Skorman's pipe dream: Nonprofit pushes for tobacco sales exclusively in Rx

BERKELEY, Calif. — The former founder of Elephant Pharmacy once again is seeking to revolutionize drug store retailing. This time, it's as part of a nonprofit health advocacy group called HealthyPharmacies.org that will attempt to boost the prominence of community pharmacy as readily accessible healthcare resource centers through health-oriented signage and merchandising/marketing pilots.

Its first order of business: to develop pilot programs that would mandate the sale of tobacco exclusively through pharmacy, and merchandised adjacent to the pharmacy counter — sans the Marlboro or Camel point-of-purchase signage presently located along the front-end of many pharmacy operations. According to Skorman, as many as 40 local cities and municipalities across 18 states have expressed interest in the concept, which Skorman expected would significantly reduce smoking, while at the same time cement the notion that only pharmacists should be allowed to dispense such dangerous drugs as tobacco.

Skorman expected opposition to this concept from the tobacco lobby, and in anticipation has signed Washington PR firm Fenton Communications, which represents such clients as the American Lung Association and has some experience promoting anti-tobacco initiatives. But the larger opposition may come from convenience store chains. "You can picture having to pass laws that would subsidize convenience stores for a while ... because some of them will get hurt a lot," Skorman said.

According to Nielsen Group data for the 52 weeks ended Oct. 3, tobacco product sales totaled $3.5 billion across convenient stores, up 23.1%. Smoking cessation product sales totaled $364.3 million, up 0.5%.

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Such an initiative, if proven successful, would significantly drive sales of both categories exclusively at retail pharmacy, at least in the beginning.

"I started Elephant in Berkeley for the same reason I'm founding this company — the mission's the same — to reform, transform and revitalize America's pharmacy system," Skorman, executive director of the newly minted nonprofit, told Drug Store News. As part of that initiative, HealthyPharmacies.org will develop signage with health-related messages to educate consumers about good health, and also will work toward identifying healthier-for-you products that retailers may include as part of their product mix.