

## Starside Pharmacy

# Even robots speak Chinese in Starside's Flushing pharmacies

By Christopher Kean

New York—For Peter Koo, owner of three thriving pharmacies in a largely Chinese neighborhood in Flushing, Queens, success hasn't come simply by stocking his stores with pearl milk tea and other Taiwanese delicacies.

All three of his Starside Pharmacy stores, for example, feature robotic drug dispensing machines that can print out Chinese language labels for his non-English-speaking customers. The machines, coupled with a complement of full-time pharmacy technicians, have enabled Mr. Koo to deliver the type of one-on-one personal service that his ethnic Chinese customer base requires.

Mr. Koo is the son of immigrants who fled mainland China in 1952 for Hong Kong, where the family focused their attention on two basic values—education and savings. When he was 17, Mr. Koo was sent to the United States to attend the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. The family had saved enough to afford the first year of college tuition; Mr. Koo had to pay for the rest of his six years at Albuquerque.

In 1991, after working many years in a hospital pharmacy, Mr. Koo seized upon a chance to get into retail pharmacy. When Mr. Koo bought Starside Pharmacy in the New York City borough of Queens, the clientele was predominantly Hispanic. But a wave of immigration from Taiwan quickly changed the neighborhood's demographics; the number of Chinese doubled in Flushing during the 1990s.

Focused on building a client base within the Chinese immigrant community, Mr. Koo saw his business volume increase steadily. In 1998, he opened his second store, and early in 2002, Mr. Koo opened his third pharmacy.

### Customizing to Customer Needs

Mr. Koo employs staff with strong linguistic skills. Staff members need to speak Mandarin, as well as Cantonese or Taiwanese. "Language is a key part of the service that we provide," Mr. Koo said.

To deal with pharmacy volumes of 300 to 400 scripts a day, on average, Mr. Koo has invested in ScriptPro SP 200 robotic dispensing machines for all three stores. "If our staff is just counting pills at the volume of scripts that we are filling, there are too many opportunities for mistakes or burnout after a long day," Mr. Koo said.



Peter Koo, R.Ph., Owner of Starside Pharmacy

The ScriptPro machines are equipped with Chinese language software, which can be used to print labeling information in Chinese characters.

The front ends of Mr. Koo's pharmacies contain most common over-the-counter products as well as an extensive inventory of traditional Chinese remedies. These are common household items in China and Taiwan. Mr. Koo also stocks popular Asian health and beauty products—again, so that customers can have the option to buy familiar items from home.

Mr. Koo is considering a fourth store. "The community can support at least one more pharmacy," he said. "And if I don't hurry up and open another one, someone else will."



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