

Carolina Liquid Chemistries

An interview with Patti Shugart, vice president

By Stephen Noonoo

Phil Shugart began Carolina Liquid Chemistries, Brea, Calif, in 1997, recognizing the need for a high-quality, lower-cost alternative reagent source packaged almost identically to the original manufacturer's reagents. Carolina currently creates reagents for use on Beckman Synchron instruments, Olympus instruments, as well as other commonly used chemistry analyzers. CLP recently spoke with its vice president, Patti Shugart, about Carolina's products, philosophy, and direction for the future.



Patti Shugart

Q: How has your focus shifted since the company began?

A: I would not say that it has shifted, but expanded. We make reagents, and this is the core of our business, but we now offer our own chemistry analyzer, the BioLis 24i, and a complete laboratory package for the physician's office laboratory (POL). Our focus has gone from selling reagents to selling reagent systems (instruments and reagents).

No matter how good the quality of our reagents were, we still had to address customer concerns over service and technical support. To address these concerns, we've invested in the development of a strong field service organization and technical support department. Not only did we offer alternative reagents, we had to offer alternative service and support. Once we made the investment, it was logical to start promoting our own chemistry analyzer. The infrastructure was already in place—Carolina Chemistries manufactured reagents, and had a field and technical support structure, so why not market a chemistry analyzer and sell an entire system? Our customers were always asking us when we would get our own chemistry analyzer.

As we started expanding into the physician's office market, we noticed a need to sell the entire laboratory package consisting primarily of chemistry, hematology, and immunoassay analyzers. This way, the POL only has to deal with one technical support department. Of course, we still also provide refurbished equipment and reagents for other platforms.

Q: What is your corporate philosophy?

A: Our philosophy is to provide quality products with an excellent support network at affordable prices. We believe it is important to continuously monitor and improve our level of customer satisfaction and promote a culture of continuing improvement of our products. We stand by our products and our customers.

If a laboratory is falling on hard times, we want to help, not hinder, their ability to sustain their business. If labs don't exist, we don't exist.

Q: Can you tell us anything about the products you are working to develop?

A: It's an exciting time for us. We are working with two international companies on expanding our instrumentation line, and will be offering a much smaller benchtop analyzer with unprecedented technology and an extremely large chemistry analyzer with data-management and sample-processing equipment. We will be expanding our demonstration center in the Piedmont Triangle Research Park in North Carolina to get these new products ready for the market and showcase them.

We are also ready to go live with a laboratory information system

(LIS) that has been put onto the BioLis 24i. Carolina would include up to three interfaces to other laboratory equipment with this option. The LIS will provide technology necessary to consolidate patient results and QC, interface with billing systems and EMR, and a number of useful data-management tools, which will translate to less clerical errors and a better patient experience. Our team of technologists has been working with innovative LIS companies to help bring this concept to the market.

The labs will have a choice of LIS companies to select from. We know that one LIS does not fit all. Our technical consultants will work with the laboratory to determine which LIS is the correct fit for their particular situation. We would also like to invite laboratories interested in this concept to tour our demonstration center.

Q: What factors motivate your company to begin developing a product?

A: Unfulfilled laboratory needs. This month we will be conducting a focus group on physician's office laboratories to confirm that we have identified the most pressing needs of these laboratories and that our approach is realistic. Once we identify the need, we determine if it is good for all concerned. Does it benefit the patient, the laboratory, and the organization? If the answer is yes, do we have the infrastructure to deliver the product? We figure it out, and from there we make it happen.

Q: What factors distinguish your products from others in the chemistry space?

A: We offer the complete line of instruments, reagents, and support for a variety of chemistry instruments, not just one. The BioLis 24i, our newest offering, provides the widest menu in the industry (100 tests) for a benchtop analyzer of its size.

Q: You've recently begun using a new water purification system for the BioLis 24i, rather than importing purified water. What are the benefits of using a system like this?

A: Benchtop systems, unlike the floor models, either use disposable reaction cuvettes or require the use of water cubes to clean the permanent reaction cuvettes. Either option can be costly and not environmentally friendly.

The BioLis is capable of using water cubes. However, we were concerned when we realized how much these would cost the laboratories in shipping. This was not only hurting our customers, but wasting gasoline. Even if the customer purchased in economic quantities, there were concerns about where would they store the cubes and what

would happen to the water when it was stored for long periods of time. Our technologists were able to replace the cubes with a water purification system, and now the laboratory can have quality water at a fraction of the cost.

Q: What's Carolina's approach to satisfying the customer?

A: Most importantly, we talk to the customer. We have someone answer the phone rather than put our customers through a series of prompts and voice mails. Working in a laboratory can be stressful. Why add to this and frustrate customers by making them jump through hoops to obtain a response? □



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