# How to reach consumers in a market where DTC is not allowed

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**Abstract** This study explores the characteristics of the rapidly changing South Korean (S. Korea) pharmaceutical market, specifically focussing on the erectile dysfunction drug market. The S. Korean drug market is in the middle of a significant transition stemming from a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, as well as the separation of dispensary services from Korean medical practices. Due to strict restrictions on DTC (direct-to-consumer) marketing in S. Korea, the role of BTL (below-the-line) marketing has received a considerable amount of attention from both researchers and industry marketers. Little is, however, known about its real-world application to a fast-moving market such as one finds in S. Korea. Thus, the understanding of how BTL can be applied to a specific market would be meaningful for the elaboration and implementation of marketing action. The findings show that the most useful and most frequently used marketing communication tools for erectile dysfunction drug marketing in S. Korea were academic symposia and public relations (PR) events. While their primary marketing target was doctors and pharmacists, marketers also use various BTL marketing tools to communicate with consumers. By using press releases about their activities, they effectively convey their brand information to a general target audience. Finally, the implications of BTL marketing for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

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### INTRODUCTION

In general, the pharmaceutical industry is said to be one of the higher value-added businesses in the world. Annual global sales of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) remedies have reached over

\$600bn in 2005. Both the market potential and performance are, however, different depending on the region of the world where the products are offered. For example, the pharmaceutical market of North America occupied 48 per cent of



the global market with a 5.2 per cent growth rate in 2005. In the case of the Europe, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain occupied 28 per cent of global market with a 5 per cent growth rate compared with the previous year. In contrast, developing markets such as Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe have experienced exciting double-digit growth in a couple of decades. Even though the Asian pharmaceutical market, excluding the Japanese market, represents only 8 per cent of the global market, it is one of the fastest growing pharmaceutical markets in the world.<sup>2</sup> According to a South Korean (S. Korean) pharmaceutical industry self-analysis,<sup>3</sup> the S. Korean pharmaceutical market share will represent 2.3 per cent of the global market share by the end of 2006 as a consequence of a double-digit growth rate of the year of 2006. This will be one of the fastest global growth rates. Primarily due to a growing elderly population as well as an increase in the number of private hospitals, the S. Korean pharmaceutical market will be one of the markets with sufficient potential to attract multinational pharmaceutical companies.4 Given the rapid growth rate and potential of the S. Korean pharmaceutical market, it is meaningful to explore its current condition.

To understand the characteristics of the S. Korean market, it is important to recognise the contemporary changes in the S. Korean pharmaceutical market environment. In recent years, it has experienced two major changes: one external and one internal. External pressure has been put on the S. Korean pharmaceutical market to open up domestically in accordance with the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The FTA is a mutual agreement of exclusive market opening between two or several countries.<sup>5</sup> When two countries agree to trade in accordance with the FTA, they can trade exclusively with each other

without any tax or trade barriers. Reportedly, S. Korea signed FTA contracts with Chile, Singapore, EFTA and ASEAN. Recently, S. Korea also reached an FTA agreement with the United States.<sup>6</sup> Since S. Korean pharmaceutical companies are too weak to compete with large US drug manufacturers, they are understandably faced with a serious situation. For instance, Seung Ho Kim, the CEO of a leading S. Korean pharmaceutical company, pointed out that the only way to be competitive against these global giants is to strengthen R&D capacity as well as marketing power.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult, however, to do this in a short period of time.

From an internal perspective, the S. Korean pharmaceutical market has experienced what can be described best as a confusion since a new pharmaceutical policy came into effect in 2002, which separated pharmaceutical dispensing from medical practices. The core change of this policy was to classify all drugs into either ethical drugs (ETC) or OTC. Consumers are subsequently prohibited from purchasing ETC drugs without a doctor's prescription. In addition, marketing activity in the S. Korean drug market has substantially lessened, as this policy prohibits any type of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising for ETC drugs.8

Given these prominent changes in the S. Korean pharmaceutical market, it is imperative to understand how S. Korean pharmaceutical marketers have effectively executed their marketing communication plans. This has been accomplished by giving managerial implication to international pharmaceutical marketers who are marketing their products in S. Korea or similar countries.

Hence, the purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate and understand how S. Korean pharmaceutical marketers execute their marketing communication strategies under these significant changes and strict restrictions. Specifically, this



study focussed on how effectively erectile dysfunction drug marketers make use of below-the-line (BTL) communication tools in the S. Korean pharmaceutical market. Erectile dysfunction drugs were chosen for the current study because they are not only drugs that receive much attention from S. Korean consumers, but also because they are generally one of the most actively communicated medicines in pharmaceutical marketing. Thus, the current study explores the effectiveness of various BTL communication activities in erectile dysfunction drug marketing in S. Korea.

### What is BTL communication?

As the marketing environment has become complex and various alternative or new media are used in marketing communication, a variety of marketing communication vehicles can be divided into BTL and 'above-the-line' (ATL) based on the media used to convey the marketing message. ATL marketing depends mainly upon traditional advertising media such as TV, radio and print.9 While ATL marketing is based on mass media channels, BTL marketing broadly includes various forms of nontraditional advertising such as sponsorship, sales promotion, etc. <sup>10</sup> This classification was coined based upon the emerging role of BTL communication. Such a development is attributable to a decline in the power of traditional advertising media, especially network television, which has been weakened and as such is less effective. 11 According to Keller, nontraditional forms of communication are becoming more dominant, and various emerging forms of communication are included in the category of BTL communication tools. Common BTL tools are 'interactive, electronic media'; 'sport and event sponsorship'; 'in-store advertising'; 'minibillboards in transit vehicles, on parking

meters, and in other locations'; and 'product placement in movies' (p. 40). Furthermore, Meenaghan<sup>9</sup> added more examples of BTL marketing such as 'direct mail', 'creative sales promotions' and 'access innovations' such as product placement, advertorial and interactive media development (p. 77). Online marketing, done via websites, banner advertising, web PR and e-mail, represents BTL marketing promotion tools used in today's rapidly changing marketing situations. In particular, word-of-mouth advertising transmitted through personal home pages, blogs, discussion groups, chat rooms, etc can influence sales, both positively and negatively.<sup>12</sup> Particularly in S. Korea, which is one of the leading countries in information technology, online marketing communication exerts strong influence over consumers.

As Keller<sup>11</sup> mentioned above, BTL marketing communication has grown faster than ATL since it emerged in the 1980s. For example, BTL expenditures were growing twice as quickly as ATL expenditures in overall US industries, <sup>13</sup> and many large companies spent more than 70 per cent of their total marketing budget on BTL during the 1980s. Schultz<sup>14</sup> tried to explain why BTL communication has grown so fast. According to him, BTL communication was a noticeably efficient marketing vehicle compared to other highly expensive traditional media, which meant that a marketer could reduce marketing costs while maintaining a competitive edge. Schultz also pointed out that BTL might overcome the inherent problem in measuring the effectiveness of traditional media. For example, the effect of BTL, specifically sales promotions, can be instantly seen by just mining scanning data for sales. This immediate sales-checking system also satisfied the desires of stockholders who wanted to see the short-term effects of marketing activities.



In addition, the efficiency of traditional media was successively discredited in the 1990s. For instance, Rust and Oliver<sup>15</sup> asserted that 'Mass media advertising as we know it today is on its deathbed' (p. 71). They posited that the introduction of new technologies, such as interactive and multifunctional media, resulted in the split of market and media, as well as the empowerment of consumers.

Similarly, Aaker<sup>16</sup> pointed out a key role of BTL is building strong brand equity. For example, by sponsoring athletes, teams or sporting events, some companies, such as Adidas, MasterCard, Nike and so on, could increase their brand awareness and establish a strong, favourable and unique brand image in consumers' minds. Besides sponsoring sporting events, firms might also strengthen their brand equity by sponsoring various art exhibitions, entertainment festivals and community events.

Many marketing practitioners believe that event marketing is one of the most important, effective and efficient marketing tools. For instance, corporate spending on global sponsorship was estimated at \$28bn in 2004, and its rate of growth in marketing expenditure has surpassed traditional media advertising.<sup>17</sup>

# WHY IS BTL PROMINENT IN THE S. KOREAN DRUG **MARKET?**

Since the new pharmaceutical policy of separating dispensing from medical practice was put into effect in 2000, pharmaceutical marketing activities have shrunk rapidly in S. Korea. While there had been more than ten pharmaceutical companies on the S. Korean top 100 in terms of advertising expenditure before the 2000, only three or four pharmaceutical companies remained on the list after the separation policy came into effect.<sup>5</sup> This is directly attributable to the prohibition of DTC marketing activities in ETC sales, which formerly comprised about 80 per cent of total drug sales.<sup>5</sup> One of the interviewees cited in this study reported that due to the steadily increasing portion of ETC in total market sales, most pharmaceutical companies have reduced their DTC marketing budgets. This has unsurprisingly led to an increase in their marketing budget for doctors and pharmacists. 18 To appeal to this specific market of doctors and pharmacists, BTL was more efficient than ATL. This is one reason why S. Korean pharmaceutical manufacturers became more focussed on BTL communication than traditional ways of communication.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from the restriction of DTC marketing, almost all marketing activities of prescription drug are absolutely prohibited in the present S. Korean market. Furthermore, nonprescription advertising must undergo two preview processes by the KPMA (Korea Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association) and the KARB (Korean Advertising Review Board). 19 Given this reality, the pharmaceutical marketers started searching for other useful ways to communicate with their target consumers. The more competitive the market is, the more necessary effective marketing communication strategies are. From this point of view, BTL marketing may be one of the most appropriate methods that can effectively communicate with consumers, both indirectly and directly. 16

### THE ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION MARKET

The growing S. Korean erectile dysfunction market is a good example to illustrate the role of BTL marketing communication, since most traditional forms of marketing communication are restricted by law. Despite the limited availability of information about erectile



dysfunction products, S. Korean consumers have, however, for several reasons, shown great interest in erectile dysfunction drugs. First of all, the longer a human lives, the greater the chance that degenerative disease will occur. Erectile dysfunction is one of the most representative degenerative diseases. Secondly, S. Korean society has become more open about the subject of sex, and people have become more willing to discuss their deficiencies with others. In addition, new media such as the internet has encouraged people to share their personal information as much as they want. All these social changes have affected the growing S. Korean erectile dysfunction drug market.<sup>20</sup>

As the S. Korean erectile dysfunction drug market has been growing rapidly from \$15m in 2000 to \$100m in 2007, the marketing situation has also become very competitive.<sup>21</sup> Since Pfizer's Viagra was first launched into the S. Korean market in 1999, three more brands have entered the same market within four years. Cialis, produced by Eli Lily, has earned the second largest market share in S. Korea. Bayer Health Care's Levitra and Dong-a Pharmaceutical's Zydena have also joined the fray. Specifically, the domestic brand Zydena earned more than a 10 per cent market share, which represents the fastest growth rate in the market, despite the fact that it was launched in the summer of 2006.8 Furthermore, more pharmaceutical companies are preparing to enter this competitive but profitable market.<sup>22</sup> For example, SK Chemical has planned to launch their new erectile dysfunction drug 'SK-3530' in 2007. Additionally, one of the leading domestic companies, Chungwai Pharmeceutics Co., will launch Avanafil, which was developed by the Japanese pharmaceutical company Danabe, in 2007.

As the erectile dysfunction market has expanded, so too has the competition for sales. Consequently, marketers of

erectile dysfunctional drugs have made vigorous efforts to deliver their marketing messages to consumers effectively and efficiently. In reality, S. Korean pharmaceutical marketers strive to make the best and most practical use of BTL marketing tools.

# How erectile dysfunctional drugs apply BTL to their marketing

In the erectile dysfunction drug market, consumers are more likely to show specific brand preference than in other markets. Therefore, marketers need to communicate with the general public, directly and indirectly. For this reason, erectile dysfunction drug marketers frequently use several marketing communication tools such as academic symposia, photo event promotions, online promotions and sports marketing.8 Based on various secondary research and indepth interviews, this study explores how S. Korean erectile dysfunction drug marketers use various marketing tools, including BTL, in terms of both academic and practical application.

### Viagra

Viagra has been the market leader since it was launched in S. Korea in 1999. While this drug is still the leader of the S. Korean market, its market share has decreased due to its competitors' marketing efforts. To handle this problem, the marketers of Viagra have heavily focussed on BTL marketing via the academic symposium. For example, Pfizer held the 7th anniversary academic symposium with the theme of 'A new life with Viagra' in 2005. In this symposium, there was an extensive discussion regarding how Viagra had affected the lives of the middle-aged S. Korean couples, as well as how the couple's sex life had improved over the last ten years.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the medical research about long-term Viagra



usage was introduced to verify the desirable medical properties of Viagra. Although the direct target of the symposium was doctors and pharmacists, Viagra marketers were also aiming to expose the general public to their research results through press releases from the event. This type of secondary marketing communication through academic events influenced middle-aged male consumers, and it was a successful way to directly publicise their drug's effect to consumers.<sup>24</sup>

### Levitra

Levitra's representative marketing tactic is game promotion. In 2006, Bayer Health Care distributed a promotional flash CD titled 'Levitra Girl' to doctors of urology. While this CD title provided information about Levitra and general marketing data about erectile dysfunction, the main content was a flash game dripping with sex appeal called 'Levitra Girl'. Levitra marketers intended to raise brand awareness of Levitra with the 'Levitra Girl' game. The game was sensational enough to catch the attention of both users and their doctors. Later. Levitra marketers said that it was the one of the few and fresh ways to raise brand awareness among their targeted consumers under the stringent regulations found in S. Korea. The CD title was, however, later withdrawn due to its overtly sexual overtones. Although Bayer Healthcare, which produces Levitra, failed to distribute to their target, they achieved a partial marketing victory because this sensational news story resulted in broad exposure of their product to the general public.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Levitra changed their marketing concept to differentiate Levitra, which held a small market share in S. Korea, from other competitive brands. When Levitra was first launched in the Korean, its concept was 'strong'. This marketing strategy was developed based

upon consumer research showing that S. Korean men were more concerned about 'strength' than speed with regard to erectile function. Bayer marketers executed guerrilla marketing to expose their new concept. In spite of the regulations, they managed to spread their advertising messages in the major daily newspapers. The one significant deviation from normal advertising that they utilised was to emphasise their company name rather than their product's brand name. The caption 'Middle-aged Koreans, let's keep strong!' was so breathtaking that an advertising review committee and the Korean Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association decided to withdraw the advertisement. It was controversial because they did not mention the brand name 'Levitra' in their advertisement. Although Bayer Healthcare ceased using this advertisement, its effect was huge enough to let people know that their new brand had been launched.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, Levitra marketers sponsored an international medical conference and cited its research to show their product's effectiveness. Bayer Healthcare sponsored the 8th Korea, Japan and China Urology Conference and released its results to the press. People who read the article about the conference were exposed to the effect of Levitra. Accordingly, the company, Bayer Healthcare, and their brand, Levitra, succeeded in becoming perceived as a leading manufacturer and brand in the erectile dysfunction drug market.<sup>22</sup> In 2006, Bayer Health Care also cited the results of the 12th world congress of ISSM (ie International Society for Sexual Medicine) that the erectile success rate of Levitra was 83.9 per cent, which was higher than the 82.2 per cent rate reported for Viagra. Regardless of whether people believe this result or not, Levitra marketers intended to let people think Levitra was similar to or even better than Viagra by attacking the market leader.27



### Cialis

Cialis is the erectile dysfunction drug marketed in S. Korea by Eli Lilly. Marketers of Cialis focussed on introducing their product concept through a PR event. As the second erectile dysfunction drug brand launched in S. Korea, Cialis aimed to communicate a different concept to the general public. The concept of Cialis was a '36h longlasting effect'. Despite the existing restrictions, they held the 'Marathon race to overcome erectile dysfunction', which was intended to stress the long-lasting effects of Cialis by positioning it as the 'Marathon drug'. To emphasise the '36 h' long-lasting effect, the marathon race was held on 6th March, using the decimal notation 3.6 to imply 36h. The marathon metaphor was used to illustrate the longlasting benefits of Cialis. This event was effective in both recruiting marathon participants and catching the attention of newspaper readers, since marathons are a rapidly growing form of popular exercise in S. Korea.<sup>28</sup>

Another event was a mountain climbing campaign, which was intended to emphasise the concept of endurance. The slogan of this campaign was 'Over the top with Cialis', which was targeting middleaged couples who were usually at the top of their respective fields. In the same context, Cialis sponsored the 'Cialis Pro Golf Tournament', which was also targeting middle-aged couples.<sup>29</sup>

Cialis also developed a PR campaign with a unique approach to taking erectile dysfunction medicine. To emphasise their 36h long-lasting effect, their campaign slogan was 'Take Cialis before you're home without your wife knowing'. This campaign emphasised to consumers that they could enjoy a normal sex life thanks to Cialis' long-lasting benefits without having to admit their shortcomings to their partner.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Cialis held several events to send their message to

another general target, namely middleaged women. Because Cialis can work for more than 36h, this benefit can appeal to women who are the secondary targets of erectile dysfunction drugs.

### Zydena

Zydena is a product of Dong-a Pharmaceutics, which is the largest domestic pharmaceutical manufacturer in S. Korea. Zydena was the fourth ED medication launched in S. Korea. Since Zydena was launched in 2005, its sales rapidly increased to the point that it captured a 20.1 per cent market share, putting it in third place in the S. Korean erectile dysfunctional market.<sup>31</sup> Zydena's marketing communication is not so different from those of its competitors. Zydena's target was married couples between the ages of 40 and 50. Zydena sponsored 'the Love Shining Night', which was hosted by the Health and Sex museum of S. Korea. In this event, Zydena invited middle-aged married couples to take time to understand each other's attitudes towards love and sex. A dance party was followed by a lecture by sex education experts who also were invited to the event. This promotion was also reported to the general public by the press.

As the results of this study show, the BTL approach is the main marketing communication channel of erectile dysfunction drugs in S. Korea. Table 1 summarises the results of BTL marketing communications used by individual brands.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS**

The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of the S. Korean pharmaceutical market where DTC was prohibited and to explore specific marketing strategies and tactics used in S. Korea. After interviewing industry

Table 1: Types of BTL marketing communication

Company type	Brand	BTL marketing
Global companies	Viagra	Academic symposia Press releases
	Levitra	'Levitra Girl' computer game Guerrilla marketing International medical conference Press releases
	Cialis	Marathon race event Cialis Pro Golf T ournament PR campaign
Domestic companies	Zydena	Health and sex museum in Korea Press releases

persons and surveying secondary data regarding the S. Korean pharmaceutical market, this study concluded that the pharmaceutical market is a rapidly growing entity; and that the BTL approach was by far the most useful and frequently used marketing communication method in erectile dysfunction drug marketing.

Specific marketing communication tools are also interesting. Even though various regulations banning direct contact between pharmaceutical marketers and consumers exist, marketers use alternative marketing tools to enhance consumers' awareness and brand equity. More specifically, academic symposia and PR events are the main tactics of S. Korean pharmaceutical companies. While their primary marketing target was doctors and pharmacists, marketers also targeted the general public as a secondary target using various BTL marketing tools. The main communication channel with the general public was press releases about their activities. Using press releases, marketers successfully informed the general public about their products without breaking any of the existing laws. The results of this study are consistent with previous discussions in

the literature suggesting that BTL marketing communications can be highly effective. 11,12,14 When markets become competitive, it is necessary to look for alternative marketing tools to effectively communicate with consumers. As this market overview suggested, marketing communication — including advertising — is strictly prohibited in the S. Korean pharmaceutical market. In this situation, marketers needed to find effective marketing communication tools, and they found solutions in BTL marketing strategies.

The results of this study provide a couple of managerial implications as well. This study shows the overall picture regarding the marketing environment of the S. Korean pharmaceutical industry. For international pharmaceutical marketers, this marketing environment analysis could provide fruitful information. Given that the S. Korean pharmaceutical market is experiencing both rapid growth and change, the time is right for international marketers to enter S. Korean markets.

Another managerial implication of this study is to provide specific marketing tactics. When mass media advertising and marketing is unavailable due to government regulation or short budgets, BTL could be an efficient alternative marketing communication tool for building brand equity. BTL is comparatively cost efficient and draws direct responses from consumers. Although mass media advertising is believed to be an almighty marketing communication tool, other alternatives can be effective options or even the only option under the strict regulations. This alternative perspective can also be applied to other product categories that are similarly regulated.

As the case of the 'Levitra Girl' game shows, this kind of implicit marketing could, however, evoke ethical issues among consumers. Marketers should decide



between awareness increases and negative responses. For a product entering a given market for the first time, building consumer awareness is imperative, but products that have certain brand equity should be careful about negative marketing outcomes that were not intended.

The findings of this study also have implications for academic researchers. Information about a specific market could be an initial step to inspire academic research. Based on the findings of this study, marketing or healthcare research can be coined focussing on S. Korean and even broader international markets.

This study has some limitations stemming from its exploratory nature. Even though this study shows meaningful trends in the target market, the effectiveness of BTL marketing communications among consumers still needs to be empirically confirmed. Also, other pharmaceutical products should be explored in terms of the effectiveness of their marketing communication strategies. Finally, the effects of BTL communications should be studied using data from other countries to strategically view international trends in pharmaceutical marketing.

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