



The Buying and Selling of Supplements

By Wendy Marks
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I recently went to my first focus group. I was asked by a supplement company whose products I recommend regularly to be part of an "expert" panel to discuss where this company was heading in the next few years. On the panel were a wide variety of people including pharmacists and pharmacy owners, as well as naturopaths and other healthcare practitioners. We talked a great deal about value, costs, marketing and labeling of different brands, and how we as professionals recommend and sell these different brands. It really got me thinking.

The Farm or the Lab?

Basically, the purpose of supplements is to provide nutrients that may be missing from the foods we eat. It is very difficult to eat a consistently wide enough range of foods with all the vitamins and minerals our bodies need to be healthy. This is where the idea of the multivitamin came from, which for many of us was our introduction to supplements as children. Of course the industry has grown significantly since then.

If you take a supplement it is best that it come from a food source. For example, a supplement made from beets, carrots and broccoli will be more effective and more bioavailable than something made from chemicals in a laboratory. Additionally, it is important that supplement components be stable, based in a non-allergenic carrier, and absorbable by the body. Sometimes, however, it is not possible to create a supplement from a food source in a stable manner, in which case it becomes necessary to create a supplement chemically. A good example of this problem is iron supplementation. Many of us, especially women, are deficient in iron. Doctors commonly prescribe iron supplements, but these are quite often chemical-based rather than food-based, and even if someone takes the needed dosage of iron, it is often not properly absorbed by their body. A doctor once said to me about such supplements that the person "might as well be eating nails," which is why when I suggest that someone consider iron supplementation I recommend something that is made from desiccated liver. Although that may sound yucky, and I have a hard time selling it to my vegetarians, desiccated liver in a capsule (that you don't taste or smell) is something that your body recognizes as food and can process more easily. You get the picture. Unfortunately supplements that are food-based are often more expensive than their chemical counterparts. In other words, all supplements are not created equal.

Buyer Beware

Large retailers who claim really cheap prices are often a risk to the consumer because they may be carrying expired or even substituted products. That is not to say that it is always the case, but caution must be exercised, especially with very large stores that sell many different things. It is unlikely for such sellers to check supplement quality and expiration dates, or if the product is even what it claims to be. Caution should be

used in these cases unless you know that the seller is reputable. That is not always easy to ascertain, as online reviewers can be hired to write misleading content.

There are, however, some reputable off-price sellers on the Internet. They sell only supplements and often carry their own brand. In most cases these sellers are a good bet. They may not offer a full range of the supplements that you want, but if they have been around for a while you can check with your practitioner, who is likely to be familiar with them.

Consider the Real Value

Without libeling a large retailer or two, I can honestly tell you that some of the well-known large natural food chains mark up their supplements as much as 300%. Often their own brands are marked up less, and may be an excellent value and quality. You may pay a premium at places like specialty pharmacies, but these are often a good bet because they usually have knowledge of both natural and traditional pharmaceuticals. A tip to find one that is reliable is to see if they have a licensed pharmacist on the staff who can advise you. There are also many fine independent natural food stores that sell quality, curated supplements and have very knowledgeable people on staff. Here, too, you may be paying full retail price but the ability to talk with someone and assess your specific needs may be worth it, with the bonus of shopping locally.

Health care practitioners often make a good percentage of their income from supplements; if they buy the product for half the retail value they can do very well. Traditionally their discount to you can range from 10% to 30% and I would encourage you to ask your practitioner what their markup is. Even though they may mark up significantly, they are still selling to you at a discount. I am in no way criticizing this behavior. I have an open policy that if I sell you supplements I only mark up 20-25%, which is pretty unusual.

Why should you consider buying supplements from your practitioner? They are buying from reputable wholesalers and can guarantee that the product is of good quality. Most importantly, you are buying their expertise about what brand and type of supplement is best for you. By not consulting a professional you can waste a lot of money and time taking the wrong thing, even possibly to your detriment. Anything you put into your body is a drug. Self-medicating, even if you listen to experts on TV or podcasts, can be not only expensive but also dangerous. Practitioners choose brands based on their history with the company and their knowledge of the product quality; we have over time found products that work and tend to use them, building brand preferences based on our experiences.

My best advice is to consult with a professional and get recommendations. Then you can discuss whether you wish to purchase from the professional or from other sources. Practitioners should be willing to discuss your options, and you should exercise them.

Namaste,

Wendy Marks