

# Direct to Consumer Advertising: What's the Bottom Line?



By Matthew Herper

Television advertisements for prescription drugs are often credited with accelerating ever-rising sales of blockbuster medicines. Some doctors blame the ads for selling patients on medicines they don't need or expensive pills that don't work any better than cheaper versions. But, surprisingly, prescription drug ads don't work as well as those for similar products.

Viewers seem less likely to remember prescription drug ads on television than ads for over-the-counter medicines or nutritional supplements, according to research provided by Intermedia Advertising Group (IAG), a research firm that uses surveys of tens of thousands of people to determine what consumers remember about the advertising they see (Table 1). People are more likely to under-

Table 1

## The Most Effective Medication & Supplement Ads, Year-To-Date

Rank	Brand	Ad Description
1	Stacker 2®	Lite—mob boss introduces Trish Stratus, pills in violin case
2	Alka-Seltzer®	Plus—man turns to block of ice at surprise party, nose & throat tag
3	Stacker 2®	Ephedra Free—wrestler Big Show fishes, hangs out with race car driver Scott Wimmer
4	Stacker 2®	Ephedra Free—wrestler Big Show goes to the rodeo with Jeff Hammond
5	Viagra®	Bob goes to a party and everyone asks what's different about him
6	Breathe Right®	Nasal Strips—boy on bed, head flattens
7	Halls®	Fruit Breezers—golfer hits people on head with golf balls (30 sec.)
8	Excedrin®	Quick Tabs—man complains about traffic and headaches (15 sec.)
9	Halls®	Fruit Breezers—golfer hits people on head with golf balls (15 sec.)
10	Excedrin®	Quick Tabs—man complains about traffic and headaches (30 sec.)

Source: Intermedia Advertising Group. Data through April 27. Measured recall of ad message during prime time by thousands of people. Where two versions of an ad are listed, time length is provided.

stand and recall ads for soda, food, lingerie, and beer than for prescription drugs.

This is potentially a very bad thing. Like many doctors, Dr. Clifford Dasco, a vice-chair at Baylor College of Medicine, worries that direct-to-consumer advertising will cause patients to ask for medicines they don't need. But he also thinks ads could play an important role. "We have words of art in medicine that are innately deceptive," Dr. Dasco says. If our words can be translated into images that are understandable and they create a more open market for information, people can make better decisions."

Right now, that's not happening. Prescription drug ads underperform those for over-the-counter drugs, which are made and marketed by the same firms (Table 2). An ad for Celebrex®, the painkiller sold by Pfizer, was the top-ranked prescription drug ad by IAG's metrics in 2002; but it came in ninth place when prescription drugs, over-the-

counter drugs, and herbal supplements were mixed together. Ads for Imodium®, the diarrhea treatment sold by Johnson & Johnson, and Excedrin®, a mixture of acetaminophen, acetylsalicylic acid, and caffeine sold by Bristol-Myers Squibb, were etched more deeply in consumers' minds.

It is not clear why prescription drug ads perform so dismally. One obvious answer is regulation. All that fine print included on TV ads for prescription products certainly makes it more difficult for companies to be convincing. Stacker 2®, the reputed herbal "fat burner" sold by privately held NVE Pharmaceuticals, can tell its story however it wants, but big pharmaceutical companies do face restrictions. Another factor: prescription drug ads are a relatively new phenomenon and drug firms still have a lot to learn about making them. CPM

Table 2

**The Most Effective Prescription Medication Ads, 2002**

Rank	Brand	Ad Description
1	Celebrex®	People with arthritis dance at parties
2	Vioxx®	Dorothy Hamill skates at outdoor rink
3	Zocor®	Dan Reeves on sidelines, team douses in Gatorade
4	Detrol®	LA courtroom scene, juror "has to go"
5	Lipitor®	Man dives into pool
6	Viagra®	Race car driver Mark Martin, "Six is my number"
7	Viagra®	People in office ask Joe what's different
8	Ortho Evra®	Woman in blue talks about patch
9	Zyrtec®	Two woman with cat, birdhouses
10	Singulair®	Woman has asthma, coaches soccer team

Source: Intermedia Advertising Group. Measured recall of ad message during prime time by thousands of people.

Reprinted from *Forbes.com*, May 5, 2003.