

Getting a Reading on Readers

Stephen Ferley; PMB, Print Measurement Bureau

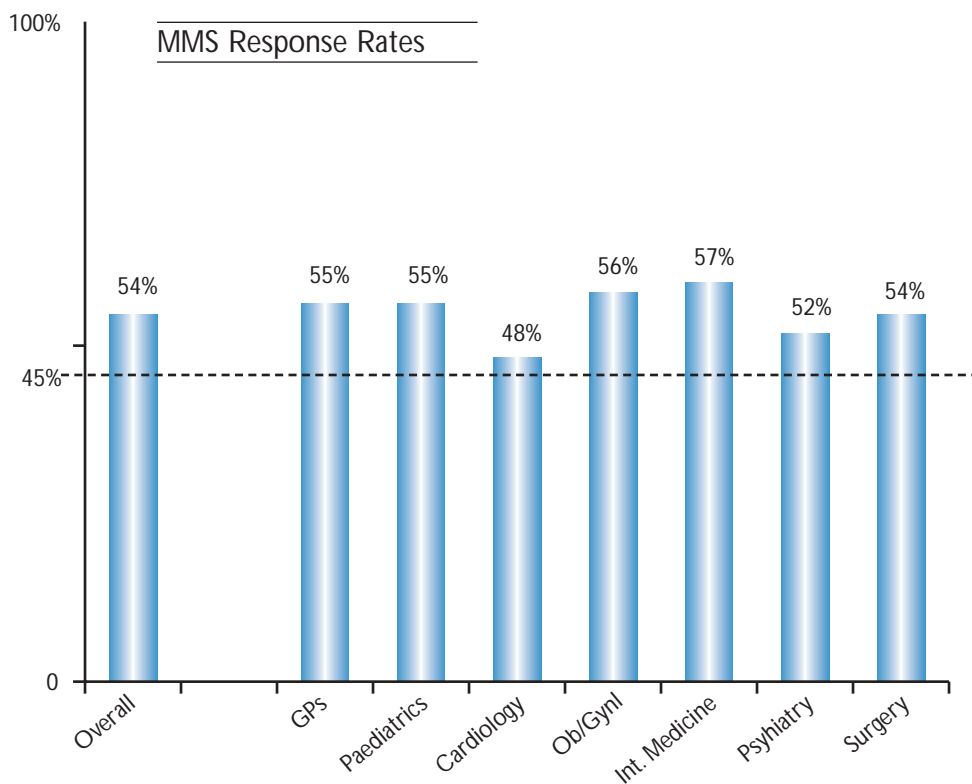
The Print Measurement Bureau (PMB) is well known in the consumer advertising world for producing the annual readership data which has become the “bible” for buying and selling print advertising. PMB’s consumer study started back in 1973, and now measures over 100 magazines. It also collects product usage information from the same sample of 24,000 Canadians, which allows publishers to show that their magazine reaches X thousand consumers of ice cream or Y thousand people who vacation in Mexico. Ever-questioning ad agency buyers and planners have

access to the same data on the same publication which makes for the all-important level playing field.

PMB now provides the same type of service for pharmaceutical publications. The PMB Medical Media Study (MMS) started in January 2001, and the first data were released in July last year. Hugh Dow, president of M2 Universal Communications, says, “Media planning and buying for our pharmaceutical clients is a major part of the entire M2 operation. Obviously, print isn’t the only part of the media mix in the pharmaceutical area but it is important. So we

need to know how many physicians and what type of physicians read which books. The MMS study does that for us.”

One might ask, “How on earth do you find out who actually reads a given publication?” Well, as they say, “It ain’t easy.” In fact, there’s a whole research industry geared to doing just that! The principle of the research is that it’s survey-based. That is to say, it uses a scientifically structured sample of the population. In this case, the “population” is defined as family physicians and specialists in surgery, internal medicine, psychiatry, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, and cardiology.



Reading Readers

A fresh sample is drawn every year, and a questionnaire is mailed to each physician selected, asking about his or her reading habits for pharmaceutical publications. The actual readership is measured by establishing how many out of four issues the physician reads, and a second question determines how much of each publication is read. The combination of the two answers produces a measure known as “average page exposure” an important benchmark for medical publications. Other measures of reading habits include the time spent reading each publication, the value of the publication to the reader, and how enjoyable it is to read.

Fieldwork runs throughout the year, with equal numbers of interviews every month, aimed at producing the most reliable measure of readership. The continuous nature of the interviewing has another advantage it will soon be possible to answer a question which has long concerned buyers and sellers of pharmaceutical print advertising: Is readership seasonal? Is reading higher, or lower, in the summer months?

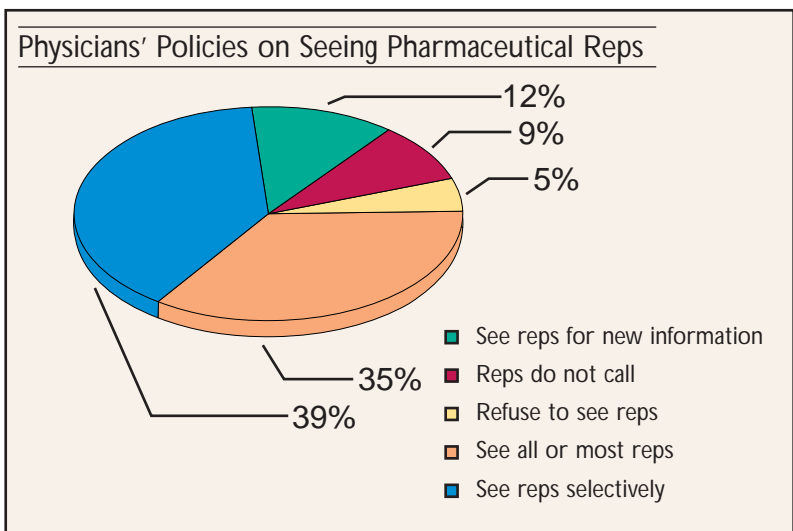
One of the most important parts of survey research is to keep response rates as high as possible to ensure that the answers from people who respond are typical of the entire original sample. In the case of the MMS, this is even more critical, because physicians are extremely busy; their time is valuable; they are very difficult to reach, even for valid research purposes. The chart on page 27 shows that this year’s MMS study, released in July, had very high response rates 55%

across the entire sample, and more than the target of 45% in every specialty.

How do we get such a good result? First, the questionnaire needs to be as “tight” as possible, and you must make as few demands as possible on the physician’s time. In addition, as Hastings Withers, the research director at PMB says, “You have to be aware that incentives are an important part of the researcher’s arsenal.” He adds: “Without disclosing the actual levels, I can tell you the incentive to each physician for completing the questionnaire is ‘considerable.’ In fact, the incentives in this study are as high as I’ve seen in any readership research in Canada, or for that matter in any other country!”

The MMS 2002 study measures 32 English and six French publications, including weekly tabloids, association journals, and special interest publications directed at physicians. The range is wide, but there’s one common factor: all the publications are valid vehicles for carrying the message to physicians and specialists about pharmaceutical brands and their relative properties and strengths.

The study collects more than readership information. There are questions about physicians’ drug prescribing habits. Both the actual number of drugs they normally prescribe in a day, and the actual types of drugs prescribed. Users can identify the readership patterns of “light prescribers” and “heavy prescribers.” They can also look more closely at prescribing information on specific drug classes. For instance, this shows that 29% of GP’s and family physicians write over 20 prescriptions per week for antibiotics.



Reading Readers

The 2002 study reported that one in every two physicians is selective about seeing pharmaceutical reps; and a further 14% claim they never see reps. However, both groups read medical publications. For example, 86% of physicians read at least one of the four weekly or bi-weekly titles measured, and 97% read at least one of the monthly or less frequently published books measured.


Sixteen leading ad agencies in the pharmaceutical field sponsor the study and use the data to maximize the effectiveness and value of their clients' campaign plans:

Allard•Johnson Communications
Bates Healthworld
Euro RSCG Healthcare
Harrison, Young, Pesonen & Newell
Healthcare Marketing Resources
Lacroix-Bleau Communication-Marketing
Le Group TMC
M2 Universal Communications
Marketforce
Medicus Intercon
MindShare Canada
Optimedia Canada

Pleds Agency (Merck Frosst Canada)
Publicite Anderson
Sudler Hennessey
Troutbeck Chernoff

One of the most valuable facets of this type of study is the sample on which the study is based. PMB will maximize this by offering pharmaceutical advertisers a Return-to-Sample option to re-contact physicians in the sample who have agreed to be re-interviewed for research purposes. This option will be available from fall 2002 onwards.

PMB may be new to the field of pharmaceutical media measurement, but it brings decades of experience in the consumer magazine field. We look forward to "getting a reading on the readers" and supplying information to the pharmaceutical media industry for many years to come.

Stephen Ferley is President of PMB, Print Measurement Bureau, and can be contacted by e-mail (steve@pmb.ca). 

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