Softgels: Consumer Perceptions and Market Impact Relative to Other Oral Dosage Forms

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ABSTRACT

Softgels, which contain a liquid formulation of a drug, often provide clinical benefit over other solid oral dosage forms and may represent an attractive alternative to them. A consumer preference survey of softgels versus other solid forms investigated four areas: (1) identification of various dosage forms; (2) perception of therapeutic benefit (easiest to swallow, faster-acting, work longer); (3) impact of individual product characteristics on overall product selection; and (4) market impact in terms of premiums consumers would pay on the basis of dosage form. The 300 survey participants strongly preferred clear softgels over other dosage forms in virtually every area. Softgels were perceived as easy to swallow and fast-acting, with a duration of action second only to that of a two-piece capsule. Overall preference was driven by ease of swallowing, and softgels were rated first by the majority of respondents. Consumers would be interested in various products if these were available as softgels rather than in their current oral dosage forms and may be willing to pay a premium for softgel products. This survey confirms consumer preferences for particular dosage forms and for softgels over other solid forms. Pharmaceutical scientists and marketers should consider softgels as alternative dosage forms when developing new compounds or considering life-cycle management of existing products.

Keywords: softgel; dosage form; consumer; product preference; market impact; product formulation

INTRODUCTION

Soft gelatin dosage forms (softgels) contain a liquid formulation of a drug and often provide clinical benefits over solid oral dosage forms.\textsuperscript{1-3} Although not a new concept, soft gelatin encapsulation of compounds...
requires a specialized technology that is currently limited to a few companies. Softgel products may offer the consumer an attractive alternative to solid dosage forms and allow pharmaceutical manufacturers to extend product lines for both branded and over-the-counter preparations.

Banner Pharmacaps commissioned the Mattson Jack Group (St. Louis, Mo) to design and conduct a consumer preference survey of softgel capsules versus conventional solid dosage forms.

METHODS

Three hundred consumers were interviewed in shopping malls in six US cities (Chicago, Ill; Ft. Lauderdale, Fla; Houston, Tex; Philadelphia, Pa; Phoenix, Ariz; and Sacramento, Calif) in the Spring of 1999. The survey covered four main areas: (1) identification of various solid dosage forms (consumers viewed a product sample board and identified the different dosage forms; Figure); (2) perception of therapeutic benefit (consumers indicated which dosage forms would be easiest to swallow, would act faster and work longer); (3) impact of individual product characteristics on the selection of a particular dosage form for a specific indication, such as treatment of headaches, allergy, or cold and flu symptoms (form or texture, shape, number and size of units per dose, color, duration of effect, and speed of activity were used to assess overall product preference); and (4) market impact (consumers ranked how much extra they would pay for a 10-day supply of medication on the basis of dosage form, speed of onset, duration of effect, and number of units per dose). Their interest in the availability of common over-the-counter products as a clear softgel instead of their current dosage forms was also elicited. Consumers could examine the product samples but were not allowed to ingest any product. Each survey took about 30 minutes, and consumers were paid for their time.

RESULTS

The survey sample was predominantly female (86%) and fairly evenly divided among the age groups of 25 to 39 years (31%), 40 to 59 years (33%), and 60+ years (36%).

Product Identification

The two-piece, hard-shell capsule and round compressed tablet were most often identified by their proper name (79% and 59% of consumers). Only about 10% of respondents properly identified the clear softgel form (oval or oblong); the term "gelcap" was most often applied incorrectly to this form. The gel-coated forms also were often called a tablet or capsule by virtue of their respective shapes (Table 1). No substantial differences were noted on the basis of age, sex, or geographic location. The oldest respondents, however, tended to refer to tablets as “pills,” and more consumers between 40 and 59 years of age named the clear oval softgel correctly (14%) compared with the other age groups (10% or fewer).