Moving beyond **THE CLICK,**

WHEN GOING TO **the Net**

Based on both public and proprietary research, it is clear that the Internet is proving to be an effective tool for engaging actual and potential prescribers for a given brand or class of drugs in an intellectual dialog that can change prescribing behavior dramatically.

IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH PHARMAVOICE, FRED FOARD, EXECUTIVE VP, COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA INC., DISCUSSES FOUR SPECIFIC PROBLEMS INHERENT IN ADAPTING THE INTERNET FOR HEALTHCARE PROMOTION.

FRED FOARD

FRED FOARD HAS WATCHED THE EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNET WITHIN THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY WITH A CLOSE EYE. Through his intimate involvement in the medium, as a media-planning executive with Communications Media Inc., which delivers non-personal promotion to professional healthcare audiences, Mr. Foard has identified four reasons why the industry has not taken to "the Net" with the same reckless abandon as the consumer goods industry.

"While there are arguably more reasons, I'd like to discuss four," Mr. Foard says. "These all derive from 'translation' issues. They are problems inherent in adapting a consumer-oriented medium to health-professional targets and to ROI expectations. I call these 'retardant' factors: the inability to discriminate professional from lay Internet surfers; the lack of standardized terminology; the inability to target specific medical specialties; and the inability to measure advertising effectiveness on the Internet."

The Prescriber

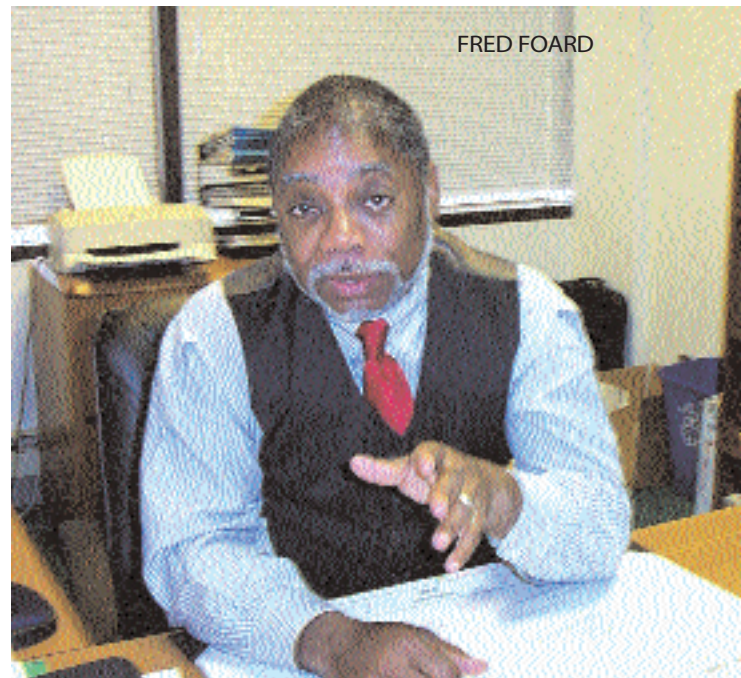In the pharmaceutical industry, branded drugs — not diagnostics or other non-drug items — make up more than 90% of the business.

"In 2000, pharma spent $2.5 billion — a 35% increase over 1999 — in DTC promotion," he says. "The figures for 2001 are not yet in, but I've seen one projection of $3 billion — a more modest 20% growth. I suspect one reason for the less aggressive investment is that after several years of heavy DTC spending, pharma is beginning to examine the ROI. DTC has been successful in building brand awareness and in generating interest. But prescriptions don't come from consumers."

Indeed, while pharma has increasingly spent wildly on consumer advertising, advertising to professional audiences has declined dramatically.

Unlike consumer goods industries, the consumer cannot take direct Internet action to acquire a product. "The potential key Internet audience for pharma is therefore the prescriber," he says. "This fact leads to the first retardant factor: the inability to precisely discriminate professional from lay Internet surfers."

Of all of the medical-oriented Websites, only a handful can distinguish, and then verify, health-professional traffic from layperson traffic and therefore there is no good way to assess exposure potential.

The Terminology

"Even if one could distinguish health professional traffic from layperson traffic, there

remains a second barrier: the lack of standardized terminology and measurement tools," Mr. Foard says. "This is a particularly frustrating problem given that the Internet potentially provides the capability for precise and immediate tracking of all activity."

Mr. Foard says, "The problem is that there's no universal approach for tallying each instance that an ad is viewed. What are 'visits,' 'ad impressions,' 'pageviews,' and 'clicks'? And, is there a uniform metric that applies to each? Furthermore, are there reliable sources for obtaining these data in a manner that are interchangeable or, at least, related?"

Mr. Foard says the answer to these critical questions is a qualified "Yes." Recently, the Interactive Advertising Bureau published a set of definitions (see box on this page).

"It will take some time for all parties (Website purveyors, audit houses, media planners/buyers) to fully incorporate these uniform definitions," he says.

The Specialty Target

"Even if an advertiser could tell when a message was exposed to a health professional as opposed to a layperson, and there were uniform metrics to track Web activity and compare exposure potential between Website alternatives, the advertiser is still faced with the third retardant factor: targeting medical specialties," Mr. Foard says. "For most of the high-traffic health Websites, even those with qualified 'professional' sections, advertisers cannot directly target a specific medical specialty."

There are some password-protected sites that can tell how many physicians of a given specialty are "registered users." With prodding, they can probably tell an advertiser how many times in a month a physician in a specialty has logged on. Although they can, Mr. Foard says they don't provide this data as an ongoing service.

"We are left with making some assumptions about whether and how a given professional-oriented Website can deliver 'eyeballs on the (ad) page' for targeted specialty audiences," he says. "We would not buy space in a medical journal that could not demonstrate specific readership numbers for a given specialty. For the Internet, we must settle for a good guess."

The Measurement

According to Mr. Foard, the fourth retardant factor is the inability to measure advertising effectiveness on the Internet.

"In my business of media planning for professional healthcare advertising, we know that advertising generally cannot be relied on to deliver prescriptions," he says. "Research shows that advertising as an adjunct to other promotional forms (primarily personal selling) is associated with incremental prescribing behavior. Perhaps it would be useful if we could tag unique visitors to medical Websites and track their pre- and post-exposure prescribing. I know of no medical Website purveyor who offers this service and I am unaware of prescription audit firms providing this service."

In contrast, Mr. Foard points to consumer-goods advertisers who can calculate "conversion rates" and "referral rates" for relating Internet activity to purchase or inquiry behavior. For prescription-drug advertisers, there is currently no way to tell whether a banner ad or interstitial touting a branded drug stimulated any action on the part of the viewer to make any move in the direction of selecting that brand for his/her next appropriate patient.

The "Take-Home" Message

Given these four factors, Mr. Foard says it's no wonder that the pharma industry has been slow to adopt the medium.

"It doesn't help that there are few people with Internet advertising expertise who really understand pharmaceutical promotion to professionals or people who really understand pharmaceutical promotion to professionals who have Internet media-planning, buying, management, and assessment experience," he says.

Mr. Foard suggests the industry should focus on the Internet's successes — winning friends and influencing enemies through self-directed education. "E-detailing, e-symposia, and Webcasts that allow interaction with experts and real-time self-testing, are setting records in participation," he says.

All of these vehicles for targeted interactivity with health professionals not only help form favorable clinical opinions but also create a positive relationship between the sponsoring drug marketer and the participant. Through education, the clinical message that is behind the advertising message is delivered at a time, place, and pace chosen by the target.

"I'll take that any day over a 5-second view of a banner ad on a medical Website page cluttered with competing information and distracting pop-up ads," Mr. Foard says. "But that's just one man's opinion." ◆

Defining Internet Activity Measurement Metrics

▶ **AD IMPRESSION** — A measurement of responses from an ad-delivery system to an ad request from the user's browser, which is filtered from robotic activity and recorded at a point as late as possible in the process of delivery of the creative material to the user's browser — therefore closest to being an actual opportunity for the user to see an ad.

▶ **CLICK** — There are three types of click — click-through, in-unit click, and mouse-over. Click-throughs are measurements of user-initiated actions of clicking on an ad element, causing a redirect to another Web location. In-unit clicks and mouse-overs do result in server log events and new content being served but may not necessarily include a redirect to another Website.

▶ **PAGE IMPRESSION** — A measurement of responses from a Webserver to a page request from the user browser, which is filtered to remove robotic activity and error codes before reporting, and is recorded as close as possible to the user's opportunity to see the page.

▶ **VISIT** — One or more text and/or graphics downloads from a site qualifying as at least one page, without 30 consecutive minutes of inactivity, which can be reasonably attributed to a single browser for a single session.

For a complete list of definitions, log onto IAB's Website at www.iab.net.

PharmaVoice welcomes comments about this article. E-mail us at feedback@pharmalinx.com.