

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER PHARMACEUTICAL ADVERTISING

Note to Educator: The following exercises and questions are based on the model of critical thinking presented by Richard Paul in his book How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World. For more information, go to www.criticalthinking.org.

DEFINITIONS

DTC (Direct-to-Consumer) Advertising: This is the term used to describe the practice of advertising prescription drugs directly to patients.

Critical Thinking: Critical thinking is that mode of thinking—about any subject, content, or problem—in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism. (As defined by The Critical Thinking Community, www.criticalthinking.org.)

PREPARATION

Record an hour or more of evening television news programming. (You will generally get a good selection of ads from this programming slot.) Select one or more DTC ads to show during class.

DAY 1:

1. Before playing the chosen ad the first time, say to your students, “We’re going to take a look at an advertisement for a prescription drug. This first time through, I just want you to watch it—no need to try and analyze it at this point—but do your best to keep your reactions to yourselves.” Play the ad all the way through. Then have students write for 10 minutes in their journals or notebooks. Give them this prompt, “Respond to the ad we just watched. How did it make you feel? What thoughts are you having? What questions do you have? Just let one thing lead to another, but keep writing until I tell you to stop. The purpose of this exercise is just to give you a chance to write down and explore your initial reactions and thoughts. There is no need, just yet, to analyze.”
2. Tell your students to put aside what they just wrote for a moment. Tell your students, “Now we’re going to make as many observations as we can about the ad.” Explain that an observation is something that one notices, but doesn’t involve analysis or interpretation. Practice making observations of the classroom first:
 - “I notice that there are three windows on one wall.”
 - “I notice that the clock is above the chalkboard.”
 - “I notice that the wastebasket is on the other side of the door than it usually is.”

Help your students to understand that being aware and making *keen* observations is a critical component of thinking critically.

3. Play the ad again, this time without sound. Pause the ad every 10 seconds (DTC ads are generally only about 30 seconds long, so you’ll only need to pause it a couple of times.) At each pause, have students jot down as many observations as they are able to in their notebooks. Tell them to be especially aware of setting, color, motion, people, lifestyle, and emotion. After you’ve played the whole ad through, give them additional time to write down the rest of their observations.
4. Say to your students, “Now I want you to close your eyes, and just pay attention to the sound.” Play the ad again with sound. After it’s finished playing, have students jot down observations about the sound of the ad.

5. Next, have students share what they noticed with the class. It is helpful to have either you or a student go to the chalkboard, whiteboard, or easel and write the classes' collected observations.
6. Once you have quite a few observations about the ad up on the board, make another column and write "Information Needed" at the top and ask students what other information they think they will need to help them think critically about this ad.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Do research to find any information that was put on the list in number 6 above. In addition, make certain that students research the following:

- How much money did the company that manufactures the drug in this advertisement spend on marketing last year?
- How much profit did this company make last year?
- What other information can you find about this company?
- What have critics said about this company or drug?

Possibly assign students to read one or more of the articles referenced in "Further Reading."

DAY 2:

Note to Educator: Sometimes the topic comes up about whether or not pharmaceutical drugs are necessary. For the purpose of this exercise—which focuses on the advertising of pharmaceutical drugs—we suggest leaving that question alone as it is a big topic and there are many angles. You can say, "There are many perspectives on the importance of pharmaceutical drugs in treating many different illnesses. I certainly encourage you to gather more information and explore that topic further, but that's not what we're discussing here today. Today, we're looking at the practice of advertising prescription drugs directly to consumers."

Have a class discussion using the following questions as prompts:

1. What are some of your general reactions to the ad? Both your first impressions and then anything that you started thinking about as you wrote and reflected.
2. What do you think the purpose of this ad is? How do you know? What evidence supports your thinking?
3. To what audience does this ad seem to be aimed? How do you know? What assumptions do the producers of this ad make about their audience?
4. What techniques is the ad using to try to get consumers to buy the drug? Do you think these techniques are effective? Why or why not?
5. What messages (about health, about this particular ailment, about life, etc.) does this ad send? What are your reactions to these messages? Explain.
6. What are some possible consequences of the messages that this ad and others like it send? Explore this.
7. Consider the information that you found out about the pharmaceutical drug company that made this ad. How does that affect your thinking about this ad? Explain.
8. What questions do you still have? What further information do you feel like you need to continue exploring this topic and thinking about it in more depth?
9. What reactions (both emotional and intellectual) do you have to companies advertising prescription drugs directly to patients? How do you think this practice affects how patients think about their health?

RESOURCES

VIDEO:

Big Bucks, Big Pharma: Marketing Disease & Selling Drugs

Available from the Media Education Foundation, 60 Masonic St., Northampton, MA. Call 1.800.897.0089 or visit the website www.mediaed.org.

WEBSITES:

Commercial Alert, a non-profit organization focused on the commercialization of culture.

www.commercialalert.org (click on "Drug Ads" under "Featured Campaigns")

Essential Information, a non-profit advocacy group. "Suggested Comments On Direct-To-Consumer Pharmaceutical Advertising," <http://www.essentialaction.org/commercialspeech/fdad.html>

FURTHER READING:

Health Action International, a non-profit advocacy group. *Blurring the Boundaries*, Chapter 1:

"Promotion Targeting Consumers," <http://www.haiweb.org/pubs/blurring/blurring.ch1.html>

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit, private operating foundation. "Prescription Drugs: Market & Industry," <http://www.kff.org/rxdrugs/market.cfm>

Z Magazine, June 2002 Volume 15 Number 6, "Drug Advertising," <http://www.zmag.org/ZMag/articles/jun02lenzer.html>

A Perspective From a Pharmaceutical Company: Pfizer, Inc. Pharmaceutical Company: "Access and Affordability-- Advertising and Promotion," <http://www.pfizer.com/pfizer/policy/advertising.jsp>

Angell, Marcia. *The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What To Do About It*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Katherine Greider. *The Big Fix: How the Pharmaceutical Industry Rips Off American Consumers*. New York: Public Affairs, 2003.

Moynihan, Ray, and Alan Cassels. *Selling Sickness: How the World's Biggest Pharmaceutical Companies Are Turning Us All Into Patients*. New York: Nation Books, 2005.