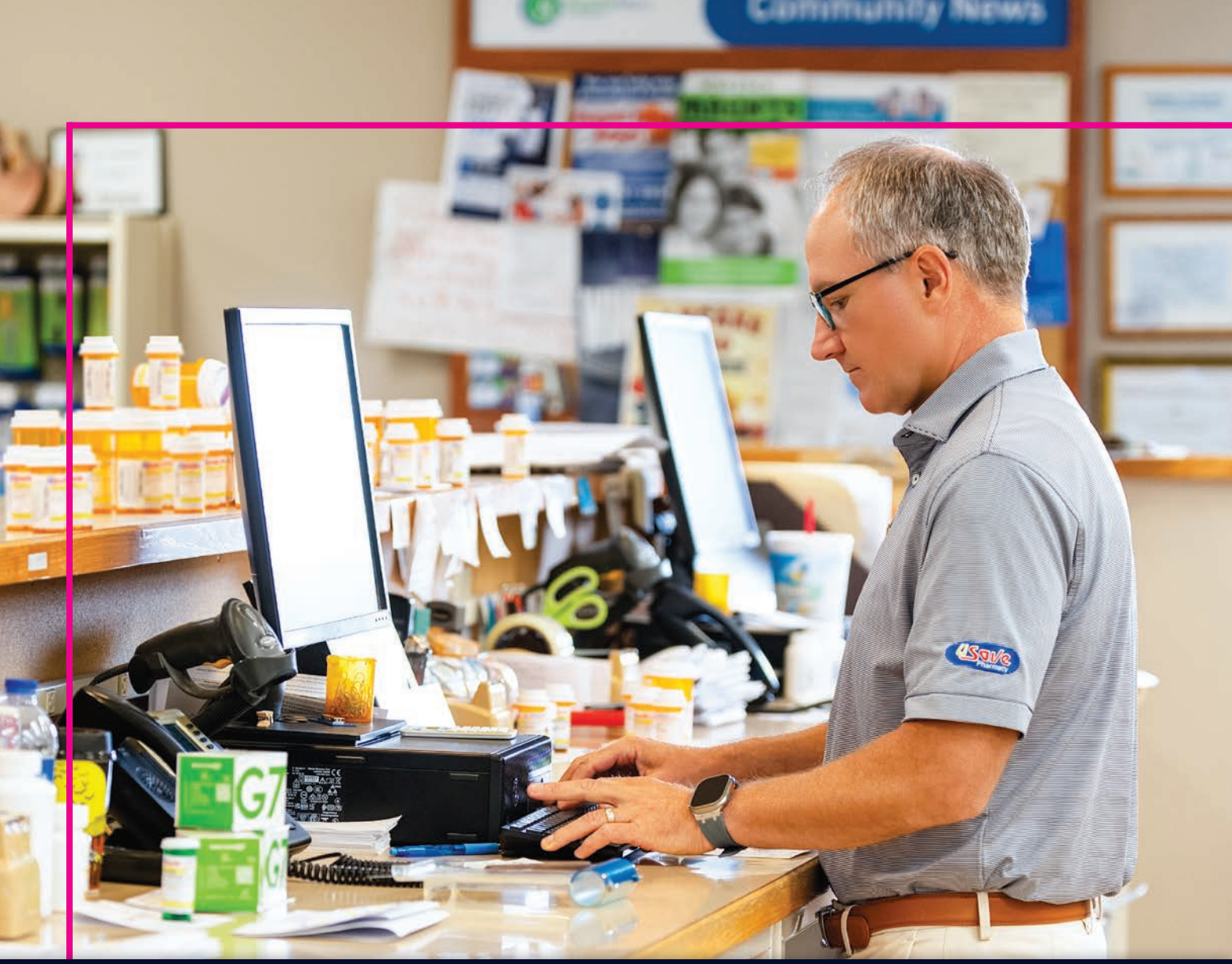
USave also established a buying group, the USave Pharmacy Group, which was recently acquired by the Independent Pharmacy Cooperative.

SUCCESS BRINGS CHALLENGES

Ironically, USave's success started creating its own challenges. The problem was never a lack of business. It was the phone.

Simply answering calls in a timely manner was becoming an issue.

"We've got nine phones out in the work area, and there were times when every one of them was ringing or everybody was on a phone.



“If the patient expresses any frustration, if it’s not going well, just transfer the call into the store and we’ll take care of it.”



Then we ran out of people to help the customer who was standing in the store, and it was just becoming a problem," Travis says. "And then you get to the point where people are looking around to see who's going to answer the phone. Every day felt like a Monday morning, and every hour felt like a Monday morning."

Bill says that one day he was watching CNBC and saw a discussion about artificial intelligence and how it was going to revolutionize business by handling tasks that didn't need to be done manually.

"They said everything was going to be quick and accurate," he says. "I thought, we have so many people who dislike the phone systems today – press 1, press 2, press 3, leave a voicemail. I was listening to this and was wondering if it could help with our phones. Our phones were kind of out of control with the amount of calls we take and how many people it ties up."

FINDING A BETTER WAY

Bill thought there had to be a better way. He and Travis contacted Chris Parker, who had done some work with the USave Pharmacy Group previously, to see if there was an AI solution for its phone system. Chris is a co-founder and partner at KODA Co., which collaborates with pharmacy.thinkrr.ai to develop and scale voice AI applications.

Once Bill and Travis learned what could be done, there was no hesitation.

"We wanted to be first in the market, not last," Bill says. "I figured there's no better time to get started on it than now. So let's go and let us try it because we could always go back to the telemanager we're already using. We had that safety net."

Bill says from a staff point view, keeping the status quo wasn't acceptable.

"It's an attitude ruiner," he says. "One person will say, 'I'm answering all of the phones,' and somebody else will say, 'She's not taking her share of the calls.' And all of a sudden, people don't want to answer the phones, which is a problem because you need all hands on deck."

Bill says he thinks a lot of independents would be surprised if they crunched the numbers on how much time phone calls take.

"Say it's roughly two minutes, somebody's on there from start to finish and you're getting 200 phone calls a day," he says. "You have the equivalent of about two full-time people answering phones."

"It's about utilizing AI in places as a supercomputer, not something to replace your current system," Chris says. "It's to make things much faster and more relevant, make your website smarter, and answer people in real time."

CONCIERGE SERVICE

Working with Chris, a new AI-based voice agent called the Pharmacy Concierge from thinkrr.ai was implemented. It handles refill calls even when patients don't have their prescription number, and sends requests directly into a pharmacy's queue. If a caller truly needs a pharmacist, it transfers instantly. Now an AI agent, named "Marissa," handles 60 percent of the pharmacy's calls. As an example, in one month, 2,710 hours of staff time was handed back to the pharmacy, an 18 percent increase from the month before.



Travis explains how a typical exchange might go.

"Somebody calls, and she picks up immediately. She asks, 'How can I help you? Do you need a refill or are you a patient or calling from the doctor's office and you go that direction? Need a refill? OK, I can take care of that. How many do you have? Do you have one or multiple? Give me your numbers,'" he says.

"After that they can punch in the number or they can speak the number or just name the drug. She can list the drugs in their profile and they can choose from that. Once they've gotten through the drug, she pushes them over to our queue. She says, 'Thank you,' and off you go."

Bill says, "She asks them, 'Do you want this delivered or mailed or are you going to pick it up?' And so it does a real complete job."

Travis emphasizes that the human element is still there. "If the patient expresses any frustration, if it's not going well, just transfer the call into the store and we'll take care of it," he says.



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Initially Travis admits it was a bit unnerving to not hear the phones ringing constantly.

"Why is it not ringing? Is it because Marissa is handling all of the calls? Or they are calling somebody else or the phones are down?" he says. "Now that we have gotten used to it, it's kind of a surprise when the phone does ring. In a way it's like having another staff member there directing those calls to where they need to go."

It's also helped with staff morale, Travis says.

"I think you can tell that there's not as much pressure," he says. "They don't feel like they're running around with their heads cut off all the time."

Travis says it has been about a year since they started working on the phone upgrades. He admits at times it was a challenge and sometimes still is, because with AI it is constantly learning and there are situations that can be tricky to diagnose.

"Some of those things still present themselves. But over that year, with our volume, it helped because we're exposed to those problems pretty frequently," he says. "And because of that we could address it with pharmacy.thinkrr.ai to get them fixed. What's helped now is we have more stores on board. Those stores may see some things that that we hadn't seen yet. So it's getting better. It's getting to the point that we envisioned it to be."

ESTABLISHING PARAMETERS

Travis says the pharmacy explained to Chris the guardrails it wanted in place for AI.

"The two primary things that we said right from the beginning is when the patient calls in a refill, it's got to come into our queue," he says. "With that comes all kinds of situations, controlled substances, discontinued prescriptions, expired prescriptions … all these little things that you don't think twice about when you're sitting there doing it. But when it's an AI agent trying to do it, you've got to put in the parameters for what you want it to do."

Travis adds, "The second thing that we wanted it to do is if that patient left a message, whether it was [to] deliver it, mail it, put some Tylenol in the bag, whatever it might be, we needed to get that message. We're a very rural area, and we do a lot of mail-outs. We do a lot of deliveries in town. And if you don't get it in the mail, especially nowadays with the mail, if they don't get their meds for three or four days, that's a problem."

He also says it was important to work out any kinks before going live.

"We had to make sure those things were solved right away before we turned the thing on," he says. "We went through the testing to make sure everything was working. Once we got that part explained, then we had to work with Pioneer, which is who we use for the software to get access. So we got through that. And then it's just kind of a day-to-day thing."

Travis continues, "We turned it on for a couple of hours and see how it worked. We would shut it off [and] go over some things. Then we had it on for longer periods, then all day. And then several months ago, we turned on the prescriber side, and we had to work through some things on that. And so that's been resolved. So, yeah, it's just almost a day-to-day thing that we work through on different issues."



MONITORING CALLS

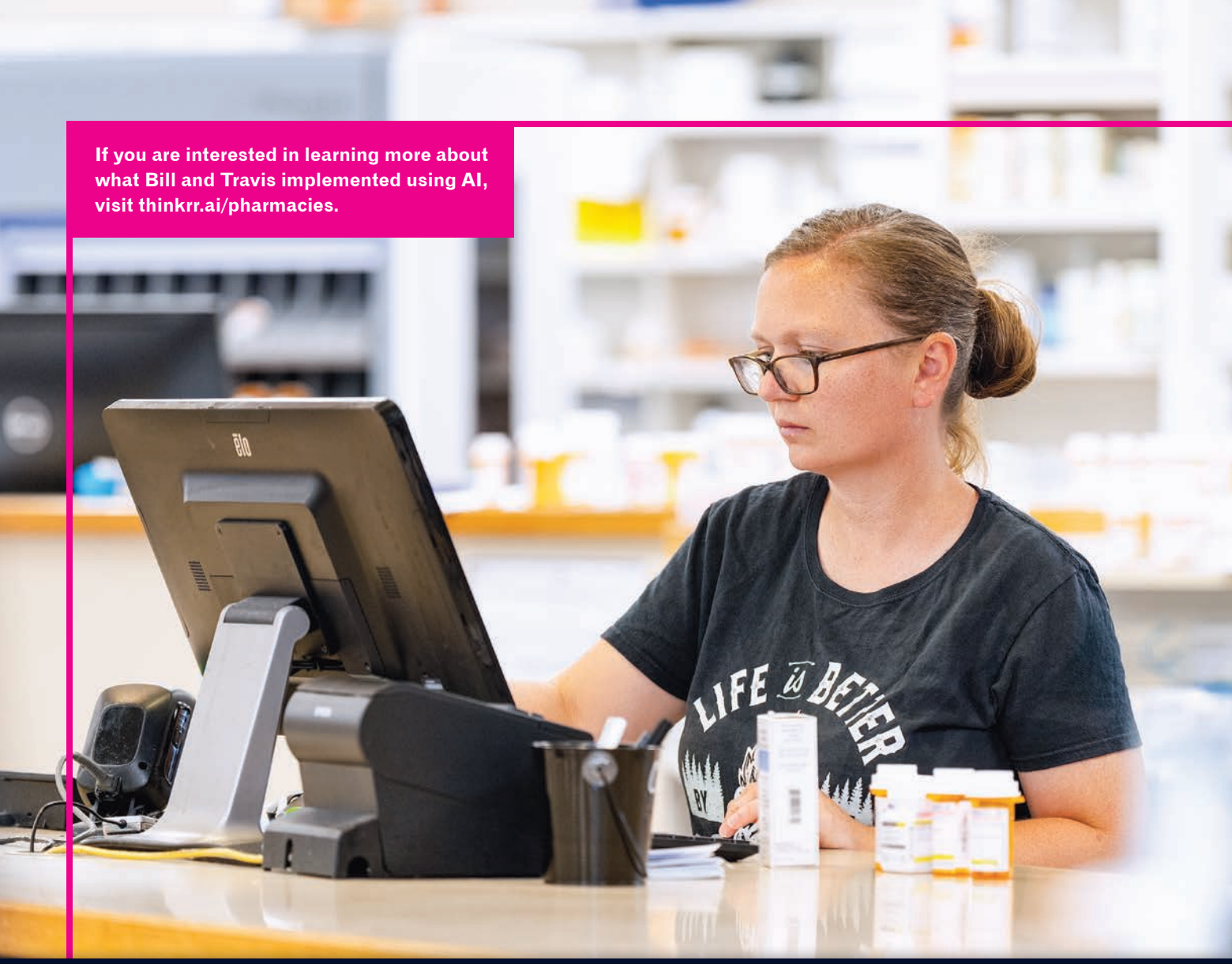
USave in North Platte has about 25 full-time employees. There are five check-out areas with their own registers, and Bill says busy periods can get hectic, especially in the drive-thru windows.

"This year, we added some curbside parking as well, where they can text into the store," Travis says. "But in the winter when you're getting all the cough and cold, and everybody wants to come through the drive-thru, we'll have all three lanes stacked. This will allow them to pull on the other side, text us. It comes up on everybody's computer that a patient is in stall one, we see their name, and we're able to take care of them that way."

To monitor call metrics, pharmacy.thinkrr.ai has a multi-purpose dashboard analyzing call characteristics.

"It sees how the call was answered and the call sentiment, whether the patient was happy, unhappy, or neutral, and records every single call that comes in," Travis says. "If there's a circumstance where somebody comes in and says they had called three things in and we don't have them ready and we can't figure

If you are interested in learning more about what Bill and Travis implemented using AI, visit thinkrr.ai/pharmacies.



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it out, we can go find that call and see what happened.

"If it was something where it looks like [it was] AI that caused the problem, we can flag that for review. It goes right back to pharmacy.thinkrr.ai and they can see the problem. They can see the call, see what went wrong and fix it. It's made the response time on those fixes much greater."

WORKFLOW SUPPORT

Last winter, USave invested in data entry tools from Encore Rx Automation. More recently TJM Labs, an AI-driven pharmacy automation company, acquired Encore. What appealed to Bill and Travis initially about Encore was its capabilities in delivering data entry automation for pharmacies, and supporting workflows across independent and retail environments.

Travis says that TJM hired the owner of Encore, a pharmacist who wrote the programs. TJM eventually scrapped its original plans and went with his system.

"He really had it figured out," Travis says. "It's very efficient and it's also very, very accurate."

Travis says USave has a significant number of medication synchronization and compliance patients, and the new system makes a difference by doing much of the work at night when the store is closed.

"If you're running (med sync and compliance package patients) during your work hours, they will bog down your robot like no other," he says. "We consistently had over 100 scripts that the robot had in its queue and that was all day long. You spent a lot of time at the robot moving up the people that were there and, and it was really very inefficient."

The difference has been dramatic.

"We just put them in the cycle fill. It moves over to the cycle fill at night, it cleans that out, and pushes them to the robot. You walk in in the morning, and those have all been run," Travis says. "The ones for the robot are sitting on the robot, and you are ready to go for the day. It can do way more than we put in there. For example, we had 300-some in there the other night. You come in and they're done."

The first one worked so well that the pharmacy added a second one. "We had the volume to add another one. It's worked out great, "Travis says.

BREATHING ROOM

Bill understands that any time major changes are made within an organization, there might be some employee pushback. But he says they soon realized that not being swamped by phone calls was making their jobs easier.

"There's the added benefit of 24/7. So when we're closed, the phones get answered," he says. "And if it's a refillable prescription, it goes right into our queue, and the AI does the filling portion of it."

Addressing another potential concern, Bill says, "It didn't cost anybody their job. We're not looking to cut staff. Actually finding employees that work out well for us here is not always easy."

"This (AI) actually gives us a little breathing room on having to hire more techs, or more cashiers, and pharmacists for that matter." Travis says. "And it's here every day and it's never sick. It just works."



AI ADVOCATES

Travis realizes there's a lot of trepidation and uncertainty about AI, but he thinks the positives far outweigh any downside.

"You know, AI gets thrown in with data centers, and data centers are a hot topic right now, but you've got to put all that aside," he says. "It's only going to increase, and it's going to increase at a much more rapid pace than it has over the past year. If it's something that you need help with your workflow or your staffing, your efficiency, whatever it may be, there's no reason not to give it a try. It may not work for you, but there's a good chance you won't want to go back."

Bill agrees completely.

"With artificial intelligence, the way we answer the phones, the way we organize our drive-thrus and everything else in our pharmacy, I think AI is going to help a lot of that," he says. "The combination of the digital media and the efficiencies that it can add to your store, I think it's going to be a home run.""" ■

Chris Linville is *America's Pharmacist*® managing editor.