



Mainstream meets alternative at Pharmaca

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MEDIANEWS STAFF

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OAKLAND — You go to your pharmacy for your prescription drugs, and when you're looking for alternative remedies, you seek out an herbalist, naturopath or homeopath. But a new holistic pharmacy expanding in the Bay Area combines the best of both those worlds, offering traditional pharmaceuticals and alternative medicines as well as experts capable of dispensing advice on the use of Western, Asian and alternative medicine products.

Barry Perzow, chief executive officer and chairman of the rapidly growing Pharmaca Integrative Pharmacy _ eight have opened in the Bay Area in the last year _ has been in the natural food business for 40 years. He started with a chain he founded called Capers in Canada. Several transformations later, he moved to Boulder, Colo., and founded Pharmaca.

"I realized that one segment of the retail industry that has not changed in 40 or 50 years was pharmacies," he said. "I thought the time had come to start a new model that was ready to adapt to the aging population and changing demographics and lifestyles."

A 2004 survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 36 percent of U.S. residents over 18 use some form of complementary or alternative medicine — therapies or practices not currently considered part of traditional Western medicine.

In the last year, Pharmaca has opened stores in the Rockridge district of Oakland, as well as Berkeley, Los Gatos, Mill Valley, Monterey, Napa, Novato, San Francisco and Sonoma. It has three stores so far in Southern California, in Irvine, La Jolla, and Pacific Palisades. Perzow could be on to something. His other main competitor, Elephant Pharm, has only four stores in the Bay Area. Besides its Berkeley base, it has opened stores in Los Altos, San Rafael and Walnut Creek.

Pharmaca boasts a wide array of products, and everyone on staff is a specialist, Perzow said. "Our staff is made up of professional health care practitioners, from the pharmacists themselves to the naturopathic physicians, nutritionists, herbalists, homeopathic doctors and aestheticians," Perzow said.

Pharmaca's naturopathic physician, Dr. Suen Sohn, said she and her colleagues do not diagnose. Their role is to advise on dosages of herbal and mineral supplements and counsel on whether these complement prescription drugs customers are already taking.

“Prescription drugs may deplete nutrients and that customer may have extra needs for supplements,” Sohn said. “Also, people often read something about a herbal product and they come in curious for more information, so we offer guidance.”

She also said that the pharmacy offers the full range of Chinese herbal formulations in capsule form. Sleeping aids, aromatherapy remedies, Bach flower essences, dietary supplements, lotions and shampoos are among the offerings on the shelves. Many products are formulated to eliminate toxins and stimulate the body's internal cleansing process to counteract substance abuse, unbalanced diets or exposure to pollution.

The company accepts most major insurance programs for prescription products. Along with traditional over-the-counter products, the store sells specialized products called professional lines, which are typically offered for sale only in the offices of doctors or alternative medicine practitioners. Products such as Metagenics, Pure Encapsulation and Thorne are kept in closed glass cases since purchase is based on a practitioner's advice.

Pharmaca also sells beauty products sold in spas and high-end salons, and Perzow promises its own line of beauty products will be out in June. Much of the store's products — from greeting cards to Pharmaca's brand of chocolate — are environmentally friendly and organic. He plans to add expanded selections of organic baby and pet products in the future.

Three Pharmaca stores in the Bay Area, including the one in Rockridge, are partnering with the Teleosis Institute in Berkeley in a pilot program that disposes of unused or expired medications in an environmentally safe way.

Perzow plans to open one store a month throughout the West until the current 20 stores number 100. He is looking at several sites in Sacramento, San Jose, Menlo Park and Danville. His expansion plans have depended on venture capital. Pharmaca recently received an infusion of \$20 million from Highland Capital Partners in Lexington, Mass., and Physic Ventures in San Francisco.

Tom Stenberg, Highland Capital's managing general partner, said Pharmaca was an attractive investment because research showed it has “potent customer appeal.” Pharmaca stores had healthy profits and are part of a fast growing market, he said.

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BAY AREA PHARMACA LOCATIONS

- 1744 Solano Ave., Berkeley. Store: 510-527-8929. Pharmacy: 510-26-2452
- 5729 College Ave., Oakland. Store and pharmacy: 510-740-1468
- 925 Cole St., San Francisco. Store: 415-661-1216. Pharmacy: 415-661-3003