PROMOTION

# Disco Days Are Over

by Charlene Prounis

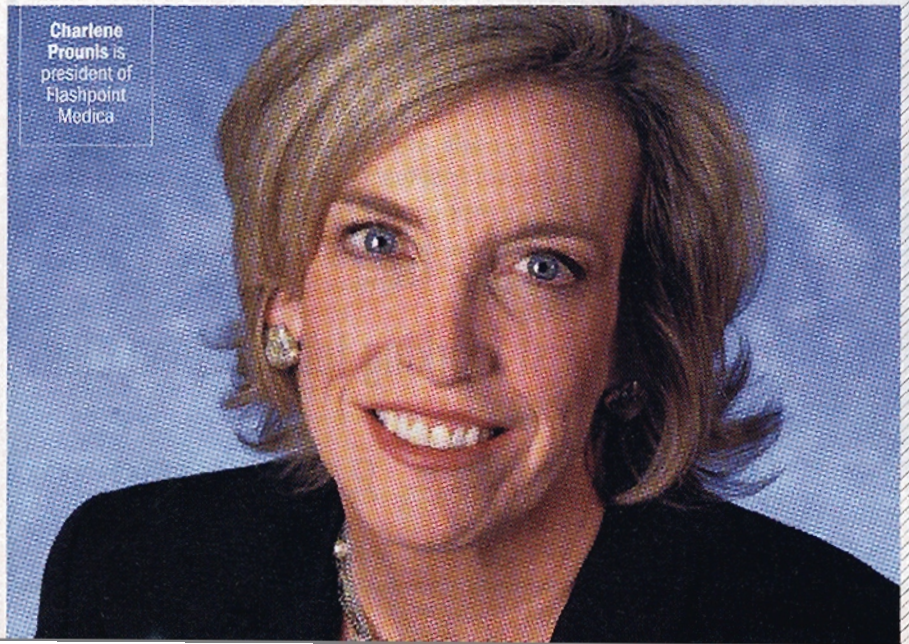
In 1981, the happy-go-lucky sensibility of the disco era was waning, but in the pharmaceutical industry, the communications discipline hadn't even begun to heat up. With about 35,000 sales reps calling on physicians, access in the 1980s was easy, characterized by six- or eight-minute details consisting of well-prepared messages delivered by reps. Companies supported those efforts with desktop media, patient-record forms, and direct mail.

During this period, several new drugs were coming to the market, and the medical community was particularly excited about new cardiovascular drugs—such as Stuart's Tenormin (atenolol) and Marion Merell Dow's Cardizem (diltiazem)—antibiotics, and anti-arthritics, like Pfizer's Feldene (piroxicam). The preferred medium to generate awareness was journal advertising. But, for the most part, professional ads were somewhat staid. It was into that space that Pfizer launched in 1982 an ad for Feldene that created some attention. The ad depicted a kneecap overlaid with an actual piece of sandpaper that prompted viewers to understand "what arthritis feels like" by having them touch the sandpaper.

Feldene became Pfizer's first blockbuster. Even so, the era of relying solely on journal ads was coming to an end, and Pfizer and its competitors were looking for new ways to reach audiences.

### Education Makes an Entrance

By the mid-to-late 1980s, the quest for blockbuster status led to more sales reps in the field, with more women and healthcare professionals joining the ranks. It was also the era of "me-too" drugs, especially cardiovascular therapeutics, with Pravachol (pravastatin) and Zocor (simvastatin) coming to market less than five years after Merck's Mevacor (lovastatin), which launched in 1987. These crowded markets required novel communications strategies that would differentiate their products. For many companies, the answer lay in education, and by the mid-1980s, medical education companies started to sprout up, often CONTINUED ON PAGE 146



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## Q: Is industry becoming more aggressive with its promotion?

Lou Morris: Over the past few years, there has been an abrupt decrease—about 75 percent—in the number of enforcement letters sent by FDA. But we cannot simply count the number of FDA warning letters to gauge the extent of the aggressiveness of industry's promotion. After all, the issuance of a warning letter is based on more than just the marketing environment.

FDA has always sought to prevent misleading information from reaching the public. As such, the Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising, and Communications (DDMAC), the FDA division responsible for regulating promotion, started "requesting" to preview launch campaigns—a practice that is now routine. But FDA confused matters by calling the reviews "voluntary." In fact, companies are required to submit DTC campaigns for review; it's up to FDA whether it decides to look at them.

Most FDA correspondence regarding promotion takes the form of advisory opinion letters, based on review of the materials prior to dissemination. Thus, the agency's input comes before the public ever views the materials.

However, 25 to 50 percent of the enforcement letters DDMAC does send address DTC promotion, even though the industry spends less than 15 percent of its promotional budget on DTC.

Karen Katen, vice chairman of Pfizer, says DTC is likely to keep taking hits from negative public reactions to pharma (e.g., the fallout from Vioxx), because it is the most visible aspect of the industry's marketing.

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