

# PR Campaign: Overdosed America!



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July 2010

You won't see me on the beach with the latest best seller or thriller book. But you might see me with a book on nutrition, health, or what some call, "self help" books. Boring to you perhaps, but chock full of information on things that may not *interest* you, but certainly *impact* you.

One such book that caught my eye and is indeed compelling is called, "**Overdosed America**", by John Abramson, M.D. The cover reads, "The Broken Promise of American Medicine – How the Pharmaceutical Companies are Corrupting Science, Misleading Doctors, and Threatening your Health".

While there are many surprising and disturbing facts relayed in this book, one I'd like to share here has to do with public relations campaigns to influence public opinion and health policies. According to Dr. Abramson, "Public relations firms earn their keep by skillfully blurring the line between independent news and commercially planted "information". With repetition in trusted sources – TV, newspapers, radio and magazines – the messages carried in these so-called news stories gradually take hold.

The issue of counterfeit drugs provides a good example. In the past few years, many American senior citizens have been taking bus rides to Canada to buy prescription drugs to avoid prices in the United States that average up to 70% higher. Others order drugs by mail or over the Internet from Canadian pharmacies. This end run around the high price of drugs in the U.S. is costing the drug companies significant profits. PhRMA wanted to curb this trend, especially while Medicare prescription drug coverage was being debated on Capital Hill.

As if out of nowhere, the safety of drugs purchases from other countries became a major issue in the United States. Articles were written about "Fakes in the medicine cabinet" and so forth, saying that the FDA had noted an alarming increase in counterfeit prescription drugs entering the U.S. The same story was all over the news. Yet a spokesperson for the Canadian drug authority told the Wall Street Journal that they were not aware of any counterfeit activity at the time.

Appearing on the very same page of the Wall Street Journal, but with a much smaller headline, was the real story behind the story. "Drug Companies Cry "Danger over Imports", reporting that big PhRMA had hired a public relations firm to help develop an effective "communications

campaign” to stop drug importation. The first step was to find the themes that would have the greatest impact. The firm suggested that PhRMA could create doubts about the wisdom of saving money by importing drugs if they focused on the “safety and effectiveness” of drugs bought from foreign sources.

The PR campaign worked. Included in the Medicare prescription drug bill are provisions that make drug importation cumbersome and therefore unlikely. Yet while the drug industry has been railing against the dangers of foreign imports, it has increasingly transferred its own production to foreign factories to save on labor costs! Just how concerned is the American pharmaceutical industry about protecting the public from the danger of imported drugs?

This is but one example in a well referenced, fascinating book. I will give more in later articles. Stay tuned. Be well.

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