

Quick, Get Me Some Meds

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So, a new linguistic idiosyncrasy has sent me into dead lurch toward the First Aid kit for the family anti-anxiety elixir. It's the abbreviated noun form of medicine — now commonly known as *meds* — and it's coming soon to a too-close-for-discomfort dialog near you.

To me, it's like nails on a chalkboard. C'mon, seriously? There are only two more syllables to go. You were almost there. (Sidenote: For an entire list of speech pet peeves, and blasé words or phrases, read [To Be Honest, I'm Lying](#) [1].)

Pull the new catchphrase down from the dialog bubbles in comic strips to the centerpiece of our roundtable. How did the industry get so up close and personal with consumers as to bring pharmaceutical language into the everyday household conversation — and even enough to warrant an axing of the word itself into a nickname?

Pharmacopeia Culture: Don't Mind Me ...

What irks me most is not the laziness in speech, but with which nonchalance the topic is broached, brandished (albeit by unassuming amber prescription bottle, which offers you some sort of relief from prying eyes) and delivered. When did it become cool to tap a few pills into your palm while casually signaling the wait staff for an ice water at a business lunch in your smartest pantsuit?

On an unrelated but equally poignant note, there's probably a fine line over what (surgery options, health/unhealthy lifestyle, prescription drugs, etc.) you are willing to examine and introduce into your own body — and mind! — as opposed to what you think a stranger should do in the name and scrawl of Dr. John Hancock. If the act of taking umpteen pills in public a day is a no biggie to some, however, why is it pharma headline fodder: [FDA Pushes Drugmakers To Curb Painkiller Abuse](#) [2]?

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Having a pharmacopeia of drugs in your purse is now perceived not only as normal, but is also trivialized by repetition via the AM/FM, tube (or Idiot Box as my mother so aptly termed it) and Net. That being said, do you think multimedia transmission signals can blur the boundaries of your health opinions, especially when marked by frequent pharma marketing exposure? The whole “ask your doctor if such-and-such is right for you” that tricks you into thinking that you’re being proactive about your health rather than pestering your family physician about an unlikely situation or a non-issue altogether ...

Turning of the Advertorial Tide

Why is it that we know so much about prescription drugs all of a sudden? If you recall, pharmaceutical companies were permitted by the FDA to start marketing straight to the consumer through TV in 1997. Now they are targeting the Web-savvy, too.

In case you’re looking for a shotgun story on how direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising was inspired, here it is from [MedPage Today](#) [3], “Clopidogrel (Plavix) usage by Medicaid recipients stayed on the same upward track as before the ads started, but the drug's unit cost jumped 11.8 percent when national TV network advertising starting airing in late 2001. The net effect was that Medicaid's per-enrollee expense curve for clopidogrel bent upward.”

Money was the inspiration. TV was the precursor. The Web will prove more powerful yet.

Nevertheless, a couple regulatory flies could land in the pharmaceutical industry’s ointment as it looks to contribute to the online pharma forum. An article entitled [Drug Industry Wants More Online Ads](#) [4] reports that prescription drug companies are collaborating with the FDA, hashing out the development of “rules for online advertising after [pharmaceutical] companies complained that the current guidelines for traditional media — which require a detailed list of possible side effects — have left them hamstrung on the Web.”

The article continues, “When drug companies have tried to adapt such ads to the abbreviated language of Google and Yahoo, they’ve run into trouble. In April, the FDA fired off warning letters to Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline and a dozen other drugmakers for search engine ads that did not mention drug risks.”

The Informed Consumer Argument

In qualifying the need for little or no regulation for online pharmaceutical advertising, one would argue that consumers are self-serving and should be expected to be responsible for their own welfare. I would argue that there is one major flaw in this logic: People aren’t even healthily skeptical in many cases.

That is, if a document looks too difficult to understand, I guess we’d better just take the experts’ word for it. The problem therein lies that the experts are typically self-serving pushers in one form or another. The logic runs parallel to the 10-page cell

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phone bill. Bill collectors know that if the text looks intimidating or overwhelming in the least, phone charges won't be questioned. Imagine all the hot-pink Highlighter possibilities ...

Now imagine using that Highlighter for calling out your health concerns in a warning box on your next prescription drug of choice. Oddly, we're given the information to bring a prescription drug of choice to our doctor's attention, yet lack the ability to fend ourselves from getting caught up in the medical marketing gibberish.

I finally assert my half-hearted position against big pharma toeing the waters of online advertising: In the era of WebMD, other Internet-informed self-diagnosis and the natural progression toward self-medication, I think un- or under-regulated Web advertising would be a very dangerous practice from a moral standpoint. Conversely, I think it makes the only commercial sense for a pharmaceutical company in this techno-hip culture.

While I'm all for educating consumers, we shouldn't need to educate them to the point of peril and hyper-hypochondria. It doesn't matter how much a mechanic studies a recipe book if he doesn't understand the ingredients.

Does the topic of pharmaceuticals and online advertising drive you to your medicine cabinet? Should those with vested interests in pharmaceuticals get to participate in the online drug conversation? Or should they be kicked out of the proverbial chat room? Let me know by e-mailing me at carrie.ellis@advantagemedia.com [5].

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