



## Book Review

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**J.C. SCHOMMER, L.H. GILNERT.**  
**A Screenful of Sugar?: Prescription Drug Websites Investigated**

New York NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014

The text *A Screenful of Sugar?: Prescription Drug Websites Investigated* by Schommer and Glinert explores the communication of prescription drug information via the World Wide Web.<sup>1</sup> It is also the tenth volume of the series in Health Communication by Peter Lang Publishing. Dr. Schommer is a prolific scholar in economic, social, and administrative sciences in pharmacy, whereas Dr. Gilnert has a wealth of expertise in linguistics and communication. The two authors together bring a unique perspective toward different categories of prescription drug websites and make suggestions regarding how to improve or utilize them appropriately. As an experienced researcher in the fields of prescription drug promotion and patients' health information search, I believe this text to be the vanguard among those delving into these issues.

While the dissemination of prescription drug information on the Web was not that foreseeable just a decade or two ago, this phenomenon is now part-and-parcel among trends resulting from advancements in information technology. In this new era of health communication, patients could easily get lost or even misled, as they interact with myriad websites and social media campaigns loaded with information on prescription drugs. To effectively search for information, a patient would eventually ask himself/herself: (1) What type of an information seeker am I?; and (2) What is the information source? These two questions are the authors' quests in the book – “to know oneself” and “to know the source”.

The book consists of nine chapters. The first chapter describes the social and political context of prescription drug information in Western countries. The second chapter discusses the present phenomenon of disseminating such information online and the associated problems. Chapters 3 through 7 critically examine government organization websites (e.g., PubMed Health), information service websites (e.g., [WebMD.com](http://WebMD.com)), health service provider websites (e.g., [mayoclinic.com](http://mayoclinic.com)), pharmaceutical manufacturers' sites, and social media (e.g., YouTube), respectively. The eighth chapter offers general recommendations to improve these websites, and the ninth chapter provides a straightforward self-assessment tool for patients – Knowledge and Resource Evaluation (KARE). On the surface, the question “What is the information source?” is the theme connecting all nine chapters. However, the question “What type of an information seeker am I?” is the underlying, yet strong theme making the book that much more salient for any number of users.

I applaud this book for four reasons. First of all, it sends a timely and important message to relevant stakeholders: the public; the medical profession, health educators, and patients' advocates; commercial information providers; pharmaceutical manufacturers and marketers; and in particular, policymakers. Unlike traditional promotional methods such as print and broadcast advertisements, the promotion of prescription drugs on the Web lacks scrutiny. It is also difficult to define the promotional method used by websites or social media. They are not print or broadcast advertisements per se, but they can incorporate web links that lead consumers to print or broadcast advertisements. Additionally, they can use other promotional methods including

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word-of-mouth by health care providers or patients. Should such promotional activities be under review of a government agency (e.g., the FDA)? Should the same criteria assessing print or broadcast advertisements of prescription drugs be applied? Additionally, in terms of sources for prescription drug information, the pharmacist is a credible and most accessible one for patients, which is highlighted throughout the book. The book suggests that pharmacists expand their roles as information consultants based upon the deluge of information faced by consumer. Of note, although the authors examined the websites a few years ago, their findings are still valid today.

Second, the book empowers patients who would like to seek prescription drug information on the Web, as aiding patients in such information searches is ultimately the goal of the book. The quality of information on the Web is out of patients' control, but effectively searching for information and evaluating the credibility of information sources can be under the control of the prepared patient. Specific suggestions are made for patients in the last chapter, including use of the KARE tool. This tool would improve patients' self-efficacy in information search. Because with this tool, patients would clearly answer the two aforementioned questions regarding the type of information seeker they are and the source of the information that they need to know.

Third, the authors took an objective and thorough approach to examine different websites. That is, in Chapters 3 through 7, they describe the systematic nature of their website evaluations in detail, and thus are able to describe as a result their recommendations to improve web-based, drug-related information.

Lastly, the book sheds light on future research directions. For instance, researchers can assess website relations and credibility based on the authors' findings, or borrow the KARE tool to analyze patients' information-seeking behaviors.

In summary, Drs. Schommer and Gilnert have delivered a fine product to relevant stakeholders. Pharmacists and PharmD students would benefit from this book to further understand pharmacists' roles in patients' information searches. The book can be of use in pharmacy education on topics related, but not limited to: health communication, health literacy, direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs, health care policy, and drug information. It can be used to supplement required texts in these areas or as a primary source in any of a number of elective courses.

## Reference

1. Schommer JC, Glinert LH. *A Spoonful of Sugar?: Prescription Drug Websites Investigated*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.; 2014.