Lipitor Ad Campaign Heads Downstream

Pfizer’s campaign for Lipitor featuring Robert Jarvik was certainly attention-getting. The ads featured bold images, a distinguished spokesman, and bold claims about the cholesterol product’s competitors. But the ads also drew scrutiny over whether Jarvik’s role created misrepresentations. Below is the anatomy of the ad campaign and some of its discontents.

The Pitch: According to storyboards compiled by VMS, the television ads picture Jarvik in many roles: explaining product risk in a parka while a man with close resemblance rows a sculling boat in the background; slicing a banana for cereal while affirming that “as a doctor” he still has concerns about high cholesterol; saying he “trusts his heart to Lipitor” before going out for a run with his son; standing in front of heart and brain image scans as he informs viewers about the dangers of heart disease; and appearing in front of a human heart model as he explains how the heart works and how Lipitor can help. Additionally, the ads state that Jarvik is the “inventor of the artificial heart,” or “inventor of the Jarvik artificial heart.” The ad depicting Jarvik running with his son states that “Lipitor does more than Crestor, Vytorin, or Zetia.”

Radio versions of the ad also directly name competing generics; in some ads Jarvik states that Lipitor is “more studied than [Merck’s now-generic] Zocor,” and in another radio ad he states, “In clinical studies Lipitor was proven to lower cholesterol significantly more than Zocor.”

The Problem: Reps. John Dingell, D-Mich., and Bart Stupak, D-Mich., launched a congressional inquiry to investigate Jarvik’s appearance in the DTC ads. The congressmen sent letters to Pfizer questioning whether the ads mislead viewers to believe Jarvik is a cardiologist, while he is not licensed to practice medicine (though he has a medical degree). In the ads, Jarvik states that “more cardiologists surveyed said they’d prescribe Lipitor for their own families than any other cholesterol lowering brand.” The letter also asks for “due diligence” by Pfizer regarding the claim that Jarvik takes Lipitor. Since the controversy erupted, questions have also been raised about whether Jarvik was rowing as he appeared to be in the ads and whether Jarvik was in fact the inventor of artificial heart.