

Linguistics professor examines manufacturers' prescription drug websites

June 30 2010

Dartmouth Linguistics Professor Lewis Glinert and Jon Schommer, the associate head of the Department of Pharmaceutical Care and Health Systems at the University of Minnesota, have examined the corporate websites dedicated to the 100 best-selling prescription drugs. They found a startling lack of consistency in an industry where advertising standards are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

"Communicating via a website is common practice today," says Glinert, "and consumers are very savvy about doing their own research on the Internet. The FDA has rules about direct-to-consumer print and television [drug advertising](#), so we think it makes sense to also regulate websites and other marketing tools when it comes to prescription medicine. Consumers need consistent and balanced information."

Glinert presented their study, "Manufacturers' prescription drug websites: A gray area of discourse and ethics," at the Communication, Medicine and Ethics (COMET) 2010 Conference at Boston University School of Public Health on June 28. Glinert and Schommer have previously published on the topic of direct-to-consumer drug advertising and Glinert has also presented their research at an FDA hearing.

In this paper, Glinert and Schommer found that the websites:

- have no obvious linear narrative or 'next page' or conclusion; users move in a maze of text and navigation choices, some

leading far away

- lack a popular genre name (like infomercial), meaning that users come to them without a clear idea of how to perceive them
- have an unpredictable mix of information and promotion, content, verbal style, visuals, and layout
- often present safety and risk information in small font, in cumbersome un-bulleted blocks of text, detached from promotional text and videos, and below a page's scrolling 'fold'

Glinert notes that the Internet search engine Google has also been working to help consumers with their research on [prescription drugs](#). A Google search of a prescription or generic drug name, for example Lipitor, will now display a summary and description at the top of the search results. The new feature, developed in partnership with the National Institutes of Health, links to NIH content and risk data.

"Our research provides justification for Google's move," says Glinert. "Only time will tell if this is a major change for the better."

Provided by Dartmouth College

Citation: Linguistics professor examines manufacturers' prescription drug websites (2010, June 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-06-linguistics-professor-prescription-drug-websites.html>

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