

# Google, Yahoo call for expanded online drug ads

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(AP) -- Google, Yahoo and other Web companies joined the pharmaceutical industry Thursday in urging federal regulators to make it easier to pitch drugs in online advertisements.

The Food and Drug Administration is hearing from dozens of drug and advertising executives at a two-day meeting on Internet marketing of medical products.

The agency has agreed to consider developing rules for online ads after companies complained that the guidelines for traditional media - which require detailed lists of side effects - have left them hamstrung on the Web.

As drug maker and media companies push for increased online access, consumer advocates say the FDA must respond with increased enforcement, and that industry should pay for the effort.

Drug makers spent more than \$4.3 billion on patient-targeted advertisements last year, though online marketing represented about 3 percent of that amount. The industry's limited online marketing presence represents a lost opportunity for search engines like [Google](#) and Yahoo, given strong demand for online medical information.

Yahoo Vice President David Zinman is urging the FDA to draft new rules that give companies greater flexibility on the Web.

"We need to get some adjustment to the way the medium is used because it's very different from print and broadcast - that's the main challenge," Zinman said in an interview Thursday morning.

FDA rules require all ads that mention the benefits of a drug also disclose its risks.

Since advertising links that appear on sites like Yahoo only leave room for a few words, companies have effectively been barred from touting the benefits of their products. Companies work around this by running anonymous ads about general medical conditions. A link that reads "Cholesterol levels" on Yahoo, for instance, connects to the site for Lipitor, Pfizer's best-selling cholesterol drug.

Zinman and other online executives argue that such ads don't help consumers who are trying to effectively navigate the Web.

"In effect there's less transparency for the consumer because the brand name cannot be displayed on the page," Zinman said.

Sunnyvale, Calif.-based [Yahoo](#) is testing a new type of ad that would contain an extra link to detailed drug information, including risks.

Rival Google is proposing a similar design that would list a short summary of drugs risks, followed by a link to full prescribing information.

"We're going to propose ways to get balanced and relevant advertising to consumers that is transparent," said Mary Ann Belliveau, Google's director of health care advertising.

The Internet companies' proposals square with suggestions from drug industry's lobby, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers

Association.

The group suggests placing an FDA logo within advertisements that would link viewers to the drug's full risk information. The abbreviated text would let manufacturers send short messages about their drugs on social media sites like Twitter, which has a 140-character limit.

PhRMA also is scheduled to present Thursday, along with drugmakers Eli Lilly & Co. and Sanofi-Aventis.

Consumer health advocates said they agree online ads should link to FDA-approved drug information. But Alan Coukell of the Pew Prescription Project recommended against using the FDA's own logo "or anything that might suggest that FDA is endorsing either the product or the promotion."

Diana Zuckerman, director of the National Research Center for Women and Families, also opposed the logo idea, and pointed out that increased Web advertising would only add to the FDA's already daunting workload. The agency regulates products that account for one quarter of the economy, including food, drugs, medical devices, cosmetics and tobacco products.

"To ensure the balance and accuracy of ads on the Internet and new media will require substantially more resources for the FDA," Zuckerman told a panel of FDA advisers. "Realistically, that money will need to come from new industry user fees."

Pharmaceutical companies already pay millions to fund FDA's review of new drugs. Zuckerman and groups like the Consumers Union said funding for the review of online advertising should be added to those fees.

Even after the FDA reviews hours of comments from the meeting, the agency will only be in the early stages of crafting new guidelines.

According to some industry experts, the agency is unlikely to release its final regulations until 2011 - when they may already lag behind the ever-changing media technology.

A spokeswoman for the FDA on Wednesday declined to comment on the agency's timeline.

"Next steps after the meeting will be to review all the testimony provided at the hearing," Shelly Burgess wrote in an e-mail.

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