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What Was Old Is New Again: Coricidin Making a Comeback



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By Jim Edwards

NEW YORK -- Schering-Plough has seen an uptick in sales from Coricidin, an old over-the-counter cough/cold remedy that was prominent in the 1960s and '70s.

The movement shows that even drugs that get left behind by more scientifically advanced entries can find new niches in which to prosper.

Sales of Coricidin HBP rose 7.8% to \$34 million over the 52 weeks ending Sept. 10, the most recent period available, according to IRI.

The increase follows the emergence of two factors in the marketplace: the ban on pseudoephedrine from most OTC store shelves (Coricidin does not contain that ingredient); and an increase in the number of people with high-blood pressure.

Americans with high blood pressure increased from about 50 million to 65 million between the 1980s and 2000, according to Hypertension, a medical journal. People with high blood pressure cannot take certain decongestants—like pseudoephedrine—that are contained in the leading brands.

Thus the potential audience for Coricidin HBP—which contains dextromethorphan hydrobromide—has actually increased over recent years. Schering-Plough has doubled ad spend on the brand since 2003, to \$12 million, per Nielsen Monitor Plus.

The company is currently rolling out a redesigned package. “It’s more of what we would consider a refresh” of the look, said a Schering rep.

The brand was “languishing,” said Jonathan Asher, president of Dragon Rouge in New York, which did the makeover. “It started out being a really strong brand when they made the over-the-counter switch. Then as players came in with more ingredients it fell by the wayside.”

The new design retains all the elements of the old one, but ups the prominence of the red heart icon and increases the size of the “HBP” typeface. The tweaking was necessary because the brand gets relatively little shelf space, and the previous heart icon could sometimes be mistaken for the letter C, said Asher.

Also, “The consumer is usually suffering with symptoms” when they choose a box, so the design has less time than other brands to communicate its advantages, Asher said.

The redesign was going to be more radical, Asher noted, but the company noticed the sales increase from earlier in the year and decided to stick with what was working.

Ironically, Schering has reason to fear the product becoming too successful: teenagers seeking to get high often abuse it. At high doses, dextromethorphan is hallucinogenic. Abusing Coricidin is sometimes called “robo-tripping” or “skittling,” because the pills look like the candy Skittles.

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America claims one in 11 teens report abusing dextromethorphan to get high. A high abuse profile could lead to regulations like those restricting pseudoephedrine, which were brought in to stop drugs like Sudafed being used to make crystal meth.

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