

# Drug companies on the Net

It is difficult to pick up a newspaper or magazine these days without seeing some reference to the Internet and the World Wide Web, in particular. Companies providing web access are mushrooming, and two of the biggest providers, America Online and Compuserve, are expanding rapidly, with the latter claiming 10,000 new European members per week. Businesses have been quick to see the potential advertising advantages of a platform that allows them to specifically target a group of young, well educated and relatively affluent people – the average Internet user. On-line shopping is also set to boom this year once credit card information can be transmitted with an acceptable level of security.

Why bother? Many pharmaceutical companies have now set up web sites or are in the process of doing so. These generally provide basic information about the company, usually in the form of the latest annual report, together with more detailed information about their products and latest research findings. Pharmaceutical companies do not expect to make money from their web pages but they provide them with an excellent opportunity to reach people who would not normally

receive regular information about drugs. Now, with computers outselling television sets in the USA, this potential audience is expanding rapidly. There are two major advantages associated with having a web site: first, the information can be updated regularly at very little cost and, second, the number of times the site is accessed (the number of 'hits') can be monitored. Updating conventional advertising brochures is expensive, and estimating the number of people who read them is little short of guesswork. At present, if we are to believe them, some pharmaceutical companies are claiming over 2,000 hits are made on their sites each day.

What's in it for me? It seems likely that more companies will produce web pages as a service to consumers and a number now carry an e-mail address to encourage direct communication and feedback from the public. Certainly, scanning the web pages is a good way of obtaining the latest information about a company and a number even advertise job vacancies. Some sites provide very detailed information; Sankyo and Merck offer comprehensive information on the activities of each of its major research

groups. Some companies also offer wider information of general interest; Hoechst carries information on the 1995 Nobel Prize winners.

Where are the best ones? At the moment it would not be fair to rank sites in terms of merit because those of several companies, such as Roche and Glaxo-Wellcome, are still in development. However, one of the most visually attractive sites is that of Pfizer. A list of some of the sites presently available is given below, but this is continually expanding. You can hunt for new sites by using established search engines, such as Lycos and Yahoo, entering the company name or the terms 'pharmaceutical' or 'chemical'.

Is there a down-side? Well, not really. You only get information if you look for it, and the amount of unsolicited information coming through the mail may become much less. However, like all human activity, there is always the potential for abuse. This was highlighted in January when Roche sacked three laboratory assistants in its Pharmaceutical Security and Environmental Protection Department in Basel for downloading large volumes of pornographic material from the Internet.

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Web site addresses for some pharmaceutical and related companies. The addresses given should be prefixed with 'http://www'.

astra.com  
ciba.com  
dupont.com  
hoechst.com  
lilly.com  
merck.com  
monsanto.com  
pfizer.com  
roche.com  
sankyo.co.jp  
sumimoto-chem.co.jp  
warner-lambert.com

