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Trusting Other Patients' Drug Advice

Peer-Influence Advertising Takes Off, as Companies Seek Effective Marketing Tools

By JONATHAN D. ROCKOFF

Who are you going to listen to when it comes to medicines—your peers or the companies that actually make the drugs?

Market research shows that the sick are relying more on the recommendations of fellow patients, and less on the reputations of companies and endorsers, in deciding whether to seek treatment and what drugs to ask for, say pharmaceutical companies and their consultants.

Several drug makers are seeking to tap into the growing importance of so-called peer-influence marketing. They are making use of more patient testimonials and savvy use of the Internet, including sponsoring information about diseases on medical Web sites. GlaxoSmithKline PLC and Sanofi-Aventis SA are among the major drug makers that have run ads featuring patients' stories.

The numbers are still small. Ads for eight of the top 50 selling drugs feature the tales of real users talking about their positive experiences taking the medicines, rather than celebrities or voice-overs, according to an analysis by Gaurav Kapoor of the New England Consulting Group.

Targeting Smokers

But drug makers are focusing these efforts on some key health concerns such as smoking cessation, where the support of peers seems most effective. Pfizer Inc. last year turned to patient stories in print and TV ads for smoking-cessation therapy Chantix. In the ads, patients tell the stories of their struggles with their conditions and the impact of the medicines. Patients have "liked the authenticity—to really connect their experiences with what they have heard from others," said Jim Sage, a Pfizer marketing official.

Pfizer's first ad campaign for Chantix was a traditional awareness-raising approach that introduced the product and emphasized, using the story of the tortoise and the hare, that beating smoking was a long process. The company switched to using patient testimonials after receiving hundreds of thank-you notes from users and finding that their stories tested well with focus groups.

"The role of the peer is important because it really provides a positive example," Mr. Sage said. "Oftentimes people preach to smokers" about the need to quit, he said. But after years without success, smokers need to know that doing so is possible and worth the effort before trying again, he said.

Pfizer found many of the patients in its ads through thank-you notes they submitted, Mr. Sage said. Before putting the patients in ads, Pfizer made sure that the patients took Chantix and that the use was appropriate. Pfizer pays the patients according to the Screen Actors Guild's wage scale. A SAG spokeswoman said its nonprofessional rate is

\$592.20 a day during filming plus residual payments that vary depending on how often an ad runs.

The growth of peer-influence marketing comes as drug makers face tighter regulation of some more common forms of marketing, particularly celebrity endorsements. In 2008, ads for Pfizer's popular statin Lipitor were attacked as misleading because they played up the fact that Robert Jarvik, inventor of an artificial heart, was a physician, even though he did not practice. Pfizer subsequently dropped the campaign because of the "distraction."

Also, the industry's reputation has suffered after years of bad publicity stemming from drug withdrawals and conflicts of interest. As a result, some drug makers are looking for a voice other than their own to sell their products, says Keith Vance, a marketing consultant for drug makers who has helped develop patient-testimonial ads.

Reducing Ad Spending

Pharmaceutical companies spent \$4.3 billion on advertising during the first nine months of last year, according to the latest data from Kantar Media, an ad-tracking firm. The spending was down 1.3% from the year-earlier period. It could drop further over the long term, drug marketers say, after blockbuster products lose patent protection and companies start selling more medicines targeted to smaller patient populations.

Web advertising could benefit from those changes, since the medium is suited for more narrowly targeted selling than print or television. Drug makers spent \$282 million on Internet display ads during the first nine months of this year, Kantar Media said. But the Food and Drug Administration has sent letters to several companies warning that certain Web ads were false and misleading, and that has deterred many firms from spending more heavily. Unlike with TV and print ads, the rules for drug advertising on the Web are not clearly spelled out, including, for instance, how companies should furnish sufficient information about the risks a drug presents.

Until the FDA develops Web ad guidelines, many drug makers are trying to capitalize on the Internet in other ways. For example, companies have sponsored general information about diseases on medical Web sites. Drug marketers also review chat rooms, message boards and networking sites for help shaping the messages of traditional ads.

"When people go to the Internet, they are looking for not only pure information, but people's experience with the product," says Mr. Vance.

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