

Pharmaceutical companies add celebrity to ad formula

[2 STAR Edition]

Houston Chronicle

Houston, Tex.

Mar 7, 1999

Authors: PHIL GALEWITZ

Pagination: 2

Dateline: NEW YORK

Abstract:

NEW YORK - Former presidential nominee Bob Dole admits he takes Viagra. The perfectly composed Joan Lunden suffers from itchy eyes and sneezing. Denver Broncos running back Terrell Davis fights migraine headaches.

The emergence of celebrity drug advertising - to patients and physicians - comes amid an explosion in consumer advertising since the Food and Drug Administration in August 1997 loosened restraints on television and radio commercials for prescription drugs.

Last July, Schering-Plough became the first pharmaceutical company to use a celebrity in a direct-to-consumer national television campaign. It tapped Lunden, former Good Morning America anchor, to promote its prescription allergy pill, Claritin.

*Copyright Houston Chronicle Publishing Company Division, The Hearst Corporation (the "Houston Chronicle")
Mar 7, 1999*

Full Text:

NEW YORK - Former presidential nominee Bob Dole admits he takes Viagra. The perfectly composed Joan Lunden suffers from itchy eyes and sneezing. Denver Broncos running back Terrell Davis fights migraine headaches.

No, these people aren't attending a self-help group for celebrities with ailments. They're helping drug makers pitch their medications.

As competition in the drug industry intensifies and pressure mounts on companies to build profits, an increasing number of pharmaceutical companies are employing famous actors, politicians and sports stars to attract consumer and physician interest.

"The use of celebrities is the next big way to differentiate a drug," said Kelly Peters, senior marketing manager for IMS Health, a health information company based in Plymouth Meeting, Pa.

The emergence of celebrity drug advertising - to patients and physicians - comes amid an explosion in consumer advertising since the Food and Drug Administration in August 1997 loosened restraints on television and radio commercials for prescription drugs.

Last July, Schering-Plough became the first pharmaceutical company to use a celebrity in a direct-to-consumer national television campaign. It tapped Lunden, former Good Morning America anchor, to promote its prescription allergy pill, Claritin.

The company would not reveal how much she was paid, though analysts have speculated it's about \$1 million a year.

The payoff for Schering-Plough: The aggressive advertising campaign for Claritin helped worldwide sales soar by 35 percent last year to \$2.3 billion, including \$1.9 billion in U.S. sales.

"We saw this as the next step to reach out to consumers," Schering-Plough spokesman Bob Consalvo said.

Despite their increasing use, celebrity ads still represent only a tiny portion of the billions the industry spends on drug promotion each year.

But the use of celebrities shows how pharmaceutical companies have become more creative in their marketing. For example, Schering-Plough advertises Claritin on United Airlines baggage tags and Merck offers patients a money-back guarantee on its cholesterol-lowering drug, Zocor.

Drug companies use different types of celebrity pitches to sell their products. In some instances, they use those who can give a firsthand testimonial to the effectiveness of the drug, as Lunden did with her hay fever treatment.

Other companies use public figures to raise awareness of an illness to spur visits to a doctor for treatment.

For instance, Pfizer, maker of Viagra - the only pill available in the United States for treatment of impotence - launched an educational campaign on the disorder last month featuring former Senate Majority Leader Dole.

Yet, in other instances, the celebrities are hired guns who use their reputation to pitch specific drugs.

Merck, the world's largest drug company, hired baseball star Cal Ripken to promote the company's Prinivil hypertension drug in ads that appear in medical magazines. Ripken, as the ads disclose, does not suffer from high blood pressure.

"Cal symbolizes hard work and a solid work ethic," Merck spokesman John Bloomfield said. "And Prinivil provides 'hard work ethic' against a disease."

Mickey Smith, professor of pharmaceutical administration at the University of Mississippi, said the celebrity's believability is key to making such campaigns work.

"The ads have to make sense," he said.

Mug: 1. Bob Dole; Photo: 2. Baseball star Cal Ripken is shown in an ad for Merck's Prinivil hypertension drug. As competition in the drug industry intensifies, an increasing number of drug makers are using celebrities to attract consumer and physician interest; Mug: 3. Joan Lunden

Credit: Associated Press

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission. --+++++940020161+++++7991328+++++--