An updated analysis of direct-to-consumer television advertisements for prescription drugs

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Although proponents suggest that direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising is educational and motivating, a new analysis finds that the
potential educational value of such advertising has declined.

Compared to an analysis of direct-to-consumer television advertising published in 2007, this study found a significant decrease in the percentage of ads conveying information about the conditions being targeted, such as risk factors (decreased from 26 percent to 16 percent) and prevalence (decreased from 25 percent to 16 percent).

Positive emotional appeals continued to be emphasized (94 percent of ads), with a decrease in the use of negative emotional appeals (from 75 percent to 51 percent), resulting in a more positive portrayal of the medication experience.

Lifestyles portrayed in the ads emphasized how products can enable more recreational activities (69 percent of ads), while fewer ads suggested lifestyle change in addition to the product (decreased from 23 percent to seven percent).

The authors suggest that portraying positive aspects of the post-medication experience, such as recreational activities, endurance, and social approval, may have motivational value, but may also imply off-label outcomes and encourage an inappropriately broad population to seek the advertised drug.

According to the authors, improving the educational value of direct-to-consumer advertising is likely to require further regulatory action by the FDA, rather than reliance on self-regulation by the pharmaceutical industry.
