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Drug maker uses Magic Johnson to advertise HIV treatment

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As competition among makers of AIDS drugs increases, GlaxoSmithKline is using perhaps America's best-known HIV carrier to spread awareness among urban blacks of treatment methods and the company's products.

Magic Johnson's image is being splashed on billboards, subway posters and full-page ads in newspapers and magazines.

The ads include photos of a robust-looking Johnson and feature messages such as, "Staying healthy is about a few basic things: A positive attitude, partnering with my doctor, taking my medicine every day."

The market leader in HIV treatments with its drug Combivir, GlaxoSmithKline said its campaign is being conducted in cities with the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection among blacks, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston, Atlanta and Newark, N.J.

The campaign also includes educational ads and a speaking tour by Johnson. It is similar to campaigns that have used athletes, movie stars and other celebrities to promote awareness about and specific drugs for arthritis, depression and other conditions.

But the GlaxoSmithKline campaign is the first of its kind for HIV, which has created particularly sensitive issues of price and profit for the pharmaceutical industry.

"The new wave of this disease is moving toward minorities, specifically African-Americans," said Peter Hare, vice president of GlaxoSmithKline's HIV business unit. "More African-Americans are dying from AIDS than white people. So, from a business perspective, if you want more patients, you have to focus on the African-American community."

Johnson, diagnosed with HIV 11 years ago, does not have full-blown AIDS. To maintain his health, the basketball Hall of Famer takes a combination of GlaxoSmithKline and non-GlaxoSmithKline drugs, including Combivir, the most commonly prescribed HIV drug and one of GlaxoSmithKline's best sellers.

New alternatives, including generics, are turning what was once a limited market into one of fierce competition. Products such as Crixivan and Stocrin made by Merck & Co., and Kaletra and Norvir, made by Abbott Laboratories, pose a threat to GlaxoSmithKline's profits.

GlaxoSmithKline still controls about 50 percent of the market for HIV drugs, with sales topping \$1.1 billion in 2001, the most recent year for which comprehensive figures are available.

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"So if anyone complies with their treatment, or if new African-Americans start using HIV drugs, there will be some benefit for us," Hare said. "But this campaign is beneficial for everyone. There is something in it for African-Americans with HIV, for doctors, and yes, something in it for Magic and for GlaxoSmithKline."

Many major drug companies have educational AIDS campaigns. Abbott, for instance, sponsors free testing at community AIDS organizations.

AIDS is the leading cause of death for blacks between the ages of 24 and 44. One in 50 black men and one in 160 black women are believed to be HIV-positive today. About one in three does not know he or she has it.

Hare said the traditional methods of marketing HIV drugs do not always reach blacks.

"This group doesn't particularly trust the health care system," he said. "Research shows that they want someone they believe. And they believe in Magic Johnson."

For a long time, rumors abounded that Johnson had been cured or was on some secret treatment formula. According to the company, Johnson, who was not available for comment, feels this campaign gives him a chance to further dispel those rumors.

"We are trying to get across that Magic looks good because Magic takes his meds everyday, not because he is taking some tailored potion," Hare said. "The stuff he takes is available to everyone."

HIV treatment is expensive. The drugs are usually taken in combination with one another, and each can cost from \$1,500 to \$6,700 a year in the United States.

GlaxoSmithKline and other leading HIV drug makers froze prices last year as a gesture to the AIDS community, but some activist groups are unhappy that the companies are not offering any low-cost incentives along with the publicity campaign.

"Telling people to get tested and seek treatment and not providing the resources is corporate irresponsibility," said Michael Weinstein, president of AIDS Healthcare Foundation, the country's largest provider of HIV/AIDS medical care. "The only issue left to tackle with AIDS is the cost of medication."

He said the GlaxoSmithKline campaign is clearly a commercial for its products, but is helpful anyway.

"It's identity advertising. But it's inspiring. Putting Magic out there to people is a very positive thing. He is the ultimate symbol of living well with HIV," he said.

Marty Algaze, communications director for the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York, said an important first step in reaching blacks is showing that an HIV diagnosis is not a death sentence.

"If Magic can get more people to get tested and get on HIV drugs than I am all for it," Algaze said.

On the Net:

GlaxoSmithKline <http://www.gsk.com>

American Foundation for AIDS research <http://www.amfar.org>

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