MedicalXpress

Study about branded drug website risk disclosure gets FTC attention

October 12 2016

Do you take time to read the risk warnings on drug websites before you take the drug?

Mariea Hoy, an advertising professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has studied that question and determined that no, you probably don't.

Last month, Hoy presented her findings in Washington, D.C. at a Federal Trade Commission workshop titled "Putting Disclosures to Test."

Hoy and former UT faculty member Abbey Levenshus, who now teaches at Butler University in Indiana, conducted the research, and their findings were recently published in the *Journal of Risk Research*.

"We looked at whether consumers seek out, notice and read risk disclosures on a branded drug website," Hoy said.

She and Levenshus recruited 29 people with seasonal allergies to participate in their study. Those people were told that the researchers were studying how individuals look for health information online and that they would be looking at a website for a new prescription allergy drug. The website included a warning section, listing the risks associated with the drug.

To determine how much attention the people paid to the risk warnings,

the researchers used eye tracking to see how where and how long they looked; survey questions asking the participants how much of the risk information they read; and a post-task interview to revisit the website and review how they read the information.

Hoy and Levenshus conclude that although 80 percent of the study participants claimed to have read half of the information or more, they had done only limited reading and had limited recall of the listed risks.

"This study's eye-tracking, survey and interview data have demonstrated that mere exposure to risks does not automatically indicate risk readership—no matter how fairly and well balanced or clearly and conspicuously those risks may be presented," they concluded.

Why do consumers skim over this important information?

They found that most of the study participants focused on the drug's benefits and ignored the risks.

"Perceived familiarity with the health condition, its risks and companion drug options surfaced as the primary explanation for failure to seek, and subsequently process, the risk information," the researchers conclude.

To increase consumers' attention to risks, the scholars recommend that drug manufacturers present the information differently.

They suggest that risks be presented before benefits and any risk information unique to the drug be highlighted graphically with borders or colors.

Hoy said she was pleased that the FTC noticed the study and invited her to present its findings at the workshop, whose attendees ranged from academic researchers to members of government agencies.

"I am honored to have represented my university, my college and most particularly my school to spotlight the research that our faculty and graduates produce," she said.

Hoy has worked in UT's School of Advertising and Public Relations since 1989. She teaches courses in research, advertising and society and the major's capstone course, Campaigns. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Central Oklahoma and her Master of Business Administration and doctorate from Oklahoma State University.

More information: Mariea Grubbs Hoy et al. A mixed-methods approach to assessing actual risk readership on branded drug websites, *Journal of Risk Research* (2016). DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2016.1223160

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville