# Is online the way forward for retail in pharmacy?

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed a lot of things that we would have taken for granted before. Shopping in a retail setting has changed as we all must wear face masks now. Pharmacy was a leader in the retail sphere as we remained open and protected our staff with specific measures to ensure the health and wellbeing of our staff and customers. Some of these measures were to close off the retail sections of our business to the public. Many pharmacies offer online sales, and many want to get involved as they see online as a positive step for the future of their business especially considering the current COVID-19 pandemic.
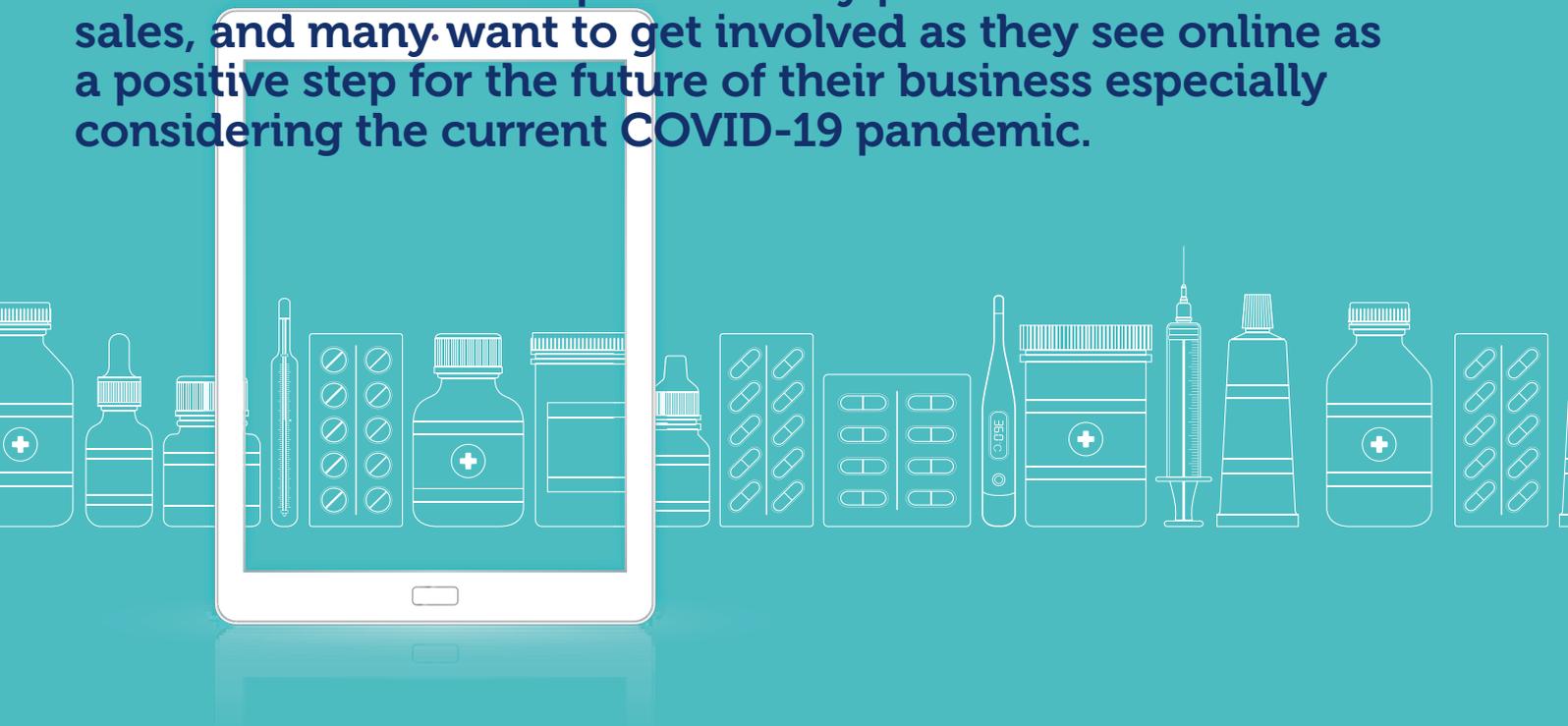
Colin Deeny,
Paul O'Hea and
Rory McDaid

In this article in our series of COVID-19 business articles, Darren Kelly, IPU Business Development Manager, posed some questions to one such pharmacy who operates a successful online business and asked them to give their insights to assist other members who may be looking to move their business into this area.

Many thanks to Colin Deeny and team in Inish Pharmacy for their input about what they did to set their online business up from the most northerly peninsula of Ireland.

Introduction

Who you are and how long you have been in business? Inish Pharmacy is a group of three pharmacies. The first of three was established in 2007. There are three pharmacist directors; Colin Deeny, Paul O'Hea and Rory McDaid. There are also three non-pharmacist directors.

Where you are based?
We have locations in Muff, Buncrana and Carndonagh, all in Inishowen, Co. Donegal — at the most northern peninsula of Ireland.

When did you start to offer online shopping?
Our ecommerce website went live in December 2013. How time flies!

Why did you look to offer online services? Was it location, customer access, COVID-19 or similar, or competitive edge?
It was obvious as early as the turn of the last decade in 2010 that people were going to shop more and more online. A lot of that money was and still does leave our country to overseas companies. Most notable of course to Amazon, but also to other online pharmacies in the UK and other retailers further afield. It was also leaving our local community in Inishowen. So, we had to get online. We had to help reverse that trend. We also thought it would allow us to expand our customer base outside what may be considered a relatively remote and rural location.

In addition, as pharmacists we provide a service. We should make that service as convenient as possible. As we looked ahead, we saw that this is what people would eventually want, expect, and indeed now demand. If we do not offer it, non-domestic retailers will. That money leaves our local economy and will leave Ireland.

What were your first steps?
The first steps were to see what we wanted our website to offer. Would it be all ecommerce? Would it be promoting primarily professional services? How would it look? It was important that we not only offer the right services but also do so in a way that

reflected our ethos and professionalism. A big part of that was looking at and discussing other websites — worldwide.

How did you find your website designer? Any recommendations?
As part of the discussion about what we wanted to offer, we also looked at web designers. There are surely more web designers than pharmacies across the world. When it came down to it, we wanted a reputable company that we could work with and develop our site long term — not an off-the-shelf site.

Did you need to obtain any special permits or licences to develop your online store?
We had to ensure we worked with trusted and secure payment processors so that our customers could shop in a safe and secure manner.

Then there is GDPR. We must ensure that all collected data is limited to what we actually need. We also need consent from users to help us communicate remotely.

Finally, when the PSI allowed the sale of medicines online, we registered on the PSI Internet Supply List. This ensures standards relating to the safe supply of medicines are applied online.

Did you apply for any grants or supports from your local authority or Government?
No, we did not apply for or get any grant for the first few years. Then more recently, in late 2018, we applied for funding from the Online Retail Scheme, a grant administered by Enterprise Ireland on behalf of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (see www.enterprise-ireland.com > Funding Supports > Online Retail Scheme). However, that was not before many years of hard work, financial investment, and development.

A grant is useless without your commitment.

From a cost perspective, do you think that online sales justify development of an online store?
There are certainly a lot of costs involved, for example software, packaging and posting. In addition, it is likely that you will need dedicated and qualified staff to help with the site maintenance and dispatching and communication. If you want your site to be successful, you just cannot do it all yourself.

Then there are always new software integrations or additional services every few months that we must consider. While they can improve customer experience or help our staff work more efficiently, they all cost money. So, you need to keep up to speed with IT or you could be stung.

Is it all worth it and financially viable? That is a question each pharmacist owner will have to answer themselves. What I will say is that had we looked ahead at the amount of time, money and focus that online has taken to date, we would probably have balked and said, "no way". However, at each point throughout this learning curve, I would have to say that what has kept us going is the fact that we know that this is what people want. There is no point in me saying it is profitable or not profitable. It has been a bit of a rollercoaster. It is continually changing, but it is where we consider we must be . . . and continue to go forward. We live in a global economy and once you venture online you realise that even more.

What motivates us and what we get satisfaction from is the fact that we have a great team, with great camaraderie, and we bring employment and investment to the local economy.

What advice would you give to other members who may be looking to go online?
Do not build a website and simply expect people to come to your site. Why should they visit your site? Why should they interact with you? Make sure that you are offering what people want. Also, do not be too parochial. We are not really competing with other Irish online pharmacies. It is important that we as Irish Pharmacy Union members aim to retain our domestic market share. We are competing in a global marketplace and there is plenty of room for all Irish online pharmacies to do well.

PSI internet supply list

Anyone who wishes to sell non-prescription medicines over the internet in Ireland must register with the PSI and have their name listed on the approved Internet Supply List. Those websites must also display the EU common logo on every web page that offers non-prescription medicines for sale.

The aim of the EU common logo is to help members of the public to identify websites that can legally sell medicines online. This is a requirement across the EU, which was introduced by the Falsified Medicines Directive. The common logo can only be displayed on websites that are entered on the approved list, and the list of all those registered in Ireland is

available on our website. This is the common logo for Irish registered internet suppliers.

The PSI internet supply list is divided into two parts: Part A contains pharmacies who wish to sell pharmacy-only medicines (POM) and general sales list medicines (GSL); and Part B contains retailers including pharmacies who wish to sell GSL medicines only. The HPRA has a list of all GSL medicines and POM medicines available on their website. The PSI has produced a document entitled *Guidance in Internet Supply of Non-prescription medicines*, which details the legal requirements and considerations for pharmacies when selling medicines online. These include sourcing, storing, supplying, and record keeping systems in place for medicines liable for abuse and misuse. The IPU has produced the *IPU Guidelines for Pharmacies on Online Sales*, which will help those pharmacists who are currently considering supplying medicines online (see www.ipu.ie > Professional > SOPs and Guidelines > Internet Pharmacy).

PSI

AN RIALTÓIR CÓGAISÍOCHTA

Guidance on Internet Supply of Non-Prescription Medicines

Version 1 June 2015

Click to verify if this website is operating legally