Thrifty White’s Bob Narveson Brings Unique Experience to NACDS Chairmanship

By Mark Hendricks

As president and CEO for Thrifty White, one of the largest companies in the country to operate under a 100 percent employee stock ownership plan, Bob Narveson is quite comfortable with the all-for-one, one-for-all mindset that such enterprises require. That experience should allow him to hit the ground running in April when he officially settles into the chairman’s role for the National Association of Chain Drug Stores.

“I believe if you want to be heard you need to be involved,” Narveson says. “Many chains today are bringing unique and creative ways to improve patient care and medication adherence. We need to make sure that those programs are seen and recognized.”

Narveson brings a wealth of pharmaceutical business savvy to the NACDS table. His 31 years of industry experience include eight years working for Osco Drug in North Dakota, South Dakota, Idaho and Colorado. In addition to his various leadership roles at Thrifty White over the last 23 years, Narveson has also been an NACDS board member and executive committee member since 2009; a board member and vice chair for the Chain Drug Consortium; and chairman for the Premier Value Alliance.

For some, three decades in one industry can lead to stagnation. They become set in their ways, slow to recognize change and even slower to accept it. That is simply not how Narveson operates.

“There are a lot of great concepts that can be learned if you open your mind to new ideas,” Narveson states. “The people here at NACDS are very bright individuals and they didn’t get here by accident. Learning to accept a changing industry and adapt quickly is the key.”

Not Like the Movies

Narveson grew up in Fargo, North Dakota. Although Hollywood made the area famous, the Fargo Narveson knows is a far cry from the somewhat quirky locale created by the Coen Brothers in their 1996 cinematic classic. His father worked in the heating and cooling industry and his mother was an Office Manager for the city of Fargo.

“It’s not like the movies, doncha know,” Narveson says, speaking a phrase worthy of his roots.

After high school, Narveson moved to neighboring Minnesota and received his bachelor’s degree from Moorhead State in 1984. He also met the person who would help him write the next several chapters in his life.

“I have been married to my best friend, Steph, for 30 years this October and she has been my most important...
influence,” Narveson says. “Steph has always supported me, moving throughout the country in our early years with Osco Drug. She’s never complained and has always supported our family.”

Today, Stephanie Narveson is a registered nurse, a muscle activation techniques specialist and a yoga-fitness instructor. She and Narveson have a daughter, Krista, who is studying interior design.

“Most importantly, Steph cares for our family with every minute of every day and she is the foundation of our family,” Narveson adds. “I always know I can count on Steph.”

Narveson has also benefited from the examples set by numerous others who have crossed his career path. He places the roughly 1,600 Thrifty White employee-owners at the top of that list.

“I get the privilege to work with them on a daily basis and I really mean it when I say they can accomplish anything they set their minds to do,” Narveson says emphatically.

Thrifty White’s modus operandi, according to Narveson, is to find the best possible people and provide them with an environment where they can grow and prosper. It has helped produce a strong company with minimal turnover.

“We have no finger pointing in this company,” he stresses. “If a mistake is made we fix it and move on. By creating this type of environment we learn from each other every day. More importantly, we believe we can win and will give 100 percent every day.”

In an industry he considers to be “filled with role models,” Narveson singles out Tony Civello (Kerr Drug), Mark Griffin (Lewis Drug), Craig Painter (Kinney Drugs) and George Bartell (Bartell Drugs) among those who have been most influential for him.

“One other gentleman I’d like to add to the list is Bob Loeffler, formerly of HEB,” Narveson says. “Bob is someone who’s got super high integrity and he’s a man of his word. I really respect Bob.”

Opportunity and change come with the pharmaceutical industry territory, which helps fuel Narveson’s enthusiasm. Considering the country’s aging population — 10,000 Americans reach the age of 65 each day — and the changes that will result from the Affordable Care Act as it becomes steadily implemented, Narveson says he has a wealth of motivation for the foreseeable future. He sees the industry as having “not only an opportunity, but an obligation to increase medication adherence and provide face-to-face consultation.” If provided with increased access to the patient, Narveson says, the pharmacist will be an ever-important part of the national healthcare solution.

“If there is opportunity in chaos, then there must be a ton of opportunity here,” Narveson adds with a laugh. “I like the ability to move quickly in the industry. It allows us to develop programs that we would be proud to have our family and friends benefit from and then share those concepts with each other.”

“Disruptive innovation is one of the keys to our industry,” Narveson insists. “If we can set the bar as high as we can and stay on that road we will achieve our goals. As long as we remember it’s all about the patient and healthy outcomes, and we are allowed fair access to the patient, we will do the right thing.”

**The Thrifty White Script**

Narveson says Thrifty White employees are extremely proud of the com-
pany and recognize that reputation and integrity can take a lifetime to build and but a moment to lose. The company foundation is built upon high expectations for the company and the individual and an appetite for tackling new challenges that will improve patient care.

The company works hard to keep the focus on what is being measured, Narveson continues, because people respond to what is being measured.

“Our organization knows we can improve patient care and we want to leave our mark on the industry, not just participate,” Narveson reasons. “This needs to be achieved through grass roots efforts both at the state and federal level. We believe we can win and we never settle for good enough. We live by the saying, ‘It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.’”

Narveson considers whiteboard creativity to be one of the most important tools Thrifty White employees brings to the company table because it allows them to constantly evaluate new areas of growth and identify areas of concern for the organization.

The company currently includes 90 corporate stores and 81 Affiliated Pharmacies. The company and its employees are committed to the communities they serve, Narveson says, because most of them grew up in the Midwest and realize the importance of having a local pharmacy whose ultimate goal is caring for patients.

One example that illustrates Thrifty White’s commitment to providing healthcare services to small rural communities is its numerous telepharmacy sites, the first of which opened in 2003. The telepharmacy concept allows a trained, certified and experienced pharmacy technician to fill and dispense prescription medications after the process has been verified by a registered pharmacist via an audio-video link.

“This arrangement allows a community to continue pharmacy services even though the local drugstore has closed or the community is too small to support a traditional drug store,” Narveson explains. “This technology allows patients to receive their medicine while they wait and still be able to talk to a pharmacist.”

The Thrifty White Ready Refill and Med Sync programs are two other company offerings Narveson likes to tout.

Ready Refill is a program whereby a patient’s medication is automatically refilled each month and available at the store or mailed ahead of time in lieu of waiting at the pharmacy.

Because Ready Refill became such a positive product, Narveson says patients began asking to have multiple prescriptions available at the same time. To meet that need, Thrifty White began offering a synchronized medication refill program it calls Med Sync.

“We believe our services and products must exceed the expectations of our customers,” Narveson says. “Some of our customers said, ‘you know, I’m on four or five drugs and I have to come in on a bunch of different days during the month to pick up my prescriptions. Is there a way you could bring all of those prescriptions together so that I could come in once a month to pick up all of my prescriptions? That would be a lifesaver.’

So that’s what we’ve done, and we’ve got 24,000 customers using the Med Sync process today.”

Thrifty White also offers its programs and services to independent retailers through its Affiliated Pharmacies Program. The program helps the store advertise more effectively, provides access to contracts Thrifty White has with vendors and offers Thrifty White planograms that diagram the company’s merchandising and retailing plans for operating a successful store.

“It’s almost like a franchise, but not quite,” Narveson says. “If you walked into many of those stores you wouldn’t know it’s an independent label store versus a Thrifty White corporate store. In essence, it provides a growth path for us. We’ve purchased a number of those stores, so they’ve become corporate stores. It’s a feeder program for acquisitions for us like the old Walgreens agency stores or Snyder Drugs’ independent store program.”

Thrifty White is also educating future pharmacists through its working relationship with the North Dakota State University College of Pharmacy. To that end, the school and Thrifty White have opened the Thrifty White Concept...
Pharmacy to provide students with unique inside-the-pharmacy experiences that they would not receive at any other pharmacy school in the country.

“The Concept Pharmacy emphasizes the retail community pharmacy practice,” Narveson says. “Students from all four years of the professional program study and experience the latest techniques in areas such as drug distribution systems, telepharmacy, automation, nursing home practice, disease state management and patient education.”

**From Local Store to National Stage**

While programs like Ready Refill and Med Sync add to the company’s toolbox, Narveson believes it’s the ongoing follow-up processes and face-to-face interactions that are key to Thrifty White maintaining an industry-leading medication adherence rate among its customers.

“According to a 12-month study from Virginia Commonwealth University, and depending on the drug class, patients enrolled in the Med Sync program had 3.4 to 6.1 times greater odds of adherence,” Narveson says pointedly.

The company’s success with medication adherence is a prime example of how Thrifty White implements its biggest assets — “our customers and our employee-owners” — to provide the best in professional pharmacy services and unique and innovative practices. As a result, the company is playing an important role in helping the nation address the $290 billion dollars lost annually in avoidable healthcare costs.

“Our process is proving it can keep people more adherent and affect the overall healthcare spend,” Narveson says. “Our employee-owners realized the challenge ahead of us and we chose to become an organization that focused on patient care and healthy outcomes. In order to achieve this, we had to change our existing thought process, along with many of our internal systems. Our company had a paradigm shift that is not only in the best interest of the company, it’s just the right thing to do.”

Developing in its patients the highest
medication adherence rate in the industry helped Thrifty White increase its comparable prescription count by 2.8 percent in 2012. In the years ahead, the company will continue to look for more efficient ways to meet patient needs in areas like Medication Therapy Management (MTM) and Comprehensive Medication Reviews (CMR) and by expanding long-term care, assisted living and independent living services.

The Thrifty White radar also includes new and Innovative packaging solutions in all areas of pharmacy, from short-cycle fills related to long-term care to daily pouch packs in Med Sync and timer caps on traditional vials.

Last year the company completed 12 Healthy Outcomes Store remodels and added 12 ad-flow TVs. More than 65 additional ad-flow TVs are to be installed by June 1 and Slate Tablets have been provided to Thrifty White pharmacies for patient education.

For all of its efforts, Chain Drug Review tabbed Thrifty White as Pharmacy Innovator of the Year for 2012. The company previously received a Best in Class rating from OutcomesMTM.

“We do a good job taking care of our customers and we do a good job with the programs and services we offer,” Narveson said.

A Leading Role for NACDS

Because he believes so strongly in pharmacy’s role in the healthcare industry, Narveson is looking forward to serving his term as NACDS chairman. He believes the organization includes some of the industry’s brightest and hardest working people and that he has been able to help Thrifty White by learning from the experience of his fellow NACDS members.

“By staying involved with NACDS, you can address the current issues before you read about them in the publications,” Narveson says. “The relationships allow you to have a sounding board for ideas and advice. We all learn as much or more from the struggles we face on a daily basis as we do from the successes. With each experience you grow as a person.”

Narveson will bring with him his steadfast belief that improving medication adherence is the best way for the industry to affect the $290 billion avoidable healthcare cost issue. It is a simple concept that he believes needs to be driven home. However, he also plans to continue pushing the pharmacist-provider status issue.

“With the upcoming shortage of M.D.s, we are the key to the front-line efforts in patient care,” Narveson says firmly. “I believe we need to shift from merely providing the prescription to an industry that is measured by the outcomes it achieves through a partnership of the entire healthcare team.”

Narveson will also lead the effort to help NACDS members understand and implement the Affordable Care Act that will dramatically change the healthcare system in the coming years. With 30-40 million more patients potentially brought forward by the legislation, he believes the industry will have to find the most effective way to take care of them by affecting the overall spend and the medication adherence for those individuals.

“And it can be done, it’s just a matter of putting the systems together,” Narveson adds. “What I think the industry is going to do — and I’m hoping and I truly believe this — is move more towards being an outcomes-based industry where a big part of what we do is going to be based upon what the outcome for the patient is. If you take a look at that $290 billion issue at hand, the real issue there is we have to figure out how to keep people compliant.”

Narveson says organizations need to make sure they are up for the challenge and can demonstrate how the industry can improve patient outcomes. He believes sharing data will be the cornerstone to forming effective accountable care organizations (ACOs) and documenting im-
About the Author

Mark Hendricks earned his journalism degree from West Texas State University and has spent 23 years as a communicator and writer for private industry, non-profit organizations and academic/research institutions. He also works as a freelance writer; his stories and articles have been published by a variety of newspapers, magazines and trade publications.

Narveson says the industry is being asked to assume a leadership role in patient care. That means compensation for the additional services pharmacists and pharmacies will be asked to provide will continue to be an issue as it has been for the three decades Narveson has been in the business.

“Compensation has never gone up, so we just need to continue to be more efficient and work harder to be able to take care of the patient,” Narveson concedes.

“I always look at the Affordable Care Act as an opportunity to take care of the additional patients that will be coming forward, and when we prove we can do that and we can affect the overall spend, pharmacy will take another step forward at that point in time and become a more important part of the healthcare team.”

Narveson also notes another issue that relates directly to pharmacy’s role in boosting adherence and improving patient health and the healthcare delivery system: NACDS’ commitment to ensuring that pharmacy patients have access to high quality care that meets their needs under Medicare Part D.

Based on input from members and their patients, NACDS is urging CMS to increase its oversight in several key areas of Part D network operations, including preferred networks. The areas include reasonable geographic access, including to preferred pharmacy providers, and assuring in all aspects of network-based care that quality care is maintained.

In addition, Narveson notes that many patients are unaware of the details of pharmacy options under Part D for which they sign up, so it’s important that CMS maintain its vigilance to ensure that beneficiary communications are clear and unambiguous.

Narveson alludes to a quote from the late former Surgeon General C. Everett Coop: Drugs don’t work in patients who don’t take them. Narveson emphasizes that the issues in which NACDS is engaged – from Medicare Part D to implementation of the Affordable Care Act — can help address that reality.

Of Leisure and Legacy

When Narveson gets time away from the office and boardroom, he likes to spend family time at Leech Lake in Walker, Minn. He also enjoys pheasant hunting, dog training and simply laughing and telling stories with friends and family.

When the day comes for him to call it a career, Narveson wants to be remembered as someone “who gave it 100 percent,” whether he was working with his fellow Thrifty White employee-owners to develop an industry-leading company or working with organizations like NACDS to create a patient-focused industry model that measures adherence and truly benefits the patient.

“It is very important to me that we pass on the management of Thrifty White to a qualified team of individuals that does not settle for ‘good enough’ and always remembers that reputation takes a life time to build and a second to lose,” Narveson says.

He also hopes to spend more time with Steph and Krista, both in Minnesota and in someplace a bit warmer.

“I’ll work more with the dogs and spend time hunting and fishing with friends, but I know deep down there will be times I hang around the Thrifty office and tell them how it used to be in the good old days.”
Bob and his daughter Krista enjoy a baseball game.

One of Narveson’s leisure activities is hunting pheasants in the Fall with friends, family and colleagues. Pictured on a memorable hunt, from left, are: Top row: Dan Narveson, Roger Palmer, Gary Dewhirst, Dan Kwapinski, Tim Kremer, Mark Nelson, Jeff Lindoo, Tony Leysrinig. Bottom row: Justin Heiser, Mark Hardy, Bob Narveson, Kevin Hoffman, Paul Hochhalter, and Larry Palmer.

Bob takes part in this year’s NACDS RxImpact Day on Capitol Hill. With him, from left, are: Tim Erdle, Thrifty White Executive Vice President of Store Operations; Dave Rueter, Thrifty White Executive Vice President of Personnel; Tim Weippert, Thrifty White Executive Vice President of Pharmacy; Justin Heiser, Vice President of Pharmacy Operations; Morton Kondracke, Commentator for Fox News; Andy Schaaf, Thrifty White Pharmacy Manager; Mike McBride, Senior Director Industry Relations, Upsher-Smith Laboratories; and Mike Duteau, Vice President of Pharmacy Operations, Kinney Drugs.

Thrifty White is educating future pharmacists through its working relationship with the North Dakota State University College of Pharmacy. Shown with Bob, from left, are: Tim Weippert, Executive Vice President of Pharmacy, Tim Erdle, Executive Vice President of Store Operations, Tanya Schmidt, Central Sites Operation Manager; and Katti Kraemer, Central Fill.

Bob had the privilege of spending some time with Baseball Hall of Famer Harmon “Killer” Killebrew prior to his death in May 2011.