



ED SLAUGHTER

Setting the Standard for DTC Consumer Research

As consumer marketing of prescription drugs moved to the forefront in the late 1990s, Ed Slaughter helped launch the most important research on consumer attitudes toward this new form of advertising, with the annual *Prevention* study.

By Jennifer Haug

Ed Slaughter has always been fascinated by the impact of media and communication on public policy and public health. He focused his graduate work at the University of Maryland in the areas of health and political communication. “My interest in this work, this kind of communication goes back to those days and really originated out of an interest in media effects,” he explained in a recent interview. “I was interested in measuring the impact of the message, understanding its impact on public policy issues, and on public health. I wanted to know how public communication worked, and for health, why it so often didn’t.”

His work in market research eventually led to Rodale, its *Prevention* magazine business unit and the founding of the annual national survey of consumer attitudes toward pharmaceutical advertising, widely known as the *Prevention* study. These efforts were recognized by peers in the DTC community, and Slaughter was selected as an inaugural member of the DTC Hall of Fame, which DTC Perspectives launched in mid-2008.

Slaughter began his research career at the Gallup Organization, working on the Gallup Poll and conducting large scale surveys on health issues. His first boss at the Gallup Organization, Neil Upmeyer, was instrumental in his early career. Slaughter credits Upmeyer with being a visionary of that time, conducting research in the mid-late 1980s on the impact of managed care (HMOs and PPOs were in their infancy then), on the quality of care, and on the impact these new plans were going to have on the way physicians practiced medicine.

“All of the questions and issues we see unfolding now as they relate to health care in the United States, he was already thinking

about in the mid ‘80s. We crafted research to begin to establish the baseline measures around those topics,” Slaughter said. In a research study about divestment and apartheid, rather than only interviewing people in the U.S. or the white minority in South Africa, Upmeyer recognized the need to talk to the affected populations in that country. The Gallup team reported their findings to both the South African and U.S. governments, and to the public, about how divestment policies were viewed by the people they actually affected, and that they were actually trying to protect.

Slaughter said, “Working with someone that has that kind of vision, and that understanding how research done well could really affect policy and decision-making, and eventually, people’s lives left its mark. It was really, really a tremendous learning experience for me.”

Now, more than 20 years later and having been in the research field for nearly two decades, Slaughter has taken a position in the customer strategies and solutions group at Merck & Co’s U.S. human health division. He’s working to understand how the presentation of product benefits and risks in broadcast DTC affects consumer recall, how consumers experience the healthcare system and how those experiences influence their decisions about whether to use and remain adherent to prescribed therapies. Slaughter tries to help Merck develop new and innovative approaches to DTC advertising that will help consumers and their physicians make well-informed choices, and that will help consumers understand and adhere to prescribed therapies. Throughout his career, Slaughter’s research has always greatly benefitted a variety of industries, and pharmaceutical direct-to-consumer advertising is no exception.

After leaving the Gallup Organization, Slaughter worked for Princeton Survey Research Associates, which does much of the research for the PEW Research Center for the people in

the press. He then moved on to join Rodale in 1995. It was here, that Slaughter would create one of the industry’s most influential surveys, *Prevention* Magazine’s Annual Survey of Consumer Reaction to DTC Advertising.

Ken Wallace, former vice president publisher at *Prevention* Magazine – referred to as “the elder statesman of magazine



Bob Ziltz (left) of *Prevention* presents Ed Slaughter of Merck & Co. with his DTC Hall of Fame award.

publishing in the United States” by Slaughter – hired him to join the Rodale team. Watching Wallace prepare his sales force during a meeting one day, Slaughter realized that his role was “to raise, to elevate the relationship that we had with our advertisers and to provide them the types of information that they really needed to help make a day-to-day business decisions. My job wasn’t to

provide them with a bunch of stuff about our readers. They could just as easily get that from their ad agencies. If they were going to take us seriously as business partners, we needed to bring them information that would drive their business – information they couldn’t easily get anywhere else. And so that’s the way Ken worked with me and the research, and that’s the way he worked with his team. It was a tremendous benefit.”

Rodale had a history of doing national surveys on health issues and then doing longitudinal work to understand to what extent people were participating in preventative health behaviors, what influenced that behavior, and what impact it had on their health. Slaughter was fortunate enough to have been hired as the director of advertising and trends research, and director of market research for Rodale, leading the work for such aforementioned research projects.

In early 1997, Slaughter and his team recognized the emergence of DTC, as they saw more print advertising and non-branded reminder ads for prescription medicines and more people being proactive about managing their healthcare. This shift of the “traditional dynamic of the doctor prescribing the medicine was shifting. Consumers were taking a more active role, looking for information, and in a way were reversing the tables a little bit on their doctors. They were asking questions, and even requesting medicines,” he recalled.

Seeing this as an interesting phenomenon, the Rodale team decided to add questions on DTC to a national survey they were conducting to examine consumer choice of OTC products. Those first measures were taken in the spring of

1997, before the FDA’s draft guidance was issued. When the FDA heard news of this study, they became very interested in learning the results. After sharing the findings with such DDMAC team members as Nancy Ostrove, DDMAC and Slaughter’s team developed a relationship where DDMAC provided technical assistance in the development of each year’s survey. “That was the evolution of *Prevention* Magazine’s Annual Survey of Consumer Reaction to DTC Advertising. The surveys became a point of interest because there was a huge interest in this new channel to consumers, and it had a lot of implications for health policy moving forward,” Slaughter stated.

The annual national survey of U.S. adults had humble beginnings, but buzz quickly circulated around the industry. The results have continually countered prevailing negative opinion of DTC advertising, showing that consumers understand and equally value risk and benefit information about prescription drugs, as well as providing objective evidence of the value of DTC to public health. The study became so successful, that companies not only invited Slaughter and his team to present their findings, but many would even contact *Prevention* just to find out what questions were going to be asked in that year’s survey.

Slaughter found it to be particularly rewarding when research he had conducted, particularly his work with *Prevention*, was actually used by policy-makers and decision-makers in government. “I had a lot of conversations about *Prevention*’s work on OTC choice, use of herbal remedies and vitamin supplements, and other research, with people at GAO, and office of inspector general. It was really rewarding for me to have my research play an important role in policy outcomes, that I hope ultimately play a beneficial role in promoting public health, to help people make well-informed health decisions,” he added. “The same thing happens with the DTC research. The FDA really did use the results from this study to inform their thinking about this activity. So in a way, that’s hugely rewarding.”

Looking ahead, Slaughter said he would like to see, one day, a time when it is possible to “lay to rest this whole debate over DTC. And do it in a manner that is responsible and in a way that has regulatory authorities and people on Capitol Hill [able to] understand what DTC does and doesn’t do. This notion of all you have to do is show somebody a television ad and they run off and demand medicine grossly overestimates the effectiveness of the advertising. It’s wrong-headed and it ultimately damages the industry’s ability to communicate effectively about viable treatment options and, more importantly, for consumers to learn about them. I would like to see this resolved in a responsible way.” ■

