



## Short Communication

# The role of product promotion in the pharmaceutical industry: Impacts and ethical considerations

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## Abstract

Pharmaceutical companies face a unique challenge in promoting their products, as they must strike a delicate balance between business goals, ethical standards, and regulatory requirements. Pharmaceutical promotional efforts significantly impact the prescribing practices of clinicians and healthcare professionals (HCPs). Right product promotion to right customer in right way certainly brings the business. Pharmaceutical product promotion should start early in the development process and should be consistent with pharmaceutical code of practice such as Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices (UCPMP), International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA), Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) code of practice for the pharmaceutical industry. By focusing on patient safety, providing clear and balanced information, and fostering ethical relationships with healthcare professionals, pharmaceutical companies can ensure that their marketing efforts contribute positively to healthcare outcomes. In an industry where patient health is at stake, maintaining public trust through responsible promotion is crucial.

**Keywords:** Product promotion, UCPMP, IFPMA, ABPI.

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, the pharmaceutical sector has led the way in pioneering research and advancing the discovery and development of new medications. The World Health Organization describes drug promotion as encompassing all activities by manufacturers and distributors that aim to inform and persuade, ultimately influencing how medicinal drugs are prescribed, supplied, purchased, or used. Initially, drug promotion was intended to educate healthcare professionals about new treatments, serving as a valuable resource for keeping them informed about the latest medical advancements.<sup>1</sup>

Pharmaceutical companies face a unique challenge in promoting their products, as they must strike a delicate balance between business goals, ethical standards, and regulatory requirements. Right product promotion to right customer in right way certainly brings the business. Unlike

consumer goods, drugs directly impact health, making responsible promotion essential to ensure patient safety, maintain trust in the healthcare system, and comply with stringent regulations. Pharmaceutical promotional activities undeniably have a strong impact on clinicians' prescribing behaviour, although this influence is often more subtle than direct.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Promotional materials for pharmaceutical industry

Materials created/sponsored by pharmaceutical to promote the prescription, recommendation, supply, sale, administration or consumption of products. Under certain circumstances, materials used in combination with an educational event may be considered promotional.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2. Pharmaceutical product promotion

“Promotion” means any activity undertaken, organized or sponsored by a pharmaceutical company which is directed at

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Health Care Providers (HCPs) to promote the prescription, recommendation, supply, administration or consumption of its pharmaceutical product(s) through all methods of communications, including the internet.<sup>3</sup>

Pharmaceutical promotion is valuable as it disseminates crucial, rapidly evolving, and highly technical information. Consumer advertising can enhance health outcomes by improving patient adherence to treatments. Beyond highlighting new therapies, it plays a key role in aligning medical advancements with consumer needs. It also influences physicians and payers to consider patient preferences. This ensures better accessibility and adoption of innovative medical technologies.<sup>4</sup>

The pharmaceutical industry utilizes a diverse range of promotional techniques to effectively reach different audiences and meet various needs. These methods are typically managed by the marketing department within a pharmaceutical company, which tailors its strategies to engage different target groups, whether they be healthcare professionals or consumers.<sup>1</sup>

The promotion of pharmaceutical products should commence early in the drug development process, as it plays a crucial role in raising awareness and generating demand among physicians. However, it requires strategic and careful management. It is always advisable to validate promotional strategy with scientific experts from medical affairs team.

The publication of clinical trial results and their scientific dissemination are integral to a promotional campaign, helping to enhance awareness of the product and its potential benefits for both patients and prescribers. Advisory board meetings with key opinion leader can be considered or plan prior to brand launch, which help in deciding the strategy of product promotion.

During the launch phase, symposia can be organized to enhance prescribers' exposure to a new therapeutic agent. Symposia with regional satellite programs can be considered, inviting a large number of specialists from the target therapeutic area. Scientific symposia of high academic standards are always valued by healthcare professionals, provided they are not purely promotional. These symposia are carefully tailored and planned and should be led by medical affairs only. These events typically begin with a keynote presentation by a prominent researcher, providing an overview of the current understanding of the disease in question. Subsequently, the product is evaluated in comparison to existing treatment options, showcasing how the new therapeutic agent integrates into disease management while emphasizing its benefits for patient care. Even the venue for such symposia should be chosen carefully. A university or academic facility may be preferred, can be arranged at local hotel which is more convenient or offers better conference facilities. Exotic locations should be avoided. Scientist involved in drug development as well as

investigators (At least principal investigator) participated in the clinical development should be called in symposia and panel discussion can be conducted along with other attending clinicians.

Product launch plan should be in place before launching product in market and it should include journal advertising, proper and adequate training of medical representative on product, visual aid (VA) detailing of the product to doctors by sales representatives, plan for digital promotion, product monograph, leave behind literature, clinical trials handouts, detailed plan about webinar, continuous medical education (CMEs) programs, focus group discussion (FGDs), round table meetings (RTMs), patient education etc. Right selection of speaker as well as audience for such programs are the most important aspect. Providing accurate and up-to-date scientific data about the products is the responsibility of pharmaceutical company. This approach can be valuable in building and sustaining the company's image, while also reinforcing its integrity and transparency in delivering a thoughtful and practical response to requests for information.

When a company is recognized by prescribers for offering excellent and responsive scientific support, its reputation remains strong within the medical community. A positive company image can significantly benefit its representatives during face-to-face interactions with customers, especially given the growing competition in various therapeutic areas.

Promotional strategy for product promotion should be consistent, should not change frequently, can be different for different specialties. Marketing and sales should take the help of medical affairs for right advice on product promotion. Open communication between the medical and marketing departments is crucial to address potential conflicts or disagreements before decisions are made. It is advisable for marketing teams to consult with the relevant medical adviser early in the process. Creating ethical promotional materials involves a collaborative process that brings together several key stakeholders. These include the product manager, medical advisor, scientific expert, and a representative from regulatory compliance, all working together to ensure that the materials are accurate, compliant, and ethically sound.

## **2. Methods of promotion: Product Promotion is an Art**

Pharmaceutical companies use a variety of strategies to promote their products, targeting healthcare professionals, patients, and other key stakeholders. The goal is to raise awareness of new drugs, differentiate products in competitive therapeutic areas, and ultimately influence prescribing behavior. Below are some common methods of pharmaceutical product promotion.

### *2.1. The changing scenario*

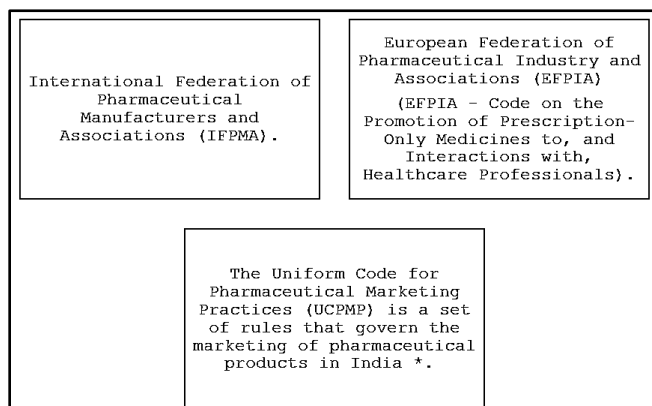
In the past, interactions with company representatives played a major role in shaping prescribing behavior, with the information they provided being valued by both specialists

and General Practitioners (GPs). However, this is evolving. Despite the representatives' skills and often scientific backgrounds, a growing number of specialists may now perceive them as primarily focused on promoting the company's products, rather than serving as impartial sources of information about the safety and efficacy of those products.

Pharmaceutical product promotion involves a combination of traditional face-to-face interactions and modern digital marketing techniques, targeting both healthcare providers and patients. Companies must navigate a complex regulatory environment to ensure their promotional efforts are ethical and comply with industry standards. When done effectively, pharmaceutical promotion can increase product visibility, drive adoption in clinical practice, and ultimately improve patient care.



**Figure 1:** Methods of pharmaceutical product promotion



**Figure 2:** International codes for pharma promotion.

### 3. Principles of Good Promotional Practice

As per Ethical Criteria for medicinal drug promotion. World Health Organization. Geneva 1988. Resolution WHA41.17. "All promotional making claims concerning medicinal drugs should be reliable, accurate, truthful, informative, balanced and up to date, capable of substantiation and in good taste. These should not contain misleading or unverifiable statements or omissions likely to induce medically unjustifiable drug use or to give rise to undue risks."

### 4. International Principles

Various codes are available which talks about how to do right promotion of pharmaceutical products.

The UCPMP was issued by the Department of Pharmaceuticals on March 13, 2024.

### 5. Common Principle to Follow

Promotional materials must uphold the integrity of the pharmaceutical industry, ensuring accuracy, balance, and fairness. They should never be misleading, undermine confidence, or bring discredit. All content must be up-to-date, evidence-based, and fully substantiated. Materials must be consistent with locally approved product information. Misleading claims should be strictly prohibited.

IFPMA states that pharmaceutical companies are responsible for providing accurate, balanced, and scientifically valid data on products.<sup>3</sup> Evidence should be reliable, accurate, truthful, informative, balanced, up-to-date, and capable of substantiation.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence used to support promotional/marketing claims must be consistent with cited research and the research should be designed with adequate methodology.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of new pharmaceutical compounds is crucial for addressing a wide range of medical conditions. However, it is equally important that marketing strategies adhere to ethical standards, ensuring that the promotion of these medications prioritizes transparency, patient safety, and public trust over commercial interests.<sup>7</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

The promotional efforts of pharmaceutical companies exert considerable influence over clinicians' decisions regarding medication prescriptions. Right product promotion to right customer in right way with consistency certainly brings the business. All product promotion should be in accordance with the product licence and the Summary of Product Characteristic (or SmPC). Promotional materials should be precise, balanced, fair, clear, and unbiased, reflecting a current assessment of all available evidence. They must not deceive, either explicitly or implicitly. All claims and grievances must be verifiable, with supporting evidence provided upon request. Promotional activities should never be concealed. Essential details, such as prescribing information, must be included in all promotional content. Medical affairs play an integral role in guiding marketing team and should validate promotional claims so that it should be unbiased, ethical.

### 7. Source of Funding

None.

### 8. Conflict of Interest

None.

## 9. Advice to Read

1. International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations' (IFPMA) Code of Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices.<sup>3</sup>
2. ABPI code of practice for the pharmaceutical industry (2024).<sup>8</sup>
3. UCPMP: Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices (UCPMP) 2024.<sup>9</sup>
4. European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations' (EFPIA) Code on the Promotion of Prescription-Only Medicines to, and Interactions with, Health Professionals.<sup>10</sup>

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