

TV Ads for Prescription Drug To Start Today, Causing a Stir

By MICHAEL WALDHOLZ
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

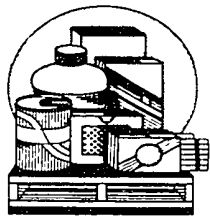
NOTHING IS GENERATING more debate in the drug industry than recent efforts by a few companies to advertise their prescription products directly to the public. Today, the first televised ads for a prescription drug will begin a six-week trial in Florida, and they are certain to cause a stir.

"Right now, we don't want anyone advertising, especially on TV," says Lloyd G. Millstein, an official of the Food and Drug Administration, which wants more time to review the issue. "We can't stop them, but we'd rather they waited."

Nonetheless, Boots Pharmaceuticals Inc. will promote its Rufen, an anti-arthritis drug, in a series of 30-second and 60-second commercials appearing about 50 times a day on four television channels in the Tampa area.

Boots's message is simple. It asks arthritis sufferers to request that their doctors prescribe Rufen if they already are taking the same drug sold by Upjohn Co. under the brand name Motrin. The Boots pitch says the only difference between the two brands, chemically known as ibuprofen, is that Rufen costs less than Motrin.

"We can tell doctors until we're blue in the face that they can save patients money by prescribing our product," says John D. Bryer, president of Boots. But because the cost of medicine often isn't a physician's concern, he says, it is more effective to take a price-comparison campaign directly to the drug's users.



SINCE STARTING in Shreveport, La., in 1977, Boots, a subsidiary of Boots Co. of Britain, has gotten into the U.S. market through a number of entrepreneurial schemes. The television ad campaign is only its most recent salvo in a six-year battle with Upjohn. Upjohn originally licensed ibuprofen from Boots's parent and made it the most prescribed arthritis medicine in the U.S. Sales of the drug this year will exceed \$200 million.

In 1981, Boots won a court fight with Upjohn over Boots's right to sell Rufen in the U.S. Soon afterward it offered arthritis patients a \$1.50 rebate coupon each time they bought a bottle of Rufen instead of Motrin. As a result, Boots has grabbed about 18% of the ibuprofen market. (Upjohn declines to comment about Boots's past marketing strategies except to say it has found them "interesting.")

Mr. Bryer concedes that the company's television campaign could backfire if doctors feel the ads undermine their role or if the FDA says they violate its regulations. But, Mr. Bryer says, "we're not doing this because it's the right thing to do but because it's the necessary thing to do." He adds that Boots is willing to be a pioneer because "we are small, and if we don't grow rapidly, we won't grow at all."

In the past year or so, several other prescription drug companies have tried some consumer advertising, but those attempts were all print ads with limited runs. Most companies have been reluctant to do more because of possible repercussions, even though drug makers are well-versed in advertising; their print ads in medical journals are slick productions.

BUT WITH COMPETITION intensifying and with Americans showing a hunger for more health news, many in the drug industry expect a flood of direct-to-consumer ads soon. Indeed, this week the Cable Health Network said that it has lined up eight sponsors for a new educational TV show for doctors. The show, which has the FDA's blessing, will have commercials touting specific prescription drugs.

For a trailblazing effort, the Boots TV ads are rather staid. "We have made sure we don't fly in the face of existing FDA guidelines," Mr. Bryer says. The commercials, he adds, are "tasteful" and aren't a "hard sell."

Mr. Bryer, in fact, stars in the ads. The tall, Hollywood-hand-some Britisher tells viewers, "If you have arthritis and your doctor has prescribed ibuprofen, the No. 1 drug for the symptomatic relief of arthritis, you should know he can prescribe it under two brands, Motrin and Rufen." Mr. Bryer goes on to say that the drugs have the same uses and side effects. "The most important difference," he says, is that "Rufen can cost you considerably less."

During the commercials a warning to patients will be superimposed on the screen, alerting them to potentially troublesome side effects of Rufen and precautions to take. And viewers who ask Boots for details will be sent a full list of the drug's restrictions.

MR. BRYER BELIEVES he has been careful not to offend physicians. In the ads, he advises watchers to ask their doctor for details about Rufen. Boots is sending Mailgrams to doctors and pharmacists this week, alerting them to the promotion.

Boots also is attempting to respond to FDA concerns about consumer ads by running a survey of doctor and patient reactions during the commercials' six-week run. The results should help the FDA and the industry evaluate such ads, Mr. Bryer says.

In the future, Boots expects to market Rufen in a larger dosage to compete against the same size Motrin pill sold by Upjohn. And to help kick off its introduction, Boots will offer pharmacists entry into a drawing for a free trip to England each time they sell a bottle of Rufen instead of Motrin.

But it's the new ads that Boots expects to drive its Rufen business. Mr. Bryer, who says that other companies will soon find that consumer ads are the most "cost-beneficial" marketing method, adds that he is "absolutely convinced that such ads are the way everyone will do business in the future." And, he says, "I want to make sure I get involved on the ground floor."