

# southern NEIGHBOR

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

:: chapel hill:carrboro:durham:pittsboro:hillsborough

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## Breaking the Chain: Rx for Success for Independent Pharmacies

By Melanie Raskin

I don't know why we called it Joe's. Our neighborhood independent drugstore (yes, it was in a neighborhood) in the mid-sized Eastern North Carolina town where I grew up was owned by Mike Brown, but, to us kids, it was Joe's. It was a place where you could bicycle to pick up a prescription...and get a fresh-dipped ice cream cone and a birthday gift for Mom that suited a 12-year-old's budget. But, more than that, it was a place where Mr. Brown – and everyone who shopped there – knew your name, how well you were doing in school and all the ways your kid broth-

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## The Southern Neighbor Guide to Terrible Holiday Gifts

By Glenn McDonald

Holiday gift giving is a time for thoughtful, somber reflection. You consider the important people in your life – family, friends, loved ones – and carefully consider what they like, what you like about them and how best to express your appreciation and affection. Then you attach a dollar value and wade into the retail swamp of the holiday-industrial complex.

Good times, good times. In my several decades navigating the holiday gift-giving season, I've been on both the giving and receiving end of many breathtakingly awful presents, bestowals and dubious gestures. Forthwith, a guide to bad gift ideas for the holiday season....

### The Passive Aggressive Gift

A perennial holiday favorite, the Passive Aggressive Gift is a time-honored way for friends and family – often in-laws, it seems – to express their percolating displeasure with your lifestyle choices. Hair dye kits and household cleaning supplies are always nice. Gift certificates for weight-loss programs, plastic surgery boutiques, detox centers – these are all valid choices.

But as always, it's the personal touch that matters. One genre to consider is the self-help book. Buying someone else a self-help book is a genuinely confusing thing to do. It communicates a kind of hostile recursive logic: "You're doing this wrong, and because I care about you, you really should fix it on your own." It's an elegant method of communicating barely sublimated contempt.

GIFTS, page 2




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**GIFTS**

Some books to consider: “Winning Lotto/Lottery for Everyday Players” is a subtle way to express your opinion on a family member’s ultimate earning potential. Your new son-in-law, say! “Reading for Dummies” pretty much speaks for itself. Or for a spicier flavor of passive aggression, consider “More Joy: An Advanced Guide to Solo Sex.” (These are all actual books, by the way.)

**The Vaguely Creepy Gift**

That last title leads us to our next

category, The Vaguely Creepy Gift, with which I have some personal experience. For Christmas of my senior year in high school, I received a curious envelope from a certain relative who shall remain nameless. Let’s just say her name rhymes with “Shmandma.”

Inside was a certificate for a grave plot – already purchased – and a brochure with several delightful headstones and memorial markers to choose from. This wasn’t a joke, I was assured by my parents. “Shmandma,” you see, was an eminently practical woman, a survivor of the Great Depression, and she brooked little-to-no nonsense when it came to life’s pragmatic concerns. Fun gal, Shmandma.

If you’re in the market for a creepy present idea, Google up the Morbid Anatomy Gift Shop. In addition to many alarming taxidermy specimens, you can order the “Babies in Jars” limited edition daguerreotype, a nice pair of 19th century hearse finials, or the lovely “Syphilis and Smallpox Wax Moulage Set.” Again, these are actual products. All major credit cards accepted.

**The Time Bomb Gift**

If you’re shopping for families with young children, remember that louder always equals better when considering musical instruments and electronic toys. Such items seem innocuous on Christmas morning, but gradually reveal their nature as time-delayed noise bombs as the new year takes hold.

Also bear in mind that, with big-ticket items, you want to select for humongous and unwieldy playthings that require hours of assembly and/or several thousand dollars annually in D-cell batteries. Giant remote-control vehicles, say. I’m not saying my wife’s family specializes in these kinds of gifts, but I’m also not not saying it.

Or this is always fun: Pre-school kids, for some obscure evolutionary reason, absolutely love repetition. As far as they’re concerned, the only thing better than watching a DVD for the 20th time at maximum volume is watching it for the 800th time at maximum volume. As such, Barney the Dinosaur DVDs are essentially weapons. Having been on both the giving and receiving end, I can attest that this really is the nuclear option of bad gift giving.

**The Astoundingly Cheap Gift**

Also known as the It’s The

Thought That Counts gift, these are the kinds of presents you can acquire at thrift shops, dollar stores, recycling centers or – in a pinch – from whatever is within arm’s length of wherever you’re sitting at gift-wrapping time.

For my holiday giving dollar, nothing says “I love you, as far as you know” like office supplies. Rubber bands, paper clips, ballpoint pens – your recipient can’t deny the essential utility of these items. Old printer cartridges are a good option, too. If you really want to get crafty, gather up all those used and expired gift cards laying around the house and put them back in circulation. When they prove to be worthless, you can just blame hackers, or the banks, or Obama.

For older gift-givers, here’s a handy option if you need a quick present for the grandkids. Salvation Army stores are usually crowded with outdated technology like 8-track tapes, VCRs and transistor radios. Dust these off, polish them up and present them with a flourish. When the young people start making the inevitable jokes (“What is this, Christmas, 1973?”), act confused and wounded and claim that you just can’t keep up with the young people today.

**The Me Gift**

Another true story: When we first moved to the area, I bought the missus a Durham Bulls season ticket package for Christmas. I knew it was wrong. I knew it was self-serving. But I did it anyway, because like

many so red-blooded American males, I’m dim and inattentive and have no idea what I’m doing in the run-up to major holidays.

The “season ticket incident,” as it’s now known around the house, was a personal failing, but I’m happy to say that I’m much, much better at gift-giving these days. This is primarily due to the fact that my wife, upon receiving the season ticket package, suggested I undertake an entirely un-merry and anatomically impossible holiday activity. As such, I cannot in good conscience recommend The Me Gift for the holidays, personal experience being what it is.

But look – bad gift-giving is more an art than a science, ultimately. If you think you can get away with a self-serving gift idea, go for it. Terrible gift ideas can add texture to the holiday season, introducing exciting new vistas of interpersonal dynamics, lingering resentments and the possibility of blunt head trauma.

And if you’re really, really stuck? Just give socks. Everybody needs socks.



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Dave Smithwick and Kathy Duszynski of Southern Village Pharmacy

**PHARMACIES**

er drove you crazy.

Today, you'll find the Joes' have been replaced by the big chain pharmacies. Even Sutton's Drug Store, a Franklin Street institution for more than 90 years, recently sold its pharmacy business to CVS, one of two big chain pharmacies on Franklin Street. In the squeeze by corporate healthcare to leverage profits by partnering with chain drug stores, it can be hard to rationalize going it alone. But that's just what people are doing. Sure, they're pharmacists but, at heart, they're entrepreneurs enticed by the freedom (and pure pleasure) of running a small independent business.

For David Smithwick, R.Ph., of Chapel Hill's Southern Village Pharmacy, it was time. After 13 years in the corporate sector, he was ready to pursue his dream when he graduated from pharmacy school in the early 1990s. "I wanted the flexibility and independence to provide service the way I see fit,"

he explains. "If I feel like my customer service isn't up to par, I can hire people to help me deliver the service I want. If I'm part of a chain, my headcount might get cut even though I'm busy. Now, I have more flexibility to respond to customer needs, stock the products I want and staff up, as needed."

Greg Vassie, pharmacist and owner/partner of Pittsboro Discount Drugs and two other pharmacies for 10 years, agrees. "I worked at a big chain drugstore and they were more concerned with high volume," he says. "Now, as an independent, I can meet patients instead of meet quotas, and there's more freedom and less stress."

For Lydia Mikhaylyants, who worked in big chains for six years and is now owner and pharmacist at Governors Pharmacy in Chapel Hill, it's all about her patients. "When you work for a big company, they have certain measures you have to meet and you often feel rushed and don't spend as much time with patients," she states. "Now, I have time for my patients.

I know their names and addresses, their doctors, their conditions, their families and their medicines, which means I'm doing my job well and taking care of people the way I intend."

All three pharmacies do some compounding, an essential component of the business for more than 100 years. "Compounding is making products that aren't commercially available," says Vassie. "It's also a way of individualizing medicines. If a child is sick and doesn't like the medicine, we turn it into a lollipop or flavor it or create a different delivery system so the child will take it. Manufactured medicine comes in certain dosages but what if the patient needs a different level? We can create different dosages, forms and strengths to meet the patient's need." Most compounding is used to create dermatology products, creams, ointments, mouthwashes and hormone replacement therapies.

While the disadvantages are what you'd expect, the risk of running a small business and, of course, competition (bigger chain stores can have more buying power with insurance companies and may be able to negotiate better on reimbursement rates), the pharmacists are enthusiastic about the advantages of an independent pharmacy to customers. Smithwick creates an orderly and friendly experience with prompt service and plenty of time to ask questions.

"We're about relationship," Vassie muses. "Not that big-box pharmacists don't do a good job, but, sometimes management forces them to make numbers rather than connect with individuals." For Mikhaylyants, the advantage is safety. "I can see that by taking more time, I'm helping people and improving quality of life, especially in my older population. They might take up to

10 drugs – all with possible interactions and side effects. It's great to help manage that and make a difference."

The future is exciting – and all about caring for the patient. Vassie looks forward to being part of an electronically connected medical team and collaborating with physicians to deliver excellent patient outcomes. He's also interested in preventive medicine such as weight management and cholesterol and blood pressure screenings. Mikhaylyants is eager to work with pharmacogenomics, potentially reimbursable genetic testing using a

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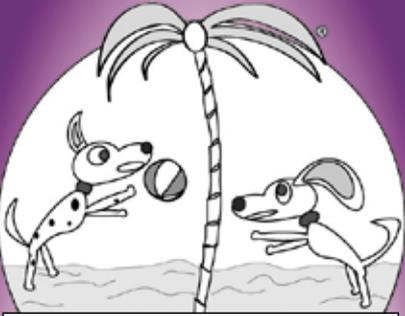


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simple cheek swab of a patient to see which enzymes – and so, which medicines – will work best for that individual. It's a very personalized model of healthcare that can accelerate finding the right, most easily tolerated drug.

In a world where every street corner boasts a big chain drugstore, Mikhaylyants still feels independents are increasingly relevant. She's right. According to the NCPA, National Community Pharmacists Association, nearly half of prescriptions are filled by independent pharmacies. "Patients benefit so much when a community pharmacy is watching out for them, making sure they're taking the right medicines the right way, remembering negative reactions and allergies," Mikhaylyants concludes. "And people are craving community; patients often stop by to just say hi. We're the most easily accessible health professional customers have, a simple phone call away, able to give immediate feedback. And we're always willing to talk."

**What You Can Expect From an Independent Pharmacy**

- \*They'll know your name (and your kids' names and your dog's name and....) That's the whole reason they went independent in the first place. Which leads to point # 2....
- \*You'll get unparalleled customer service. Because they're independent, they're able to choose to spend more time with customers, really getting to know you and your needs.
- \*They consider themselves part of your medical home and will strive to make sure you get exactly what you need, exactly how you need it.
- \*For the most part, you'll pay the same price as in the big chain stores: Co-pays don't change.



Greg Vassie of Pittsboro Discount Drugs.

- \*They don't carry everything a big chain drugstore does: no toys, groceries, make-up and discounted Thanksgiving decorations. Most focus primarily on medicines, medical aids, vitamins, herbals and the occasional home product.
- \*They don't have the extensive hours that big chain stores do – that's another reason they went independent.
- \*To a person, they love what they do and, more importantly, how they do it. And it shows!

**Ready to declare your independence? Check out these area independent pharmacies:**

Southern Village Pharmacy, Chapel Hill  
 southernvillagepharmacy.com

Governors Pharmacy, Chapel Hill  
 governorspharmacy.com

Carrboro Family Pharmacy, Carrboro  
 carrborofamilypharmacy.com/

Pittsboro Discount Drugs, Pittsboro  
 919-542-7283

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