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How Stores Can Deploy Technology at Multiple Locations

Centrally managing store hardware helps retailers expand while delivering unparalleled customer service.



by **Erin Brereton**

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

For [Medly Pharmacy](#), an innovative upstart in the prescription fulfillment business, growth — and lots of it — is the order of the day.

Based in New York, the company offers medication home delivery and a state-of-the-art mobile app that lets patients easily manage their prescriptions. Launched as a digital pharmacy, in recent years Medly has been rapidly expanding its footprint of brick-and-mortar retail stores up and down the East Coast; its seventh retail location opened in Raleigh, N.C., in January, and more growth is planned.

Key to the company's expansion is a consistent, all-but-templated

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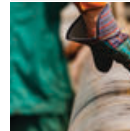
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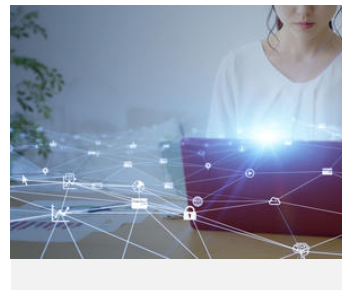


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key to the company's expansion is a consistent, all-out, templated approach to deploying store technology — networking technology, in particular, but other types of store hardware as well, according to David Bour, Medly's director of IT and information security.

"We have to be able to scale efficiently, to almost copy and paste the network," Bour says. "It's hard to grow at the pace we are if you don't standardize the networking equipment."

Medly works with its technology provider, CDW, to ensure that each new location receives everything it needs to operate a store, including a [Meraki](#) network stack, [HPE servers](#), [Poly phones](#), surveillance cameras, [Acer](#) and [HP desktops](#), and [Zebra Technologies](#) printers for processing prescriptions and printing labels. Stores are also outfitted with [Synology NAS](#) technology for pharmacy infrastructure and backing up camera data.

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Challenge, he says. "We couldn't just go with the cheapest device. We didn't want anyone to be able to access sensitive data; that comes down to segmenting your IoT and printers. We wanted it to be walled off."

In addition, new hires receive [Apple MacBook](#) or [Microsoft Surface](#) laptops, and pharmacy delivery workers are given [iPad](#) devices.

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Establishing the network at each new location is simple because Meraki automates the process, Bour says. "Meraki makes things that are normally difficult very simple. If I wanted to set up dynamic routing between our sites, Meraki is more or less plug and play — define the network, say who's participating and they handle the rest."



Each new location may have some unique needs that CDW fills, but for the most part, the stores' tech requirements are now standardized, which simplifies the process of equipping them, Bour says. "The term I came up with was 'pharmacy in a box.'"

Consistency Is Key for Growing Retailers

Medly's approach to equipping its stores with tech is a smart one for growing retailers, says Jon Duke, research vice president of retail insights research at [IDC](#). "Consistency certainly is the intent," Duke says. "It offers consistent data, consistent maintenance, integration between systems; employee training is a lot simpler. If you have different packages in different stores, it's harder to move

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employees around who may be less familiar with one system versus another."

That consistency with tech is important for another reason: In-store experiences can encourage customer loyalty – or have a decidedly damaging effect. Fifty-nine percent of U.S. consumers say they'd walk away from a company or product they loved after several bad experiences, [according to PwC](#). Seventeen percent would bail after just one.

Shortly before the pandemic, stores seemed concerned that their efforts to connect with consumers weren't having the desired effect. Less than two-thirds of retail executives said their organizations were delivering consistent or very consistent customer experiences across channels in an early 2020 Oracle survey.



Some major resellers can provide a "store in a box" experience.





Employee mobile technology, such as [handheld inventory management](#) and other solutions, has been a hot investment area in recent years, Duke says.

[Office Depot](#) outfitted its stores with [Zebra TC51](#) mobile computing devices in 2019 as part of a multiyear effort to automate processes and reduce the time spent on noncustomer activities, according to Jonas Stillman, the company's director of store operations. Like all of its in-store hardware, ranging from its networking equipment to the Windows-based PC computer workstations in stores, Office Depot configures its Zebra devices centrally and manages them remotely via its data center.

Instead of restocking shelves after manually examining what's recently been purchased, a custom application on the devices now provides an automated list of items, which are tied to a location in the stockroom so employees know exactly where to find them.

"Because we've streamlined that process, we were able to eliminate half the time it took stores to restock the shelves on a daily basis," Stillman says. "That was a big, big win for us in the early days when we launched the device. We knew that was our biggest gap we had to fill from a process excellence/task reduction standpoint."

"The store associate can search for the feature you're looking for on a printer, for example, and it returns what's in-store or available for delivery, if it's not carried in-store," Stillman says. "One of the most common questions associates get from customers is, 'What is the difference between printer X and Y?' They can scan two items with the application, and it shows how the items are different or similar."

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Deploying Solutions With an Identical Setup

Over the past 12 years, [Tops Markets](#) has increased its total grocery store locations in New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont to more than 160 through various acquisitions. Instituting Tops' technology systems in new locations is a standard part of the company's transition strategy, says Mike Metz, vice president of IT.

"That's actually been our go-to-market strategy, to be consistent from day one," Metz says. "All stores are pretty much carbon

copies of each other. The only thing that varies is the physical size of the store and whether we're going to put 15 registers in a store or 10."

To help equip its new stores, Tops Markets works with a third party to configure and ship hardware to new locations. The approach has allowed Tops to standardize the store opening process, Metz says: "We could almost open a store in our sleep now, because everybody understands exactly what they're doing and nothing has changed from the last store we opened."

Tops' point-of-sale system is run by [IBM](#) controllers. Customers can tap their phones and check out with [Apple](#), [Google](#) or [Samsung](#) Pay, something many appreciated during the pandemic, Metz says, because it made touchless payment possible.

Tops' uniform approach to technology has also helped facilitate the company's tech maintenance efforts, Metz says.

"Having consistency reduces cost, because our inventory of spare parts is the same; we don't have to have inventory for multiple platforms," he says. "It's financially an advantage because you're supporting a large number of items, and typically vendors will work with you on volume discounts."

Central Configuration Enables Mobile Work

The devices are generally configured in an identical way; the only thing a store location can do is change the volume settings, brighten the screens or reset the devices if there are issues with them, Stillman says. Software updates are distributed centrally via [VMware's AirWatch](#) enterprise [mobile device management](#) solution.

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"We're consistently making tweaks and changes to the internal application we use in stores," Stillman says. "The MDM gives us the ability to push out any internal advancements we have."

Although social distancing requirements meant a number of retailers likely pulled back on in-store investments last year, there's been interest within the industry in some technology – particularly types that touch on omnichannel capabilities, such as [curbside pickup](#), according to Duke.

curbside pickup, according to Duke.

To quickly provide curbside service, Office Depot first used a rudimentary back-end notification process it built with its IT partners, according to Stillman, which allowed customers to park

and push a notification button that had been emailed to them. A message was then sent to all store associates' Zebra devices to let them know a customer was outside.

Roughly a month later, the company refined the functionality of the devices, which Stillman doesn't expect will fade away anytime soon.

"Now, stores get a name, order information, how long someone has been waiting outside; that way, they know what to bring out to you to close the loop on the order," he says. "Curbside fulfilled a need, but customers have realized, 'This is actually really easy.' We see curbside pickup as a permanent part of our platform."

The Zebra devices have a much lower failure rate than the legacy mobile units the store had previously used, according to Stillman. Less repair downtime has meant Office Depot has been able to provide seamless curbside service and other customer experiences — and shoppers have taken note.

"What we've seen, based on comments, from a qualitative perspective, and even in the scoring from the provider that does our survey, is customers get a sense that more people are working on the sales floor, even though we have not really changed our labor model," Stillman says. "All we've done is given stores the tools to spend less time on tasks and more on customer service — and that is having a tangible effect."

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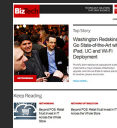


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