

Ronald G. Cameron

Ronald G. Cameron, '57, never took any classes in economics or finance when pursuing his pharmacy degree. But while he was working as a rotating pharmacist in suburban Los Angeles, his innate business sense helped him recognize the market niche that would define his career for the next three decades.

As a pharmacist serving a three-store chain in Van Nuys, California, Cameron would work two days in one store, two in a second, and one in the third, giving other employees the chance to take their days off.

"That's where the wheels started turning," he says.

Instead of the rotating employee system, Cameron thought a temporary agency could supply pharmacists to fill in for people who wanted vacations, needed sick time, or required extended leaves of absence. Ironically, it was when a different business venture failed that he had the opportunity to put this plan into action and become the chief executive officer of the nation's first—and largest—pharmacist's registry.

Cameron had planned to buy a pharmacy where he had once worked in Denver, Colorado. Although he had met with the owner and had a handshake agreement to buy the drugstore, once Cameron quit his Van Nuys job and drove to Denver, the terms of the sale suddenly changed. Chagrined, Cameron backed out of the deal and returned to Los Angeles.

"So here I am in L.A. I have no job; I have no apartment. All of my stuff is in storage in Denver. So I decided then and there that I would take the money that I was going to use to buy this pharmacy, and I would open a temporary pharmacy services business."

In January 1970, he launched Cameron and Co. Inc., which billed itself as "The Pharmacist's Registry." He was the sole employee, and his previous employer was his sole client. Business poked along at first while Cameron tried to persuade prospective clients to buy into his idea.

Cameron discovered that he wasn't the only pharmacist who had no formal business training. It took him nearly five years to begin convincing clients that it was cheaper for them to pay his temporary pharmacists a few dollars an hour more than they paid their staff employees.

"We don't get a business background," explains Cameron of his fellow pharmacists. "We're not CPAs; we're not accountants. We don't get any classes on finance. So the biggest thing I had to overcome was that pharmacy owners and managers didn't understand what their true cost of labor was. They didn't understand all of the hidden expense items that go along with hiring someone."

Cameron would break down salaries, Social Security expenses, Medicare, state unemployment taxes, and workers' compensation to demonstrate how he was actually saving the client money.

"We had to do that with each and every client we went to, because nobody understood the true cost of labor. And believe me, we still hear that same story 30 years later," he says.

But his efforts have paid off. Today, Cameron and Co. employs more than 500 full- and part-time pharmacists and is used by virtually every major chain store, as well as hos-

pital, retail, and independent settings. The company, now headquartered in Las Vegas, has 30 offices from Hawaii to the East Coast. The workers fill vacancies ranging from one-day emergencies to four-month maternity leaves.

Apart from earning more money and getting better benefits than they would receive by working directly for a chain, the pharmacists who work for Cameron and Co. enjoy the chance to work in a variety of practices without getting embroiled in internal politicking. And with the rise in pharmacies that are open seven days a week, Cameron says his service cuts down on industry burnout.

When he's not running the registry, Cameron makes presentations in a course in pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. He likes to teach in an informal, open-forum style, giving students a real-world glimpse at the kind of settings where they may practice. He also helps to instill some of the business sense that has impacted his own career.

"The university helped me, and it's payback time," says Cameron. "Everybody should give something back in life. I feel it's my obligation." R

