Trust in pharmacy – crisis of confidence?

When faced with a health need, why do clients decide to consult one health profession rather than another? Why are they loyal to a particular pharmacy or pharmacist? Is trust an important patronage motive? Does it play a significant role in influencing client preference or loyalty? And how well are pharmacists doing as trusted professionals?

There is no recent research reported about pharmacist trust in South Africa. However, in the USA, pharmacists have consistently been voted as one of the most trusted professionals. Only nurses have continuously beaten them for the highest honour. Impressive!

Some suggest that this accolade should be treated with caution. They contend that the public do not perceive that the relationship with pharmacists involves high risk, i.e. there is nothing much to trust or distrust. Is this the reason for the high rating?

Why do clients support a specific pharmacy? Is it because of low prices, easy convenience or short waiting time? Or is it because of their trusting relationship with their pharmacist? What is the situation in your pharmacy? Why do you lose customers to competitors?

In 2007, adults in the USA spent $33.9 billion out-of-pocket on visits to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners and purchases of CAM products, classes, and materials. This excludes purchases of vitamins and minerals. What does this say about the public trust in evidence based medicine?

Is pharmacy facing a crisis of confidence?

‘Building Trust’ is a phrase that is often heard in professional circles. It is used synonymously with ‘ethical standards’ and ‘professional status’. But are the implications of this ‘soft skill’ really appreciated? Would you be more interested in this topic if you were convinced that developing trust directly influences economic performance?

How’s this for starters? – Did you know that organisations with high levels of trust outperform organisations with low trust by nearly three times?

Think about it. Time is money. When a high-trust level exists, people assume that they can trust services and products. Examine the following list. If you asked these people if they had any doubts, they would always answer “Of course! (Don’t waste my time with stupid questions!)”

- Parachutist: ‘Will your parachute open?’
- Doctor: ‘Is that injection needle clean?’
- Employee: ‘Will you receive your salary at the end of the month?’
- Pharmacist: ‘Are those scheduled tablets of good quality?’

If there was a lack of trust, it would take a lot of time to convince them that there was no reason for concern? A question that is closer to home:

- Do pharmacists make enough money?

What are the perceptions of pharmacy stakeholders? If there was a high level of trust, would they be asking that question? Can you imagine how much time and money would have been saved if there was a high trust relationship between the profession, government officials and politicians?

Can you answer these questions?

If you can answer these questions with confidence, you need read no further.

First question – Can you explain what would happen if you undermined the trust of any of your stakeholder groups (e.g.
your staff, clients, suppliers, investors, private sector and public sector policy makers?) Alternatively, what would be the benefits of building trust? Linked to this question is ‘do your stakeholders trust you individually, and do they trust pharmacists in general?’

Second question – Do you know how to create trust? Conversely, do you know how to destroy trust?

What is Trust?
Trust is a characteristic of a relationship. It has two ingredients:6

1. Character (who you are, your intention and integrity)
2. Competence (what you can do and your evidence/track record of reliability and ethics)

When trust is built into a relationship, it gives confidence to those involved, and reinforces loyalty. There is transparency, faith, empathy, concern and caring. Behaviour is easy to predict. Parties accept responsibility for the advice they give. There is scope for mistakes – but through understanding and forgiveness, the relationship grows.

When there is distrust, there is suspicion, doubt, disbelief and uncertainty. Behaviour is unpredictable. For starters, use the Trustometer in Figure 1 to rate the level of the trust relationship with your different stakeholders.

How important is trust?
Is it really that important? Is it the one thing that changes everything?5

Benefits of trust
In a nutshell, if you have created trusting relationships with your stakeholders, you stand to benefit in many ways:
1. Everything will be done so much quicker. The doubt and suspicion that drags decision making is removed.
2. Professional status is recognised, respected and reinforced with every client interaction.
3. Credibility, and opinion leadership status is enhanced and this brings about client loyalty.
4. Economic status is improved since your stakeholders will want to ensure that you are appropriately reimbursed for your professional services.
5. More productive working environment with greater loyalty from staff.
6. You will be more valued by your community.

Covey6 argues that the ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust with all stakeholders is the critical leadership competency of the new global economy.7 Take a moment to reflect on the challenges facing political leadership in this country. Also consider the fundamentals that must be in place to claw our way out of this recession. Can you see the difference if the relationship is one of high or low trust?

Consequences of distrust
On the other side of the coin, if you have not managed to develop trusting relationships, or you indulge in distrust behaviour:
1. It takes forever to gain the support and consensus of others. You are continuously negotiating, pleading, demanding and it seems to make no difference. Everything moves at frog speed – one jump forward, two jumps back.
2. Your professional status is questioned. There is suspicion about your intentions and your integrity. There is doubt about your professional competence, about the value you claim to be adding. There are suggestions that you could be replaced by a technician or a robot.
3. You have no opinion leader status, no loyalty. Advice is sought from other members of the health community or the internet. Clients support you for convenience or low price – nothing else.
4. Decision makers do not consider that you play a significant role in the system, your motives are not trusted, and the lowest possible reimbursement is negotiated.
5. Your economic status is threatened.

Weighing up these criteria, one must ask to what extent is there a crisis of confidence in pharmacy in South Africa.

Future articles identify many ways in which to improve trust. For example, your self trust, your trust behaviour with others, improving trust with the community and marketing trust as part of the brand image of pharmacy.

References:
4. This article has been strongly influenced by the writings of Stephen MR Covey:The SPEED of trust: http://www.coveylink.com/about-coveylink/how-we-define-trust.php. Readers are urged to read this excellent publication.