



MARKETING ETHICS, PHARMACEUTICALS, AND MASS MARKETING

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Abstract

In the current mass marketing environment, marketing firms cannot market cigarettes or e-cigarettes (vapes). However, there are whole segments of companies who can market their products, including pharmaceutical products, alcohol, high saturated fat foods, performance automobiles, and investment opportunities via mass media and directly to consumers. This said, we find it ethical to state that in 1971, cigarette commercials were banned to help keep consumers safe (Hamilton, 1972), when other products that tend to be just as dangerous can mass market to everyone. Pharmaceutical companies are all over the media, and a lot of older people have the possibility to be hurt by some of these advertising campaigns. Many people may be ill-informed and watch these advertisements, call their doctor, and request a medication that may conflict with one of their current medicine prescriptions.

In addition to this, there are many organizations currently doing business that may be just as harmful to consumers as tobacco. Again, there are many people who may watch financial investment firm's advertisements and invest their money. Fast-food corporations have done some serious revamping of their food offerings in the last two decades (Adams, 2018), but the changes won't stop there. Many fast-food corporations have committed to reducing the calories, added sugar, sodium and saturated fat in some orders, or have added health options. Also, many alcohol companies have come up with a drink responsibly campaign to provide a show of care for consumers.

This paper intends to look at what needs to change in Marketing, and what can be done to keep consumers safe from all types of products, like tobacco, but not from others like alcohol, high saturated fat foods, and other products that have no advertising regulations. Also, with the advent of social media, are there requirements that need to be put in place to monitor this whole new arena for advertisers? The authors of this paper look at products that may hurt the public and question if things need to change. In addition, we look at if this change needs to start with marketing companies, the government, or within marketing education.

Keywords

Mass Marketing, Marketing Education, Safe Products and Consumer Behavior

Consumer-Oriented Marketing

Consumer-oriented, or sustainable marketing is the need and call for socially responsible marketing that takes the consumers' wellbeing into account, which is marketing within, and supportive of, sustainable economic development (Van Dam, 1996) for the betterment of the consumer. For many years now, marketing and advertising has taken the blame for many concepts including childhood obesity, alcohol abuse, and pharmaceutical issues. According to Mulinari (2016), There is abundant evidence of unethical or

illicit marketing (p. 149). The goal of this paper is to provide options for marketing professionals to avoid criticism. Other issues that marketing firms face are increased pricing, deceptive practices, unsafe products, and poor customer service. The authors of this paper are suggesting marketing organizations incorporate consumer-oriented marketing, or successful relationship marketing (Volkov, 2004).

In May 2025, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, the Health and Human Services Secretary for the United States of America, was urging the United States Congress to ban prescription drug advertising. The reason being incomplete information is advertised to a lot of people who do not have enough relevant information to make an informed decision. The United States and New Zealand are the only two countries who allow pharmaceutical television advertisements. In 2024, the pharmaceutical industry spent 5.3 billion (Graham, 2025) on national television advertisements, money that could have been better spent on helping make the medications more economical for the consumer. The Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FDCA) grants the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority over marketing and advertising of prescription medication. The Federal Trade Commission Act (FTCA) prohibits “unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce.” (Graham, CMO Today, 2025)

Pharmaceutical advertising purports to educate the public about new treatments and raises new awareness about certain health conditions which encourages people to ask their doctors about new medications. However, pharmaceutical marketing may lead to making people think they need medications that they possibly do not need, leading to unintentional overmedication. Pharmaceutical advertisements are just not on television they are in medical and pharmacy journals as well.

Word of mouth as an advertising trend, at one time [was] viewed as a sociological phenomenon to be observed and described, is increasingly considered a marketing tool to be managed (Rosen 2000). In 2007, Rhu and Feick spoke about the influence that Pharmaceutical/Medical information provides via word of mouth, and it turns out that only 4% of people within the study said they were affected by word of mouth. Which leads the authors of this paper to state that the main influence for obtaining these medications does not come from word of mouth, but comes from the advertisements on television, in magazines, and in medical journals. From this, advertisements appear to the public to be considered more credible than listening to a random friend via word-of-mouth giving advice.

Pharmaceutical Marketing – Emotional and Rational appeals

Many advertisements are focusing on causing fear in people, it is fear and hope. The advertisements combine both fear and hope to promote the product. Pharmaceutical advertisements must be clear and fair. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now being used to gather and combine data analytics on pharmaceutical advertisements and how they work. Some pharmaceutical companies send out surveys and use big data analytics with AI on the information they receive back providing data showing that fear may essentially work.

Direct to Consumer (DTC) advertisements rely not only on rational appeals, but also emotional appeals whether it be positive or negative. With over-the-counter advertisements (dietary supplements) it is emotional, for instance how you can lose weight or make your skin smooth. Many of the advertisements have upbeat singing or songs to catch viewers’ attention via the uplifting tone of the advertisement.

Controversy surrounding pharmaceutical advertising

An on-going controversy is potential for misinformation, and the concern would be unrealistic expectations. Also, promoting drugs and/or medication over natural or wholistic lifestyle decisions. Encouraging individuals to focus on a healthier lifestyle could be more effective than the medication itself. Other controversies include patient-physician issues. Patients put pressure on physicians for a particular medication that a physician may disagree with. The financial implications are a big controversy as well. Advertisements may drive a demand for a newer and more expensive medication, that patients may not be aware of.

Direct to Consumer

Direct to consumer pharmaceutical advertising (DTCPA) is the business model of selling products directly to customers and bypassing any third party. Direct-to-consumer sales are usually transacted online, via social media. In the year 2021, direct-to-customer e-commerce sales in the United States were over \$128 Billion (Heinemann, 2023). It started in the 1960’s when Congress gave authority to FDA to regulate prescription drug advertising and labeling. In the U.S., pharmaceutical companies can advertise prescription

drugs directly to consumers. They run TV commercials and take out glossy full-page ads in magazines. A person struggling with health issues or someone looking for a miracle drug that will fix everything is who they are targeting as far as pharmaceutical advertisements. Currently the evidence effect is both positive and negative. This evidence may help or hurt individuals and only the US and New Zealand are monitoring it.

Research indicates some advertisements are positive and some are negative. It may have an impact on the US and New Zealand. Companies must focus on maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks that these ads contain. One study stated, (Parrekh & Shrank 2018) these ads should include quantitative data in the ads. The list of warnings and side effects are so long that most people put them out of their heads or cannot keep up with the information. If quantitative data was part of the advertisement, it may be more effective.

Social Media

Pharmaceutical ads on social media have been growing in the last years. There are Facebook groups supporting a particular product and people putting patient stories on Instagram, Twitter chats, etc... Some pharmaceutical companies have posted dance challenges on TikTok to raise awareness. Most advertisements are emotional storytelling. They are trying to reach people and grab the attention of viewers in an emotional way. Both the FTC and FDA regulate social media and all internet advertising and promotion. The FDA issued guidance documents that include many items affecting social media marketing. These guidelines discuss when firms will be held accountable for social media content (Form 2253) and how firms can address information that is incorrect that was posted by third parties that have no affiliation with the company (King & Spalding, 2023).

CVS – Marketing Ethics

In 2014, CVS decided to stop selling cigarettes. They lost 2 billion dollars in annual revenue, due to the decision (Bachman & Justin, 2024). Currently, CVS [may] go out of business for selling opioids (Polinski, Howell, 2017). The US Department of Justice announced a lawsuit in May 2022 (Bachman & Justin, 2024) accusing pharmacy chain CVS of filling illegal opioid prescriptions and billing federal health insurance programs, contributing to a nationwide epidemic of opioid addiction and overdose. CVS Health agreed to pay \$5 billion over 10 years to settle lawsuits brought to them by states. (Bachman & Justin, 2024)

Conclusion

Marketing has been a focus of heavy scrutiny for many years. Child obesity, cigarettes, alcohol, financial advising, etc... Pharmaceutical advertisements have been an issue because if you watch TV (with ads), there is a high volume of ads relating to pharmaceuticals. With only two countries in the world who allow this, which raises the question of change. Marketers must decide on the best way to advertise their products in an appropriate way. In 2025, Robert Kennedy tried to ban pharmaceutical advertisements, but it was struck down by the US Congress. For the future, firms must be aware of the influence their advertisements have on individuals and change advertisements accordingly. This also includes all types of Marketing advertisements. As we move into a sustainable marketing environment, firms must closely monitor their advertisements, who they are targeting, and focus on the well-being of potential customers.

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