

# TED Talk Script: Pharma and Advertising

By Rhett Ahlander

Currently, the pharmaceutical industry or, pharma as many people says these day, is only allowed to use direct-to-consumer advertising in two countries. This practice poses multiple potential ethical issues.

The pharmaceutical industry spends, and gains, millions of dollars annually, because it advertises its products, namely medications. However, this practice – of advertising prescription drugs – is currently illegal in every country but two: New Zealand and the United States. This practice should be illegal in every country, because it is unethical.

The proof is in the pudding – the commercials we see every day – ads to treat depression, psoriasis, chronic dry eye and even erectile dysfunction. Yes, even E.D. Now, these ads make it seem so simple, right? Each one opens with a person or two dealing with some sort of medical issue. It describes what they deal with and how it affects their lives. Then, the drugs show up – and the problem is solved – and for some reason, it always ends by a lake. But, the last 10 seconds, sometimes five, are taken up by this terrible list of other conditions. You have heard it before: “Side effects may include skin irritation, nausea, trouble breathing and, in rare cases, death.” At least they told us. But, they should have made it clearer.

This is where the pharma industry goes a little south. If the industry isn’t willing to provide sufficient information and clarity on drug side effects, how can we trust it at all? It is enough of a problem already that people feel the need to take certain drugs that aren’t working – but, rather, are doing more harm than good.

People should not be deceived into buying drugs that could be *more harm than good*. Doctors know what is best for their patients and will tell them. Advertisers shouldn’t be telling people what drugs to use, especially if what they are getting is much more expensive.

Advertising shouldn’t be used to promote products or services that have the potential to cause serious health issues. There are too many negative side effects for the [drugs we see on television](#), billboards and in print to be promoted on such a large scale.

Most advertising for prescriptions drugs doesn’t do a sufficient job in declaring all of the side effects, even if being narrated or shown in text. These are either spoken too fast or are shown in fine print, and in either case, most people will not hear or see each effect.

And when it comes to lack of efficacy, [annual spending by drug companies](#) on television advertisements reached more than \$3 billion in 2005. Today, in 2017, this figure has grown to more than \$5 billion annually. This money could be spent elsewhere, on more important things – such as medical research for cures and treatments. This would be effective.

My mother has multiple sclerosis. She has dealt with this since she was in her twenties. As you can imagine, she has been prescribed many drugs. Have any of these cured her of M.S.? No. And, she has struggled through the negative side effects of drugs that were *supposed* to help for

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decades. And, she isn't the only person to be affected. Many people are prescribed drugs to treat or cure something, only to end up dealing with an unrelated condition.

Now, am I upset with doctors? A little. My mother has had some terrible doctors. Do I hate that she has to take all of these medications? Yes, I do. But, I am more so frustrated by the fact that pharmaceutical companies still feel the need to advertise drugs that aren't working. These companies need to take a step back and think for a bit. Why not stop promoting drugs and start making them better? It is time to start producing better-quality drug products.

But, why would the industry do such a thing? The people within it are obviously doing something right because it is a highly-successful market. As history shows, the pharma industry hasn't always been on the ethically-sound side of the line. Certain drugs are prescribed all the time for uses that aren't approved by the FDA. Just ask my mother. And, it may be legal by government standards. But, as many know, the terms legal and ethical don't describe the same things.

Now, the FDA is considering giving drug companies the green light to [advertise drugs for uses that are not approved](#). Ellen Kunes of Consumer Reports was quoted saying, "People who get a prescription from their doctor for a drug that's not approved to treat their condition may be at a higher risk of side effects and other serious problems." When will the madness end?

Increasingly, pharmaceutical companies are pushing drugs out to the public that are doing more harm than good. [Many drugs seem too dangerous](#) to take because of the long lists of negative side effects.

Here's the thing: advertisers and drug companies are collaborating in order to contribute to a broken and immoral practice. Many of the well-known, and highly-promoted, drugs have side effects which don't make the prescription worth the time, effort, nor the harm.

If someone needs a specific drug their doctor can inform them about it. The industry doesn't need advertising, as we're used to. A doctor can promote both healthy diets and lifestyles, but sometimes those practices are not enough for particular health issues. [Doctors must prescribe drugs](#), at times, for their patients. So why advertise drugs?

[Doctors are paid to promote drugs](#) in their offices– and they do this job well. So why does the pharma industry still feel the need to use advertising? The best form of advertising is by word-of-mouth and a message coming from a licensed physician would bare a lot of weight to someone in need of serious help.

Pharmaceutical companies should focus their budgets on matters of greater importance, and doctors can educate their patients about drugs that might be helpful.

Let's go a bit deeper. The drugs seen on television and in magazines currently are the expensive versions. The inexpensive drugs aren't getting exposure, and many people are paying more than they should – especially because the less-costly drugs work just as well.

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[Pharma advertising has increased](#), which means the costs to keep it going have as well. And, the cost of drugs will go up accordingly. There's inflation everywhere.

Many people have serious illnesses and need the right medications to treat or overcome those conditions. Why add on unnecessary costs for overpriced prescriptions?

Now, the pharma industry needs to be [kept in check](#). The general population wants drugs ads off of television, and in a related tone, many don't want drugs to be approved at a faster rate.

The pharmaceutical industry is on dangerous waters by advertising its drug products. The fact that only two countries still use direct-to-consumer advertising to promote pharma products should say everything about the ethicality of this practice. Why would we as consumers, as well as the pharma industry, both be so foolish as to mess with something so wrong?

Drug advertising is unethical and unnecessary – and it's time to put an end to this practice. When shooting a commercial or designing a print ad for a drug, it should speak volumes about how ethical this is, especially if you have to describe other potential problems that might be caused by this drug. Remember the people at the lake in those drug ads. Next time you're watching one of these ads, please take a moment to yell at the television from the comfort of your sofa. Tell them to stop what they're doing. You could save a lot of people from *a lot* of pain – like my mother.

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