

Pharma Marketing News

Reprint

What Americans Think About Drug Advertising

“Ask Your Doctor” Call to Action Works, But Ads Still Get No Respect!

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Article

What Americans Think About Drug Advertising

"Ask Your Doctor" Call to Action Works, But Ads Still Get No Respect!

By John Mack

You may have seen the May 4, 2008, Kaiser Family Foundation Press Release, which made the following revelation: "TV Drug Ads Prompt Viewers to Ask Docs for Rx"!

To which many have responded: Duh!

This conclusion was made based on the USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health Survey ("Survey")—"The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies"—which was conducted between January 3 and January 23, 2008, among 1,695 adults ages 18 and older.

Kaiser Family Foundation President and CEO Drew Altman said, "Our survey shows why the drug companies run all these ads: They work."

Although huge pharma profits and easy money have made marketing ROI analyses unnecessary, it doesn't require a survey to prove that direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising works.

The survey, however, has some nuggets of information that give marketers further insight into the public's attitude towards drug industry advertising. This article summarizes these insights.

Effectiveness of Drug Ads

Ninety-one percent (91%) of American adults have seen or heard an advertisement for a prescription drug, according to the survey. That is a tribute to TV and the carpet bombing technique drug companies have employed delivering ads on TV. What's interesting is that as a result of seeing a drug ad, about one-third of us (32%) have talked to a physician about the advertised drug.

Practically every direct-to-consumer (DTC) ad on TV and in print prominently includes a statement such as "Ask Your Doctor if [BRAND X] is Right for You!" Advertisers call this the "Call to Action," which is the linchpin of all advertising; ie, get your target audience to take the next step toward the purchase of your brand.

Several studies have shown that this call to action of DTC works. In 2003, for example, the FDA released preliminary results from a physician survey it conducted (see "[Results from FDA Physician Survey on DTC Advertising](#)"). The

survey profiled 250 GP's and 250 specialists (dermatology, allergy/pulmonology, endocrinology, and psychiatry) from a random sample of the AMA Physician Masterfile, which includes a list of all U.S. medical school graduates.

One question the FDA survey asked was: "Think about the most recent interaction you've had with a patient ... Can you think of a patient who initiated a discussion about a prescription drug they saw advertised?"

Ninety-two percent (92%) of the physicians surveyed said "Yes."

Consumers Drive DTC Growth?

Surveys of consumers seem to confirm the FDA's study results. According to eMarketer:

"Much of the growth in DTC advertising is driven by one thing: consumer behavior. Of the 546 US adults surveyed online by MRxHealth and *Medical Marketing & Media* in March, 87% said they had requested and received a specific prescription drug from their doctor. ("Pharmaceuticals Online: Direct-to-Patient Becomes a Reality", August, 2006. eMarketer.)

Perhaps fearing that success might breed contempt, pharmaceutical marketers attempt to downplay the success of DTC in driving consumers to ask physicians for specific drugs and tout DTC's "educational" benefits. CommonHealth, arguably part of the world's leading healthcare-communications network (ie, pharmaceutical advertising agency), filed research with the FDA in July 2006 on DTC advertising that challenges the effectiveness of DTC's Call to Action.

In a nutshell, CommonHealth claimed that DTC advertising is rarely referenced by patients when visiting physicians. Their study says this happens only in 0.6% of visits!

To understand why the CommonHealth results do not jibe with FDA and USAToday/Kaiser data, read this Pharma Marketing Blog post: "[CommonHealth's Selective Release of DTC Study Data.](#)"

Continues...

DTC Outcomes

Among the 32% of USAToday/Kaiser Survey respondents who have talked to a doctor as a result of seeing an Rx drug ad, 44% said the doctor gave them a prescription for the drug they asked for. Unfortunately, even more respondents (54%) said a different drug was prescribed! The Survey revealed some other fascinating outcomes of talking to a doctor as a result on seeing drug ads (see Figure 1).

information than they did on the Internet, for example (see Figure 3, pg. 13). Only 27% of respondents relied a lot or somewhat upon ads for accurate drug information whereas 38% relied a lot or somewhat on the Internet for accurate information.

DTC and Drug Prices

Despite the fact that a narrow majority of Americans believe drug ads are a “good thing,” clear majorities have negative views of Rx drug ads as illustrated in Figure 3. In particular, 77% of Americans believe the cost of ads make Rx drugs too expensive (41% say this bothers them “a lot”).

This is bad news because most critics of DTC advertising use the argument that it raises the cost of drugs and that argument resonates with a large portion of the American public. Cost pressures have led 29% of U.S. adults to not fill a prescription in the past two years, and 23% have cut pills in half or skipped doses to make their medications last longer, according to the Survey. The Survey found that paying for drugs they need is at least somewhat of a problem for the families of 41% of adults (see Figure 4, pg. 13)

Perhaps if the drug industry was more frugal in how it spent its DTC advertising dollars—maybe cut a billion\$ out if the TV budget and add \$500 million to the Internet budget—and maybe if it held back on DTC

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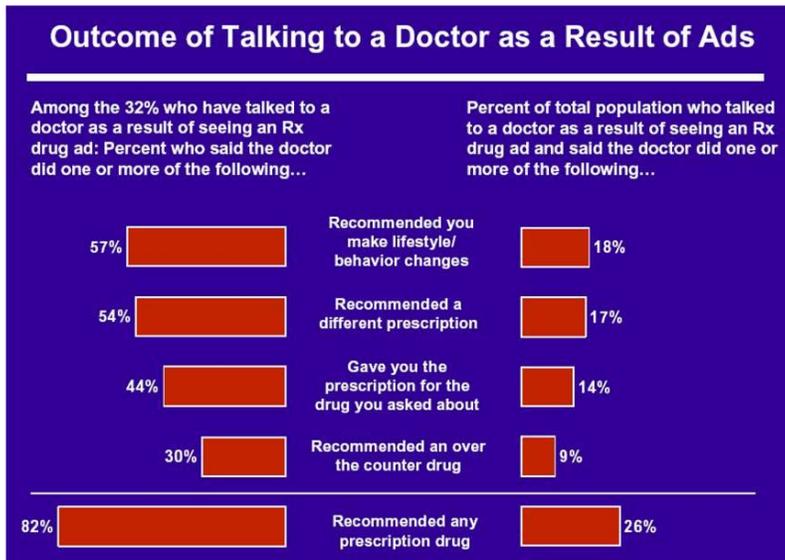


Figure 1: Chart 24 from the Survey Summary and Chart Pack.

Inform vs. Educate

The American public seems divided on whether or not DTC advertising is a “good thing” or a “bad thing”—53% vs. 40%, respectively. A clear majority (67%), however, agree with the drug industry that “prescription drug ads educate people about available treatments and encourages them to get help for medical conditions they might not have been aware of.”

The Survey delved deeper into the educational aspects of DTC ads and asked people if drug ads were doing a good job “informing” the public about drug benefits, indications, and side effects (see Figure 2). A majority (56%) of respondents felt ads did a good or excellent job regarding information on potential benefits, but fewer (45%) felt the same about side effect information.

Although a majority of respondents expressed positive views of drug ads, they relied less upon these ads for “accurate”

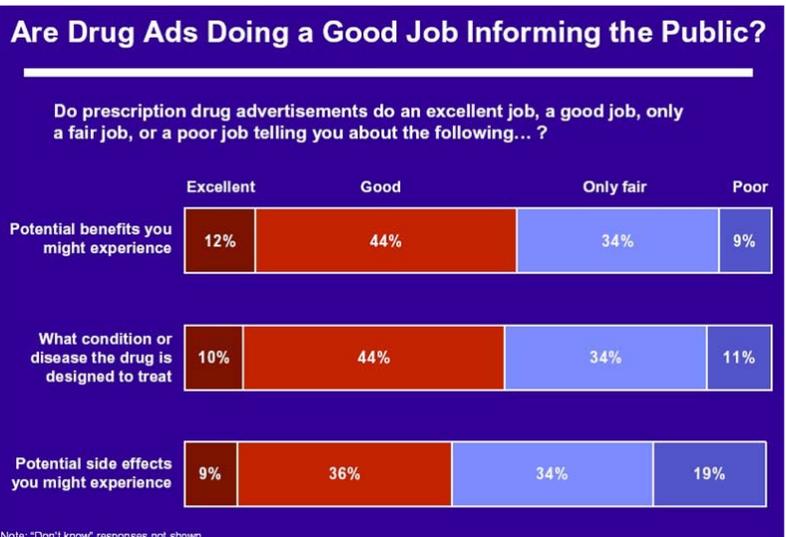


Figure 2: Chart 25 from the Survey Summary and Chart Pack.

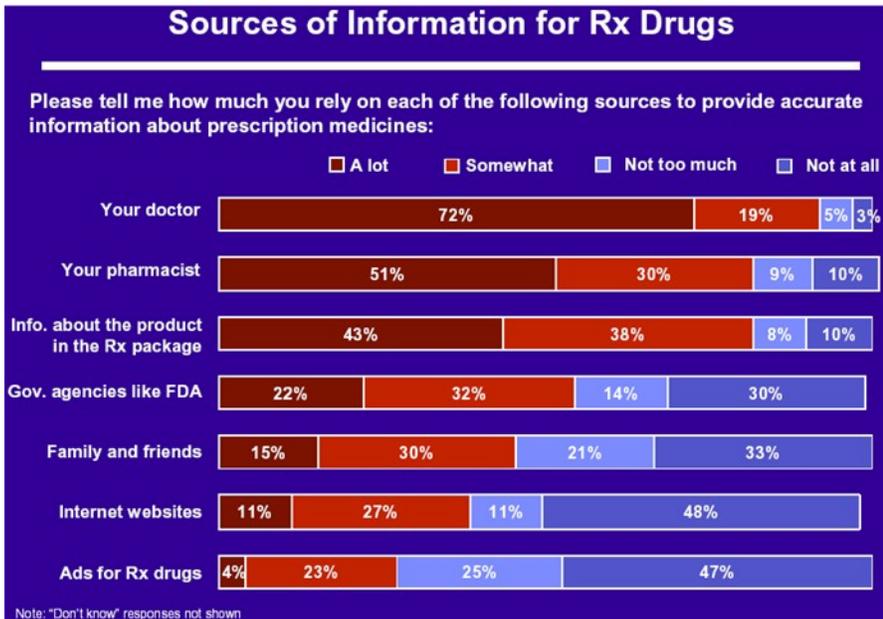


Figure 3: Chart 34 from the Survey Summary and Chart Pack.

advertising of new drugs for a year or so after launch and focused more on innovative physician marketing (eg, online closed loop marketing; see article in this issue), it would help to counteract the impression that DTC advertising leads to higher drug costs.

Of course, given the fact that TV advertising is so effective, such a re-alignment of ad budgets is not

likely to happen soon. Unless, of course, the recession hits the drug industry and forces it to cut back.

profits and not concerned enough about helping people, compared with 74% of those with higher incomes. And while more than half (55%) of people with incomes over \$25,000 think pharmaceutical companies spend too much money marketing to doctors, just 38% of people with lower incomes share this view.

Income Disparity

The Survey breaks down opinions based on household income of respondents. It found that despite having more difficulty paying for prescriptions, people with incomes less than \$25,000 are somewhat more likely to have a favorable opinion of drug companies (55%, compared with 44% of those with incomes of \$25,000 or more), and express somewhat less negative views of drug company profits, prices, marketing and advertising.

For instance, 66% of those with incomes less than \$25,000 say that pharmaceutical companies are too concerned about making

Meanwhile, a majority of Americans in every income category feel that the drug industry spends too much money advertising to patients. 52-54% of adults with household incomes less than \$49,000 say pharmaceutical companies spend too much money advertising to patients compared to 67-70% of those with household incomes above \$50,000.

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Negatives of prescription drug ads	% who agree with each statement	% who say each bothers them "a lot"
The cost of ads makes Rx drugs too expensive	77%	41%
Ads for Rx drugs encourage people to take medicine they don't need	66%	34%
There are too many Rx drug ads on television	68%	27%
Many Rx drug ads are too sexually explicit	46%	20%

Figure 4: Chart 15 from the Survey Summary and Chart Pack.

Experts Consulted

The following experts were consulted in the preparation of articles for this issue.

- **Bruce Grant**, SVP, Business Strategy, Digitas Health, 215-399-3223
- **Richard Meyer**, World of DTC Marketing (<http://www.worldofdctmarketing.com/>), rmeyer52@mac.com
- **Steven Schneider**, President, OnDemandIQ, sschneid@ondemandiq.com, 310-866-5011
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- **Members of the Pharma Marketing Roundtable**, [JOIN HERE!](#)

Resources

See articles for citations.

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