

Viagra and the Battle of the Awkward Ads

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ADVERTISING has had its share of nasty three-way battles over the years: McDonald's vs. Burger King vs. Wendy's. Bud Light vs. Miller Lite vs. Coors Light. Toyota vs. Nissan vs. Honda. Kellogg's vs. Post vs. General Mills.

Now comes Viagra vs. Levitra vs. Cialis. It is a Madison Avenue dream. And nightmare.

It is a dream because the three rivals are flush with cash and eager to compete aggressively in a market that is already big and is forecast to grow fast. Ad agencies have been panting like lovesick suitors over the idea of clients willing to spend more than \$300 million this year when many other clients are pinching pennies.

The problem is that the products in question treat erectile dysfunction, a condition, like adult incontinence or hemorrhoids, that is hard to discuss without being too vague or too vulgar. So the advertisers have to figure out how to build customer demand and loyalty without offending people and without providing additional fodder for endless gags by late-night talk-show hosts.

Even worse, the products are prescription drugs, so they come freighted with federal restrictions and requirements about advertising content. For instance, if an ad mentions the product name and what it treats, side effects must also be disclosed - in this case eyebrow-lifters like "erections that last for more than four hours."

"My 6-year-old daughter turned to me and said, 'What's a four-hour erection?' " said Kelly Simmons, executive vice president and chief creative officer at Tierney Communications in Philadelphia, who studies sex issues in marketing. "How do you explain it?"

The whole endeavor is mined with awkward moments, beginning with those faced by the 30 million American men who the drug companies estimate have trouble getting and keeping erections. Only 13 percent of those men are being treated, drug makers reckon, so analysts at Lehman Brothers figure that the market for Viagra, Levitra and Cialis should more than triple by 2010, to \$6 billion a year.

That is, if the ad agencies can help destigmatize seeking treatment for erectile dysfunction, said Nancy Bryan, vice president for men's health marketing at Bayer Pharmaceuticals in West Haven, Conn. It sells Levitra in a joint venture with GlaxoSmithKline.

In recent weeks, Levitra has slipped to third place in sales, having been overtaken by Cialis, which is marketed by Lilly Icos, a joint venture of Eli Lilly & Company and the Icos Corporation. But together they have already grabbed 15 percent of the market from the leader, Viagra, which created the category when Pfizer introduced it in 1998. Levitra was introduced last August; Cialis, in November.

As the rivalry heats up, the ads are flooding television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the Internet and even mailboxes. The drug makers are sponsoring sports like golf and auto racing; Pfizer has initiated a frequent-user "value card,"

offering a free seventh prescription for each six a customer fills. Levitra and Cialis have even tried the Super Bowl of advertising: the Super Bowl itself. Their makers paid more than \$4 million each for 60-second spots during the game in February.

The ads are running so often and in so many forums that the drug companies say they feel compelled to change pitches frequently, to keep them fresh. On April 15, Bayer and GlaxoSmithKline relinquished the aggressively macho posture they had taken since introducing Levitra. The old campaign was fraught with symbols: a man failing, then succeeding, at tossing a football through a tire swing.

In its place, Levitra released a commercial created by the Quantum Group in Parsippany, N.J., a unit of the WPP Group. The ad focused on a woman's sultry testimonial to Levitra's effect on her man: "Let's just say he notices a difference in the experience, like a 'we should do this more often' difference." If that is too subtle, she adds that Levitra gives her guy the "quality of response that he wants, time and again."

The ads may be oblique, but the strategy is not. "We give men the quality erections they want," said David Pernock, senior vice president for pharmaceuticals marketing at GlaxoSmithKline in Philadelphia.

Pfizer, aiming to protect Viagra's market share, has been changing campaigns continuously for a couple of years - maybe too often, some contend. "I found myself saying, 'What happened to Viagra?' " said Cheryl Swanson, a principal at Tonic, a brand strategy consultant in New York. "The message has diminished."

In February, Pfizer stopped running ads showing men being praised by friends and co-workers for some obvious but indefinable difference. The unspoken subtext: they were finally having intercourse again. Now it runs commercials showing men leaping for joy as the exultant anthem by Queen, "We Are the Champions," plays in the background. The idea: to convey the confidence that Pfizer hopes men will feel after asking doctors about Viagra.

"The brand that captures how people would like to see themselves will succeed," said Maxine Thomas, a creative planner at the Toronto office of Taxi, the Canadian agency that created the commercial.

Pfizer's task is complicated by its past success. As the pioneer brand in an untapped market, Viagra initially prospered. Now it must keep battling Cialis and Levitra without becoming so common that it is perceived as a generic name for impotence treatments, as Kleenex is for tissues.

As Pfizer executives prepare for their next marketing push, they are taking the unconventional step of soliciting ideas from four agencies that produce ads for other Pfizer prescription drugs like Lipitor and Zyrtec as well as from the agency in charge of Viagra ads, Cline Davis & Mann in New York, part of the Omnicom Group.

The five-way bake-off is likely to be decided next month, in time for new Viagra ads to come out in the third quarter. "The environment is changing, and we want to make sure we remain relevant," said Dorothy Wetzel, vice president for consumer marketing at the United States pharmaceuticals division of Pfizer in New York. Just as the Pfizer research and development division "screens thousands of different compounds to find the one that makes a difference," she said, "we're trying to apply

the same process to our communication development: getting multiple agencies to develop ideas and screen it down to one 'killer' communication."

It's almost enough to drive marketers to another Pfizer drug, Xanax. "Understanding consumers is an ongoing journey," Ms. Wetzel said, one that keeps her "and the rest of Pfizer up at night."

As is typical in consumer-brand battles, Viagra's competitors are trying to outflank the market leader with contrasting portrayals of their products' attributes. GlaxoSmithKline wants to portray Levitra as "the product that really works," Mr. Pernock said, and to reassure men with erectile dysfunction that they are no less manly. It began with what Ms. Swanson, the brand strategist at Toniq, called "a stereotypical gridiron persona" typified by the spokesman Mike Ditka, former coach of the Chicago Bears, "in your face, pointing his finger at you." It also has "vital" brand colors - purple and orange - and, of course, that tire swing, all of which combine to "make a guy feel more comfortable, offer reassurance," she said. Now Levitra has shifted to including the woman's point of view and a new slogan, "Quality when it counts."

From the start, Cialis came from a different direction: warmer and gentler - almost more feminine. That was apparent in its name, pronounced SEE-alice; its color scheme, pastel green and yellow; and its soft-focus campaign, showing a man and a woman side by side, often relaxing in matching bathtubs. The different, less-hurried approach stems from a fundamental difference between Cialis and its rivals: while Viagra and Levitra provide a four-hour window during which a man can get and keep an erection, Cialis opens that window to 36 hours. The continuous presence of women in Cialis ads is a subtle signal that the drug makes it easier for them to set the pace with their men, in contrast to the primarily male-driven imagery for Levitra and Viagra. For this reason, Europeans have dubbed Cialis "le weekend" drug.

In research sessions conducted before Lilly Icos began selling Cialis, women whose partners used Viagra or Levitra complained that " 'It feels like there's three of us in bed' - the man, the woman and the pill," said Matt Beebe, United States brand team leader in Indianapolis for Cialis. After hearing of the potential 36-hour duration of Cialis, men and women "described the concept of wanting to choose the moment," he added, which "helped us shape our advertising." Cialis's slogan is, "Will you be ready?"

The Grey Worldwide agency in New York, part of the Grey Global Group, spent three years developing the Cialis campaign. The basic insight was that "it takes two to tango, but no one was paying attention to the relationship," said Millicent Badillo, the senior vice president for account services at Grey who oversees the account. "Cialis is restoring what you were doing before you had erectile dysfunction, and that's a heck of a place to be."

Such enthusiasm led to some creative discussions that had to be reined in. One ad, for example, shows a woman rubbing the bald head of a man washing his car. "We could have taken it to the hose moment," Ms. Badillo said, "but that's not where we wanted to go." For the most part, Grey and Lilly Icos have relied on the bathtub image, now as symbolic for Cialis as the tire swing for Levitra and the blue, diamond-shaped pill for Viagra. "It's associated with all the good things" patients want, Ms. Badillo said, "intimate moments, taking your time, being stress-free."

"It isn't a quickie shower," she added. "There is no rush here." That low-key approach - trying, as Toniq's Ms. Swanson put it, to "keep to a certain level of taste" - could help Cialis pass muster from critics of the more explicit ads in the category, even if the Cialis campaign must include that disclaimer about the four-hour side effect.

Taste is why Grey chose his-and-hers bathtubs rather than a shared hot tub. "We don't want to put Cialis that close to the sex act," Mr. Beebe said. "You won't see a lot of sexual innuendo: a train going through a tunnel, a football going through a beat-up tire."

That jest, clearly aimed at Levitra, points up another way the brands' fight mimics more traditional consumer-product skirmishes: rivals take potshots at one another. For example, the commercial run by Levitra for the Super Bowl featured Mr. Ditka suggesting that football is superior to baseball, a sport that Viagra has sponsored.

"It would be lovely to see them use more humor," said Ms. Simmons of Tierney Communications. She said she was bothered by how many of the ads so far have concentrated "on the man figuring out how to get 'it' done." Humor not only lightens the mood, she added, but also acknowledges that "men and women have been talking to each other about sex in veiled terms for centuries."

One idea she offered gratis to the drug makers: hire the comedian George Carlin to discuss erectile dysfunction in the context of his routine about "the seven words you can't say on television."

"He'd be hysterical," Ms. Simmons said, "and he's the right age."