

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Addicted to Advertising

Is pharmaceutical marketing benign—or is it a cancer on society?

(Warning: reading my column may cause drowsiness, fatigue, and severe nausea. But it definitely won't cause a four-hour erection.)

Seems like the advertising industry has become addicted to drugs. The marketing of drugs, that is. But slowly, the intervention is being staged.

A few weeks ago, a Viagra spot (the one featuring the creepy blue-horned horndog) was pulled off the air because the spot didn't mention side effects. And recently Vioxx, an arthritis drug with a \$160 million ad budget, was pulled off the shelves entirely because apparently, its side effects included an increased risk of heart attacks and death.

Pharmaceutical advertising is a huge niche—spending on direct-to-consumer ads alone is over \$3 billion a year. It's perhaps the highest growth sector of the advertising and marketing business.

So is the ad industry truly the nation's pusherman?

We all know that from a creative perspective, most drug ads are bad to the point of self-parody. You've seen the spots—montages of blue skies, meadows, happy old couples and a voiceover reeling off a list of scary side effects. Even The One Club had to create a separate award show for pharmaceutical ads— probably because the creative bar isn't as high as it is for other types of clients, but the awards (and the entry fees that come along with them) are equally as alluring.

Now, I'm not suggesting pharmaceutical companies are evil. They're not—at least not any more evil than any other industry. Simply put, modern living has given us more of everything—including more sickness, and more ways to treat that sickness. So are we living longer because of more drugs? Or do we need more drugs because we're living longer?

I wonder if the ad industry is helping drug makers create false demand, and in this case, really messing with people's lives. I'd like to think that working on medical services clients would bring some inner satisfaction, at least more so than working on a car dealer account.

Once, I wrote some ads for a company that made medical devices. As I read through the marketing objectives, I started thinking that there was an altruism to the work, and that I was helping people live better lives. But at the same time, I was helping a company suck up to doctors in order to become the “partner” of choice, to the exclusion of other alternative treatments.

Which begs the question: Do doctors share the responsibility for this mess? I never thought it was my job to ask my doctor about a certain drug. I’ve always assumed it was my doctor’s job to tell me about one if I needed it.

Now, however, I’m not inclined to believe what a doctor tells me any more than I’m inclined to believe what an advertisement tells me. All you have to do is take a look around any doctor’s office. The pens, the prescription notepads, the clock on the wall—they’re all emblazoned with the logo of the drug du jour. And that’s only what you see. You don’t see the stacks of trial samples in the closet. Or the free trips, dinners and other kickbacks doctors get in consideration for recommending the drugs and writing the prescriptions.

What’s dangerous is when the advertising morphs into a professional opinion: Say you go to a doctor for medical services, yet your diagnosis and the doctor’s recommended treatment are influenced by an advertiser. How would you know? We trust that years of medical school and training won’t be compromised by an all-expenses paid weekend trip to a golf resort.

It doesn’t matter what industries your clients are in; you can use the drug industry as example of how far marketing can, and does, go to reach consumers from every vantage point. Because the budgets are so large, every media tactic possible is used to promote prescription drugs. Marketing directors in other industries must be insanely jealous. You simply can’t ignore the sheer amount of branding. It’s everywhere.

Not only is the marketing everywhere, sometimes it’s not easy to spot. One of the hallmarks of advertising has always been that you could spot it—you knew what was an ad and what wasn’t. Now of course, it’s fashionable to advertise in more stealthy ways—so you don’t know a message is actually an ad. Which could be relatively innocent if you’re a video game maker, but with pharmaceutical marketing, the stakes are obviously higher.

In an industry where clients are shrinking their budgets, drug advertising is a virtual Brinks truck full of greenbacks dumped at an agency’s front door. And very few agencies would turn that kind of business away—even ones that would turn away tobacco clients (another legal drug, by the way, but one that many agencies proudly shun.)

Don’t count on the government to regulate drug ads out of existence, either. The making and marketing of prescription drugs is extremely profitable, and the ad business is going have to live with it.

I don’t know about you, but it makes me feel a little queasy.