

Industry news: Strong loyalty to tried and tested over-the-counter brands

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South Africa, August 2007: 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 of the world's consumers, and when it comes to treatment, consumers are loyal and habitual purchasers of over-the-counter (OTC) self-medication products.

The global Nielsen survey polled 26,486 internet users in 47 markets from Europe, Asia Pacific, the Americas and the Middle East at the end of April this year. It must be noted that this survey is a reflection of internet users' attitudes and therefore represents online consumers' behaviour and attitudes only. According to the responses, headaches are the most common complaint for consumers all around the world – and may explain why analgesics are the largest category in the OTC market.

Globally, one in five suffered from a cough, sore throat, stomach upset or some other kind of pain. "Rising urban pollution levels, poor diet and exercise habits, stress and overburdened lifestyles are all taking their toll on consumers' immune systems, making complaints such as headaches and colds more frequent than ever," said Lennart Bengtsson, President, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa (EEMEA), The Nielsen Company.

"With the global OTC industry estimated to be worth over US\$70 billion, pharmaceutical companies are acutely aware that our hectic lifestyles are causing consumers' to suffer from more health ailments than ever before," said Bengtsson. South Africans in particular suffer more from lifestyle related health problems than many other nations. 61% of South African respondents claimed to have suffered headaches in the last 4 weeks, while almost a third (30%) of respondents have had hangovers - in contrast to the global average of 11%. 38% of South African respondents suffer from sleeping problems and upset stomachs – both often indications of stressful and hectic lifestyles.

When it comes to using Over the Counter Medication for these ailments, two in five global consumers (42%) said they reached for their usual 'tried and tested' medication at home during times of ill health, and a third either saw their doctor or visited a pharmacy in search of an over-the-counter recommendation. "Our survey found when falling ill, there are three factors that influence what consumers take to make themselves better: the first is strong product loyalty towards 'tried and tested' brands they have always used; the second is a reliance on medical professionals; and the third is deeply rooted cultural 'home remedies'. The biggest challenge facing marketers today is finding new, innovative and convincing ways to woo consumers to switch brands and try something new," said Bengtsson.

South African respondents are no exception when it comes to brand loyalty to OTC medication, with 58% of our country's respondents saying they use medication they have always used when they fall ill. Almost three quarters (71%) of local respondents cited seeking a pharmacist's recommendations when choosing medication. "Our survey indicates that pharmacists are playing an increasingly influential role in OTC recommendations. In the EEMEA region, one in three consumers said they would go to the pharmacy to buy OTC medication, rather than visit a doctor." For South Africans, money is by no means the most important factor when it comes to purchasing OTC medication, with only 14% of respondents citing it as a factor influencing their decision. Almost one fifth (18%) of South African respondents don't use OTC medication at all, rather relying on home remedies.

"For OTC companies, the challenge lies in encouraging consumers to switch brands in a category characterised by auto-pilot purchasing, shopper loyalty and the added element of deep cultural traditions of self medication in many countries. Through our consumer research and work with OTC companies we have found humor and strong lifestyle associations with the local culture have proven successful, especially in emerging markets where the OTC market is immature but developing fast," noted Bengtsson.

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