



Dr. John Abramson (left) and Dr. Thomas Stossel debated the appropriate role of pharmaceutical marketing and research at the DTC National Conference.



Talking Points

Marketers, agency executives and DTC suppliers heard plenty of ideas about consumer marketing at the DTC National Conference in Washington, D.C.

By DTC Perspectives staff

What role should pharmaceutical marketers play in the overall effort to improve public health in the United States? How should DTC evolve for the better as it enters its “teen” years and how can marketers do a better job branding their products? These were just a few of the topics discussed as hundreds of marketers, agency executives and DTC supplier company representatives gathered in mid-April for the annual conference on consumer marketing of prescription drugs.

The first question above was a point debated by two opening-day keynote speakers – Dr. John Abramson and Dr. John Stossel, both of Harvard – in a session moderated by DTC Perspectives chairman and chief executive Bob Ehrlich. (The other questions are addressed in sidebars on the next page.) In response to a question about the appropriate role of DTC marketing, Abramson, author of the book “Overdosed America,” said he believes the ideal situation would be one in which marketers based their messages on “scientifically accurate communication about how best to prevent disease.”

He added, “What I would like to see is the focus of the marketing on the bigger prize of improving health than on the small prize of selling drugs. It’s not an either or [decision].” Abramson advocated adding a “lifestyle arm” to the R&D area of drug development that would compare the value of a drug such as a statin with lifestyle changes.”

“If you are hired to just sell a product, then I don’t think that you are making the world a better place,” he explained. The marketers of cholesterol-lowering drugs “are challenged with how to convince people that their product will lower

cholesterol more effectively and have fewer side effects... I would hope that we would make a transition to that message being more effective when it is piggybacked onto an overall approach that is scientifically informed about how best to decrease the risk of heart disease.”

Stossel countered that attaining perfect conditions never exist, and that marketers should have the freedom to craft accurate messages. “If we could do a huge double-blind study of every intervention in medicine to inform our practice, that would be perfect,” he noted. “But that’s never going to happen because we can’t afford it and nobody has the time. Doctors are forced to make decisions based on incomplete and imperfect information. That’s what experts and judgment are for.”

Stossel also noted that he would not restrict DTC marketing as it now exists. “I don’t think there is ever such a thing as fully objective anything... I would much rather have the competing cacophony of different interests [in the public domain] and let the chips be sorted out.” By contrast, Abramson said he is opposed to current DTC regulations.

“What I would do is what I would do with continuing education,” Abramson said. “That is companies who are paying for the research and want the word to get out [about a drug] ought to put that money in a pot and let the money be allocated in the public interest by disinterested parties. Yes, drug companies should have a responsibility for public education and they ought to have the opportunity to get the information about their products out. But the messenger ought not to be the drug company.”



In Branding, Look Out for Number 1

There is no excuse for not being able to brand your product, Bill Schley, a co-founder of the brand consulting firm david ID, told DTC National Conference attendees. For example, he noted, Frank Perdue was able to brand chicken and the state of Florida branded sunshine. “All you have to do

is follow the principles that were invented about 50 or 60 years ago,” Schley said. “The main reason that brands have gotten off the track is because they are not following these principles.”

The critical point marketers must understand is that branding is all about “finding the one idea that you stand for, and it’s doing everything in your power to own that idea in a credible way.” But this “idea” can’t be just any idea. It’s an idea that grounded in the notion that your brand is No. 1 in some specialty. This also is called finding the “dominant selling idea,” or as it’s often referred to as a “unique selling proposition.”

“At the end of the day, people remember one thing,” Schley said. “We call it the ‘one-item of carry-on rule.’ People can take one idea and put it up in the overhead bin to take on

the plane. What kind of idea are they going to take? They are going to take the most penetrating and exciting idea that they can possibly find.”

The big idea also has a certain structure, with five basic components. They include: superlative (being the best at something), important (the idea has to matter to the consumer), believable or credible, and memorable. “Last but not least, and this is most important, the idea has to be tangible [and] it has to perform,” Schley explained. “When you do those things, you have a dominant selling idea... Every great brand has done this.”

In the world of DTC marketing, Schley noted how Viagra (Pfizer) staked out the No. 1 position for being first in the category of ED prescription drugs, and noted how well the brand team has utilized this positioning. He also credited Cialis (Eli Lilly), the third ED drug to gain FDA approval, for its innovative approach to finding a unique No. 1 positioning as the one and only 36-hour ED treatment. “What do you do if the No. 1 idea is already taken?” he asked. “You move your idea to the left or the right. It’s done everyday by smart marketers... Cialis created a new specialty.”

Review Campaigns for Value, Relevance

DTC is entering a new phase of its development, driven in part by an increase in the number of “influencers” on patient beliefs and behaviors. “There are more influencers on consumers and patients than ever before and, increasingly, the channels in which we can control the message and deliver the message have less value to consumers [and] they are not working the way they used to,” Nancy Phelan, a Wyeth executive director of consumer communications and e-marketing, told marketers at the DTC National.

The ad campaigns crafted with such incredible precision – and passed through numerous rounds of internal review – are just not as influential as they used to be, she added. Indeed, recently released research from Zenith Optimedia showed that recommendations from friends and family have the greatest influence on brand choice. On average, they are 22 percent more influential than television, Phelan said.

In addition to the typical influencers on patients – healthcare professionals, pharmacists, pharma companies and media – a new batch of evolving entities have begun to influence patients, including Web sites such as Yahoo! Answers and even healthcare insurance plans like Express Scripts. At the same time, marketers are evolving in their understanding of consumers, particularly as data sources become more integrated. By layering consumer insights with

medical and office-claims data, trade and pharmacy data and payer data, there is an opportunity to better understand and target consumers more holistically. “I believe that we can understand consumers “with much greater precision, through listening and ethnographic opportunities,” Phelan said. “[But] we do need to do a better job of delivering value and relevance.”

What does this all mean? Phelan said she believes the industry is at a “real inflection point.” The opportunity to identify and act on consumer insight has never been greater,” she said. But are controlled messages released through controlled media are not working the way that they used to and consumers are increasing their influence in healthcare.

“We really have to have exquisite consumer insight and that has to translate into a high-quality, highly relevant and high-value experience,” she added. In the new world of DTC, the brand might not figure as prominently as it did in the past. Marketers might find that there are numerous segments that need to be reached. As a result, marketers may have to do more work. “It’s a lot easier to provide one message and deliver it through one channel,” Phelan said.

