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The eyes have it

Researcher says he knows how to judge drug-ad interest

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Lee Weinblatt, a veteran advertising researcher, says the big drug makers have lost their way.

Half the direct-to-consumer advertising that crowds television and fills glossy magazines, Weinblatt says, misses the mark, and misses it badly. Drugmakers have gone too far with ubiquitous campaigns that feature talking beavers and sexually dysfunctional troubadours, techniques that blur the lines between prescription drugs and laundry soap, he said.

"The pharmaceutical companies are following the packaged goods way of marketing," Weinblatt says. "They are being led by the nose by consumer marketing/ advertising divisions that do the latest pharmaceutical ads and split their time marketing Toyotas."

Weinblatt is no industry gadfly; he counts many of the biggest drugmakers among his clients, including Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Novartis, GlaxoSmithKline, Bayer and AstraZeneca. But he insists he can prove with scientific precision that the edgy carnival barker's technique is not the best motivator for consumers to visit their doctors for a prescription.

"There are some great commercials out there," Weinblatt said during a recent interview at his office in Tenafly. "There are commercials that do engage people. The problem is most of the pharma companies are using the wrong measures that they are on the right track."

Weinblatt's firm, PreTesting, recently developed a system that records saccadic eye motion -- the involuntary flicks and darts of the eye -- as consumers watch television commercials and read billboards or print advertising.

After years of debate, some researchers now think saccadic eye motion provides a kind of window into subliminal thoughts. Passive eye monitoring, Weinblatt said, is a more accurate way of gauging a subject's response than diaries or focus groups, which depend on the honesty of participants or their willingness to push buttons.

PreTesting is betting its new system will gain traction as pharmaceutical advertisers seek answers to why some of their most expensive print and television campaigns fail. In most cases, Weinblatt said, tests show consumers pay more attention to medicine pitches that don't bury the message in slogans, logos and other gimmicks.

Consider Takeda Pharmaceuticals North America, which since 2005 has spent more on advertising the insomnia pill Rozerem than the drug has generated in revenue. Its television and print commercials feature a sleepless Abe Lincoln and a talking beaver.

"Initially, there was interest in the talking beaver," said Weinblatt. "So what? They buried the point."

Weinblatt concedes most of his pharmaceutical clients have been skeptical about the new technology, and so far, PreTesting has used the system to test just six drugmaker ads.

But growing pressure to measure the effect of commercials may force changes on Madison Avenue. Nielsen Media Research, the largest rating agency, also is introducing new systems that more closely gauge viewer reaction to print and broadcast campaigns.

"The consumer is really in control of what they are going to listen to. It's not the case we can sell by

yelling," said Mary Baglivo, chief executive of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi New York, whose clients include Novartis, AstraZeneca and Thompson Medical, the maker of the diet pill Dexatrim.

In any case, Weinblatt faces an uphill climb if he is going to change the tone of direct-to-consumer drug advertising.

Big Pharma is firmly committed to mass advertising: Industry spending on TV and print ads surged 14 percent last year, to more than \$5 billion in the U.S. market, and it jumped another 6.7 percent in the first quarter of 2007, according to TNSMedia Intelligence, a firm that tracks advertising spending.

And the drugmakers seem to be getting their money's worth. In the first two quarters of this year, many of the top pharmaceutical companies reported strong revenue and profit growth. Eli Lilly's revenue was up 20 percent in the second quarter, Merck's revenue rose 17 percent, and sales of Schering-Plough's cholesterol fighter Vytorin more than doubled the company's profit.

A LONGTIME QUEST

For three decades, Weinblatt has chased a surefire method to measure audience responses to radio, television and print advertising, packaging, direct mail and billboards.

A gadgeteer and photography buff, Weinblatt holds more than 70 patents, including one for the first eye-motion sensor in Canon cameras. The walls of his office are lined with plaques commemorating his patents, as well as poster-sized blow-ups of his still lifes and landscapes.

Weinblatt, 61, is perhaps best known for his MediaCheck system, a technology that monitors what television shows a household watches and when viewers "zap" commercials by turning the channel or fast-forwarding with a recording device like TiVo. Media Check is installed in 7,000 homes in Omaha, San Diego and Austin, Texas. Weinblatt said the company has orders to wire 130,000 homes over the next year.

His first job was as a clinical psychologist at a hospital in the 1960s. But a friend who knew of his passion for photography brought him to a market research firm to implement a technology called "pupilmetrics." Then, in 1972, he started his own company, Perception Research, which later went belly up.

A decade later, Weinblatt founded PreTesting, building it into one of the country's best-known advertising testing services. His most important contribution was MediaCheck, though Weinblatt says the new saccadic eye motion tracker -- a computer-aided camera that follows volunteers' eyes as they view television or read a print ads -- has the potential to be even more successful.

Unlike the makers of other consumer products, drugmakers face the additional challenge of motivating consumers to identify their products with particular disease states and to make the necessary appointments to obtain a prescription and acquire the treatment. Filling the airways and magazine pages does not guarantee success, Weinblatt says.

One popular TV commercial that does succeed, he said, is for Sepracor's Lunesta sleeping pill. Consumers he monitored for eye movement were mesmerized by "anticipation about what happens next" as the colorful luna moth, the brand's logo, flutters over a slumbering character on the screen. The moth, Weinblatt said, helps deliver the message of "restful sleep" without distracting viewers.

A TV ad that didn't test so well, Weinblatt said, is Pfizer's latest campaign for its Lipitor cholesterol medicine, the world's top-selling prescription drug. The commercials feature Robert Jarvik, famous for developing the Jarvik 7 artificial heart, talking about the health benefits of the statin therapy.

In saccadic eye tests, Weinblatt said, consumers have a "blank stare," their eyes darting over Jarvik's face instead of focusing on what he's saying.

"People look all over trying to figure out who he is," Weinblatt said. "You can't let the attention-getting device take over the commercial."

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