

Educate Consumers in the Aisles to Drive Prescription Sales

Article contributed by Rx EDGE



A discount retail clothing chain once claimed that educated consumers were their best customers. That slogan also could be adopted by drugstores nationwide, as shelf space areas in pharmacy aisles are becoming an increasingly productive venue to inform consumers about various medical conditions and the best ways to treat them.

In-store promotion and education are nothing new in the retail sector. For years, companies selling products in grocery stores have used shelf space and packaging appeal to influence consumer purchasing decisions. On-the-spot coupon dispensers and nutritional information, for example, are fixtures in grocery aisles.

Even though retail pharmacies use print and broadcast advertising to enhance corporate brand awareness, they know expensive media campaigns do not educate consumers about medical conditions and treatments very well. Consumers might be lured to the cosmetics aisle by ads touting special promotions, but will such visits also pay off for the pharmacy? Probably not, unless consumers show interest in learning about a specific health condition.

Drugstore customers, however, routinely buy over-the-counter (OTC) remedies from antacids to cold remedies to pain relievers without consulting a health care professional. "Many of us self treat with OTC products without ever knowing the exact cause of the problem," says Gary Norman, vice president and business director for Hoffman Estates, Ill.-based Rx EDGE. "Who hasn't seen a coworker take antacids day after day, yet never bother to consult a physician to find out why his stomach is upset."

What motivates you to see the doctor about a health problem? Studies show pain is the leading reason to seek medical advice. Yet many disorders that require professional care are not overly painful. So, in the absence of activity-limiting discomfort, the ailment persists, especially if an OTC remedy can provide some help.

Pharmaceutical manufacturers once thought direct-to-consumer advertising would pay huge returns by motivating consumers to seek treatment after learning about the benefits of specific medications. Clever and well-produced

commercials, however, aren't providing the return on investment (ROI) marketers once envisioned. Consumers may not find them to be credible sources of health information. Do you really want medical advice from a TV actor about high cholesterol? Maybe this approach is motivating some consumers to pay more attention to their diets and cholesterol levels. But do they generate prescriptions on their own?

Recent market research conducted by IMS Health showed that the average return on direct-to-consumer advertising is \$2.20 for every dollar spent. In-store promotions, however, are generating a return of \$6 for every dollar invested and yield an average prescription lift of nearly 10% across a wide range of therapeutic categories. Despite this advantage, in-store promotions today account for just 2% of direct-to-consumer marketing expenditures for pharmaceutical products. But that trend is changing.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, drug manufacturers are taking a hard look at their spending on television advertising and are considering alternative media to reach consumers and health care providers with targeted product messages.

"Drug marketers, for competitive reasons, are reluctant to reveal details of their advertising strategies," reported the *Journal*, "but the rethinking at some companies reflects a sharper focus on the return on the money spent as well as an increasing public and regulatory backlash against television (TV) ads for prescription medicines."

Further, there's evidence casting doubt on the payback of several years of TV advertising to promote the benefits of statin drugs for high cholesterol, currently the most widely prescribed medication class and an \$8 billion market. Researchers from Harvard and Stanford reported only 11% of patients they studied with multiple risk factors for cardiovascular disease take statins. This finding may indicate that more direct and detailed contact with consumers is needed.

Detailed Information Drives Prescriptions

As pharmaceutical marketers seek better returns on their media investments, retailers can take comfort in knowing drug firms do not need to look further than the corner pharmacy to educate consumers about their products. "Pharmacy customers are conscientious about monitoring their health and are avid consumers of health care information," said Norman. "For this reason, the drugstore has a distinct advantage versus other media options because a licensed pharmacist is within reach to answer questions."

Norman added that shelf and pharmacy counter promotions are attractive, cost-effective vehicles for retailers and drug companies to reach consumers who want to learn about various conditions and treatment options. "Product information available at the local drugstore may prompt a chat with the pharmacist and a visit to the doctor to discuss potential benefits of that medication. More often than not, the outcome of the process is a prescription sale for the pharmacy," said Norman. He added that astute marketers also realize they can extend the reach and value of their advertising campaigns with in-store promotions.

According to Norman, prescriptions for cholesterol-lowering medications have risen significantly from in-store promotions. "There's a very high noise level about cholesterol drugs these days, so much that consumers might be confused about which drug is best for them," he said.

"Retailers and manufacturers are finding they can differentiate the respective benefits and side effects of medications more effectively through in-store promotions than is possible with TV ads."

A recent in-store campaign developed for a major statin drug on the market reinforced the brand's popular advertising campaign. The challenge was to grow prescription volume in a mature and crowded therapeutic category.

"We reviewed past results and saw that a four to one ROI was the lowest yield for any of the company's in-store promotions and the marketing team knew that level of performance would provide a considerable lift in prescriptions," said Norman.

The in-store program featured eye-catching information dispensers extending from store shelves in more than 18,000 pharmacies. They offered detailed, pull-out product information. A panel on top of the display highlighted the product's key differentiation message and maintained the same look as the brand's traditional advertising. "The commercials had become very recognizable, so we knew images from them would be highly effective in attracting consumer attention in the drugstore," said Norman.

A key decision involved in executing these programs is deciding where to locate the at-shelf information dispenser. Since cholesterol-lowering medications are not available without a prescription, the information should be located near products likely to be used by individuals at some risk for cardiovascular disease. For other therapeutic categories, the decision is easier when medications for a specific condition are available over the counter, for instance, pain relievers and allergy remedies.

"We decided to put the information dispenser in the analgesic aisle, which is the busiest place in the drugstore. For a different cholesterol drug, the client chose to locate the display with blood-glucose testing supplies for diabetes monitoring. That strategy was intended to leverage synergies within groups at risk for diabetes and high cholesterol," Norman explained.

Measurable Impact on Prescription Volume

After two months on the market, the new drug's sales doubled. Follow-up research showed in-store programs added an additional 6% to 8% of sales growth above the doubling plateau. The return on investment thus far is tracking at nearly 5:1.

The in-store campaign, according to Norman, delivered some 300 million consumer impressions during the monitoring period, and there has been an average of two new prescriptions per store, per week since it began. He added that research evaluating in-store programs for products in 29 therapeutic categories showed there were sales lifts ranging from 4% to 18%, as measured through controlled store analysis using matched panels.

"Consumers don't want to be sold when it comes to their health, and you want to reach them when they are most receptive to an educational message," Norman explained. "Above all, they want timely, objective and credible information to make the right decisions. As a result, the pharmacy can become the convenient 'go-to' health information resource when retailers effectively blend educational and selling messages. That's a benefit for retailers, consumers and pharmaceutical companies." ■