

HOW DO DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER DRUG ADVERTISEMENTS MEASURE UP?

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Prior to the 1980's, it was illegal for prescription drug manufacturers in the United States to advertise directly to consumers. Instead, these companies only advertised to medical professionals. Several prescription drug companies began direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising during the 1980s. However, this advertising faced strict limitations from the Food and Drug Administration. However, in 1997, the FDA relaxed some of these limitations, and DTC advertising began to grow rapidly. By 2009, drug companies' expenditures on DTC advertising had grown to \$4.5 billion. Nonetheless, DTC advertisements continue to face criticism. One criticism of direct-to-consumer advertisements is that product benefit and risk information is often not communicated clearly to consumers, e.g., that the ads contain inadequate information regarding risks, or vague descriptions of medication benefits. The present study seeks to assess the merits of these criticisms.

This research is being conducted in two stages. First, secondary research is being conducted to determine what other researchers have concluded regarding the representation of risk and benefit information in direct-to-consumer advertisements. Past studies have examined several aspects of DTC ads, including the balance between benefit and risk information, and the specificity of the information expressed. Second, primary research will be conducted, in which current DTC advertisements will be content-analyzed. This research will involve collecting DTC advertisements, developing a system of coding the information in these ads, and assessing and critiquing the ways in which product benefits and risks are presented to consumers through such advertisements.

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