The corner drug store may have gone corporate, but it isn’t going away. Not Walgreens, anyway.

After 110 years, the largest drugstore chain in the country isn’t about to evolve into only Internet sales and services, but it does intend to be a leader online.

“At the end of the day, we all differentiate in our own unique way,” says Sona Chawla, president for e-commerce at the Deerfield, Ill.-based drugstore. “And we’ve already got this incredible asset. People are not going to stop going into the stores.”

“One of the reasons I exist is we will see things move (online), and the company certainly recognizes that there will be a shift,” she said. “And the belief is that having the combination is going to be better.”

Chawla, who moved to the United States from India at 18, is the first e-commerce executive at Walgreens. She joined the company in 2008 with “a white sheet of paper to define what (e-commerce) meant.”

What she decided was to use Walgreens’ astounding market penetration—two-thirds of Americans live within three miles of a store—to build an online brand that enhances and complements the in-store experience. That means scheduling prescription refills through a bottle-scanning smartphone app. It means online components for photo and medical services, as well as online shopping.

“It's all the ways that we can help you manage your health,” Chawla said. “It's all the ways we can help you shop.” The result, she said, is a more efficient Walgreens and a more satisfied customer.

Chawla talks about Walgreens as a “leading multichannel provider of health and everyday living.” E-commerce is a complement to the retail store, not the replacement it has become for markets like book sales and DVD rentals. In March, Walgreens announced a planned $409 million purchase of online retailer drugstore.com.

The strategy leans hard on Walgreens’ history and reputation. Customers, Chawla said, often refer to their local store as “my Walgreens.” She believes those same people will trust and appreciate new Walgreens programs like an online live chat with pharmacists or online shopping for in-store pickup.

“To me, that’s how retail will evolve,” she said. “People are online savvy, but the need isn’t going to go away.”

Chawla said she was excited to join Walgreens because it offered her an opportunity to develop fresh ideas within a large and established company. The e-commerce division, she said, is very much an integral part of the company and is an innovation driver for Walgreens.

It’s not her first time joining an industry at a pivotal moment. In 2006, she joined Dell as vice president of global online business. She spent 2000 through 2006, key years for online banking development, at Wells Fargo, where she held executive positions in enterprise Internet services, Web channel management, and online sales, services, and marketing. Chawla worked as a consultant until 2000, after graduating from MIT Sloan in 1994.

“MIT Sloan was a great school for me,” she said. “It gave me the right balance of skills and perspective moving into the world. I think the kinds of people that it attracts are very balanced and very pragmatic. And I think I’ve carried that throughout my career.”