Headaches, Colds and Back Ache - Most Common Health Complaints: Nielsen Global Survey

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People Opt for Self-Medication Over Doctor's Appointment
Chinese Consumers Most Influenced by Health-Remedy Advertising with Ad Spend Topping US$9bn in 2006...!

August 9, 2007, Hong Kong: Key findings from a global health survey conducted by The Nielsen Company has found that headaches, colds, sleeping problems and back ache are the most common ailments, and when it comes to their treatment in an industry estimated to be worth over US$70 billion, consumers are loyal and habitual purchasers of over-the-counter (OTC) self- prescribed medication.

According to Nielsen, headaches are the most common complaints for consumers around the world â€“ and may explain why analgesics are the largest category in the OTC market. Nearly half of those polled in the online survey (42%) claimed to have suffered a headache in the last four weeks, while one in three had suffered a cold, back problem or sleeping problem. One in five suffered from a cough, sore throat, stomach upset or some other kind of pain. (Chart 1)

The Nielsen Companyâ€™s 47-country survey also revealed diverse regional differences among populations and their health problems. EEMEA and Latin American consumers suffer more headaches, with more than half in these regions said they had suffered a headache within the last month. Asians (36%) were more susceptible to catching colds than any other region and are more likely to suffer from sore throats, coughs, stomach pain and toothache than they would a back problem, unlike those in North America and Latin America.

Within Asia Pacific, the Nielsen study uncovered some interesting differences between countries - where China has the worldâ€™s highest proportion of insomniacs, with four in 10 Chinese claiming to have suffered sleeping problems in the past month, Singaporeans led the world with the highest proportion (37%) suffering from a sore throat, a third of Filipinos were coughing (more than anyone else) and Indonesians top the world with 44 percent suffering flu in the past four weeks. People in South Korea seemed to be the sickest, suffering from most ailments and topping the global rankings for suffering from colds, indigestion, heartburn and toothaches.

At the other end of the scale, Indians, Japanese and Portuguese were the healthiest, with one in four claiming not to have suffered any health ailments at all in the past month. What do people do when they fell ill?

Nielsen polled 26,486 internet users in 47 markets1 from Europe, Asia Pacific, the Americas and the Middle East in May this year. Nearly half (42%) said they reached for their usual â€˜tried and testedâ€™ medication at home during times of ill health, and one in three either saw their doctor or visited a pharmacy in search of an over-the-counter recommendation.

The survey findings reflect some regional differences in the way consumers treat their ailments. In North America, consumers are more likely to seek out pharmacies than visit their doctor. In Europe and Asia, a visit to the doctor came ahead of reaching for non-prescription medication and home remedies, with Hong Kong leading the world with most people opting to see a doctor (51%) when they are ill. Meanwhile, people in Scandinavia and Asia Pacific are also more likely to â€˜grin and bare itâ€™ â€“ about one third in Denmark (36%), Norway (33%) and Taiwan (28%) led the global rankings taking â€˜nothing at allâ€™ to cure their health complaint.

The Nielsen survey also indicates that once a consumer wants to purchase a non-prescription medicine, experience with the product/brand always counts. Overwhelmingly, the most loyal consumers of OTC/self medication products are Asians â€“ over 80 percent of Hong Kong, Singaporean and Chinese consumers say they always buy the same â€˜tried and testedâ€™ products. 68 percent of North Americans also say they always buy the same brand of self-medication. (Chart 2)

Itâ€™s worth-noting that while one in five global consumers (19%) said they were influenced by advertising or a friendâ€™s recommendation when trying new OTC medications, people in Asia rely on OTC advertising more than any other region when making their decisions, led by China, with 39 percent of Chinese consumers - the worldâ€™s highest - saying their self-medication purchasing decisions are influenced by ads. (Chart 3)

This will be music to the ears of OTC and Pharmaceutical companies in China, who invest heavily to advertise their brands to Chinese consumers who appear to trust them more than their counterparts in the region. According to Nielsen Media Research, Pharmaceutical was the most advertised category in China in 2006, spending a staggering US$9 billion â€“ or around seven dollars for every Chinese citizen â€“ and up 17 percent on the previous year.

To put this into perspective, the amount spent on pharmacy advertising in China equates to almost 75 percent of all media advertising in the next two biggest advertising markets in the region - Australia and South Korea.

For OTC companies, the challenge lies in encouraging consumers to switch brands in a category characterized by auto-pilot purchasing, shopper loyalty and the added element of deep cultural traditions of self medication in many countries.

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