

Highlighting Validity and Placement of Risk Information in Drug Manufacturers' Direct-to-Consumer Web Pages

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Since the mid-1980s, direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising has changed the way pharmaceutical companies market prescription medications. The Internet is a growing source of drug information and drug manufacturer's websites are, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, a form DTC advertising. The current study examined the effects of colored highlighting validity (Valid, Invalid and No highlighting) and placement (Top, Middle and Bottom) of target risk keywords in manufacturers' DTC web pages affects response time and accuracy using two kinds of visual search tasks. The two tasks were the same except that in one a target was always present and in the other the target was either present or absent. The results indicate that valid highlighting significantly reduced response time and increased accuracy in both tasks. Overall, invalid highlighting was not significantly different compared to no highlighting for response time or accuracy in both tasks. Also, placement had a significant effect in both tasks. Top and middle placements showed significantly lower response time compared to placement at the bottom. Accuracy was less clear-cut, particularly in the target present/absent task where placement at the top yielded significantly less accurate responses compared to the middle and bottom. In general, the results showed that highlighting has benefits when the sought information is validly highlighted, but there is virtually no cost when non-target information is highlighted instead, excepting the one instance noted above. Implications for potential application of highlighting and placement of risk information and for future research are discussed.