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Losing A Lot More Than Weight

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Drug maker GlaxoSmithKline has set its foot into uncharted territory with the launch of Alli, the much-anticipated weight-loss drug that made its debut earlier this summer. Not only is it the first over-the-counter diet pill approved by the

FDA, it represents something of a marketing milestone, too. Unlike other purveyors of diet pills, GlaxoSmithKline is bending over backwards (not a bad way to lose weight in itself) to actually temper consumer expectations, instead of just boosting them. The company appears bent on making sure that the public doesn't view Alli as a quick fix—a magic pill.

On today's often-greasy menu of marketing approaches, GSK's approach is admirable. Unfortunately, it also raises a disturbing question: In our notoriously fad-mad weight-loss market, is there actually room for a diet drug that's not a magic pill? Taking a close look at today's consumer needs and insecurities, it's possible that GSK's breakthrough may, in fact, be little more than a catch-22 that'll leave GSK reaching for a different kind of pill—an aspirin.

Alli works by blocking absorption of about 25% of ingested fat. This undigested fat, in turn, passes straight through the body, helping consumers lose 50% more weight than they would were they simply to go on a traditional diet. For every 10 pounds lost, the dieter gets a lucky strike bonus of losing five pounds more. Sounds great, right?

The downside, however, is that all of that undigested fat passing through the body can cause what the company discreetly refers to as "treatment effects" [The squeamish among you may want to skip the line that follows.] These effects include "gas with oily spotting, loose stools and more frequent stools that may be hard to control." Fortunately, there's a way to avoid these unpleasant side effects: Eat a low-fat diet, ideally with no more than 15g of fat per meal.

Now, I applaud GSK for taking the high road here. It's being open and honest with Alli's marketing. By adjusting consumer expectations to realistic levels, the company is selling help, not hype. The Web site stresses that "Alli only works if you work." But while the company's doing a good job setting sober expectations, it seems that some marketing basics may have fallen by the wayside, such as identifying the target customer and getting the cost-benefit value equation right.

First of all, it's not clear to me who, exactly, the Alli customer is. For the drug to work, consumers must be willing to commit to some serious dieting and exercise. But if a consumer already has the will power to do that, does he need a pill like Alli?

On the flip side, if a consumer lacks the requisite will power, Alli might still not be the drug they need. The ugly truth about consumers looking to shed pounds is that they don't want products that help them be good (as Alli does by rewarding those who can stick to a truly healthy diet); they want something that'll help them be bad. Those new "churned" ice creams are textbook examples of this inverted reasoning. With ice creams that boast half the fat and a third the calories—yet all the rich taste—consumers can endure the pains of a "diet" with no pains at all. No wonder the stuff is selling.

It's no mean feat for GSK to put a positive spin on Alli's "treatment effects"—and they've actually tried. The company's inventive marketers have positioned a batch of yucky side effects as assistance with dieting: "While no one wants to experience treatment effects," the company says, "you may think of them as a way to become more aware of what you eat." True enough, but are overweight American consumers truly ready for Pavlov's diet?

Word has it that Alli has been flying off the shelves since its launch on June 15. No doubt, that's a marketer's dream; too bad the brand manager may be in the throes of a nightmare at the same time. Because, rather than being a sign of success, Americans' frenetic buying of Alli is, to me, a sign that the company's efforts to be honest with consumers have fallen on deaf ears. If consumers had really been listening to the sober realities of the drug, sales would doubtless be far more modest.

Let's hope that GSK is setting its own expectations the way it's attempting to set expectations for its consumers: on the lower side, and with a healthy dose of reality.

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