

## Interview

# Teaching New Dogs Old Tricks

*An Interview with Professor Jim Avery of the Gaylord College of Mass Communications*

By John Mack

Students at the University of Oklahoma's Gaylord College of Mass Communication recently completed a graduate seminar called "Medical Promotion." It is one of several new seminars aimed at helping to prepare graduate students for professional careers.

Professor Jim Avery designed the course to help students learn how to study a category. This category study provides them the opportunity to be more competitive for a career in DTC advertising or other medical related careers. Careers could be with pharmaceuticals, OTC, or advertising agencies.

Medical promotion was chosen as the subject for this seminar because many advertising graduates are starting their careers in the healthcare industry. The category is growing rapidly and is now one of the largest advertising categories. With that growth brings career opportunities for new graduates.

### Health Advertising is a Lucrative Option for Students

**Mack:** Welcome to the show! Tell me a little more how you work with students in your program.

**Avery:** We do a variety of things at the undergraduate and graduate level. At the graduate level, we have students do a little more research.

**Mack:** I suppose a lot of your students are interested in health advertising because it is a rapidly growing field.

**Avery:** That's true. We don't know exactly how many new jobs there are, but on an anecdotal basis, I get a lot of communication from students starting out in direct-to-consumer and other health advertising fields. AdAge reports that across the board advertising spending was up last year by about 7.5%. Major pharmaceutical companies increased ad spending even more. Ad spending by Novartis, for example, is up by about 34%. With these big spending increases there is more work which translates into more jobs.

**Mack:** What advertising agencies seem to be hiring the most these days? How does your school help students find these jobs?

**Avery:** I think virtually all advertising agencies are hiring these days. Oklahoma is not exactly the

center of advertising and of creativity. But we have some very capable young people. So, we try to get them to see the advertising agencies in some of large markets. We take students to New York, Chicago, Dallas, and even some European and Asian locations. It gives them an opportunity to see how the work is done in other locations.

A few years ago I took a group to Los Angeles to visit Ogilvy and Mather. When it came time for questions, one of the students asked how to decide which agency to work for. The Ogilvy representative said that was easy, "you work for the agency that offers you a job." That continues to be true. It is rare when a student gets more than one job offer.

**Mack:** Are they drawn to the field because of or despite its inherent challenges or is just for the money? What motivates students these days?

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Novartis	\$1285	34.2%
Merck	\$1250	11.2%

Advertising Age reports that 13 of the Top 100 consumer advertisers in 2005 were pharmaceutical companies.

**Avery:** In one class I asked students how many of them expected to change the world. Practically all of them raised their hands. That's good news as far as I am concerned, but no doubt they are interested in money also. I have also noticed that graduates are moving from job to job more these days.

#### Medical Promotion Seminar

**Mack:** Please tell me about your Medical promotion Seminar. You've told me that it was one of several new seminars aimed at helping to prepare students for professional careers. How does your seminar fit into that program?

**Avery:** We adapted our Masters degree program to offer a non-thesis option for those students who wanted more preparation for a professional career in medical advertising. These students were required to attend three, one-credit hour intense seminars designed to provide them with some practical experience, to learn the way professionals learn. The Medical Promotion Seminar, which I proposed, was one of the first to be offered precisely because of the perceived career opportunities.

The class was a thirteen hour seminar where the students learned by doing. They first searched the literature on-line. A bibliography of over 220 articles from the popular and business press as well as scholarly journals were reviewed. In the second step, students conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with both consumers and medical professionals. Next, two focus groups were conducted. One was among consumers who regularly take prescription drugs and the other was with medical professionals who have patient contact.

**Mack:** The focus groups sound interesting. I'm dying to know the results from those! But before

you tell us the results, why did you have them do focus groups? What kind of questions did students ask?

**Avery:** The focus groups provided two segments of learning. First, they study qualitative research in their course work, but often they don't really get a chance to actually see how focus groups work and what kinds of things they can learn from them. So the focus groups allowed the students to learn about focus groups and it helped them to learn about what consumers and professionals think.

Generally, we wanted students to get an idea of the issues of health and pharmaceutical marketing. They asked simple questions like "What do you think of pharmaceutical advertising?" We followed up by inviting focus groups members to the class. One professional focus group included two physician assistants and two nurses. We also interviewed consumers who take prescription drugs every day.

#### What Students Learned

**Mack:** So what were the results?

**Avery:** In a nutshell, here is what was learned that may or may not be obvious to regular readers of Pharma Marketing News:

1. Consumers like DTC pharmaceutical advertising. They watch the advertising to see if the brand applies to them. They like the idea of knowing a bit of the healthcare story, and sometimes ask a doctor if the drug is something that would be good for them.
2. Nurses and physicians assistants also like DTC pharmaceutical advertising. Primarily they like it because it empowers the patient to know more and better participate in the decision process.
3. After seeing an advertisement for a prescription drug, the most common way consumers research a brand or product is to go on-line. Participants said they search the news surrounding the drug, look for articles and studies on the medication, and try to find unbiased opinions. Very few go to the product website itself.
4. Some patients see a change in the doctor-patient relationship when they discuss DTC pharmaceutical advertising. In some cases the relationship is better because the patient is now informed about possible solutions. However, sometimes the doctor seems to feel his/her authority has been challenged.

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5. Generally, the small group of consumer participants in the study are concerned about the truthfulness of the information in DTC pharmaceutical advertising.
6. Consumers and patients are concerned about side-effects. This is especially true for Rx drugs advertised on television. Often in magazine ads the side-effect cautionary statements can take an extra page of advertising. None of those interviewed for this seminar read the cautionary statements, but had concern about whether the side-effects or the original ailment was worse.
7. Trust is important in the marketing of prescription drugs. Patients must trust their doctor, the pharmaceutical company, and their pharmacist. Of the three, the pharmacist has the highest level of trust. Almost all the participants could cite a situation when the pharmacist had saved them from a drug that would have been harmful to them. They trust the pharmaceutical companies the least. They trust the quality of the drugs, they just don't trust the intentions of the company. The importance of trust to consumers was a major takeaway for the students and we discussed this at length in the seminar.
8. Drugs are expensive. All the respondents buy drugs either by mail or from out-of-the-country. They state that the insurance companies are hard to deal with and are not reliable.
9. In the medical professional focus group, marketing techniques were discussed. These group participants thought that prescription drug advertising was unclear to many consumer patients. For example, a female patient asked if Viagra would be right for her.

**Mack:** You wouldn't characterize this as a scientific study, would you? I mean, no small focus group is.

**Avery:** Qualitative research is an acceptable form of gathering information. Focus groups are a common way to gather information qualitatively. I don't feel very confident of these findings because it was only one small group. If we had done a few groups and we got the same answers, I would feel more confident, but at this point I would say the information is interesting, but not applicable to the larger universe of consumers or healthcare professionals.

### Role of Internet

**Mack:** Considering that the pharmaceutical industry lags others in the use of the Internet for marketing, I was wondering how your students feel about the Internet and its role in health advertising.

**Avery:** Well, we know that our students use the Internet extensively in their studies. In fact, we are entering an era where students don't know how to use a library. Obviously, they will continue to use the Internet in their professional careers, but whether or not that affects the pharmaceutical marketing mix remains to be seen.

**Mack:** How does this help your students prepare for a career in this field?

**Avery:** We'll have to wait and see, but at least one student of mine was able to show what she did in the class to a hospital interested in hiring her. She felt she had an advantage over other recent graduates because of this real world experience.

### Conclusion

The Medical Promotion seminar provided new and thought provoking information for the students at the University of Oklahoma's Gaylord College of Mass Communication. They learned the value of insight into consumers and medical professional attitudes. They became familiar with the extensive literature. Importantly, the course gave the students a leg up on their competition for jobs in the field of Direct-to-Consumer pharmaceutical advertising, something many of them are considering. Clearly there is more to learn, but this is a start.

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