

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

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Advances in Therapy ® Volume 17 No. 5, September /October 2000

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.

Quantify Consumer Perceptions and Preferences Relative to Oral Product Dosage Forms in OTC Pharmaceuticals and Nutritional Product, The Mattson Jack Group, St. Louis, Mo.

Objectives for the total study were outlined as follows:

- To quantify consumer awareness and perceptions regarding the softgel dosage form as compared with alternative dosage forms for orally-administered products including vitamins, cough / cold, and analgesics.
- Perception issues to be addressed include:
 - Swallow-ability (fear of getting stuck)
 - Taste issues
 - Speed of action / faster onset of action
 - Probable pricing
 - Efficacy / works better
 - “Contemporality” of the dose form (*e.g.*, modern *versus* old-fashioned)
 - Relative importance of dose form
 - Importance of dose shape (oblong, round, large, small)
 - Connotation of dose shape (elegance)
 - Compliance issues
 - Chew-ability (for chewable product only)

Executive Summary

Dosage Form Perceptions

- This research indicated that most consumers associate certain characteristics with specific dosage forms. The majority of respondents (81%) felt that some dosage forms appeared faster-acting than others. Slightly over one-half (53%) thought that some forms appeared longer-acting, and all of the respondents (100%) felt that some appeared easier to swallow than others.
- **Ease of swallowing:** By far, the clear, oval softgel was most frequently named as the one which respondents felt would be easiest to swallow (89%). The clear, oblong softgel was named second most frequently by participants (42%) with this attribute, followed by the gelatin-coated, round tablet (23%).
- **Speed of onset:** The clear softgel dosage forms were, by far, the most frequently named as appearing to have a more rapid speed of onset (72% – oval shape; 67% – oblong shape). The qualitative research had indicated that this perception is based on the understanding that these products contain a liquid. Research indicated that two-piece capsules were the next most likely to be seen by respondents as fast-acting (33%). Pressed tablets and gelatin-coated tablets in the round and capsule shapes all received low ratings for probable speed of onset.
- **Duration of action:** Among the respondents who felt that some forms appeared longer-acting than others, the two-piece capsules were the strongest performers (41%), followed by the clear, oblong softgels (30%). It is interesting to note that results for these two forms were reversed in the youngest age group (25-39) as compared to the two older groups (40-59 and 60 and over).
- **Overall preference:** When asked which product they would prefer to take, 71% of respondents named the clear, oval softgel dosage form. The clear, oblong softgel was named as the second most-preferred by a majority of respondents as well (40%). The least-preferred dosage form for the majority of respondents (40%) was the pressed tablet.

The respondents formed their dosage form preference based on their feelings about swallowability. When asked which dosage form they would prefer to take, respondents were extremely likely to choose the form that they thought would be easiest to swallow. Preference and ease of swallowing show a very high level of correlation. Of those respondents who thought the clear, oblong softgel would be easiest to swallow, the great majority (84%) said that this is the form that they would prefer to take.

- **Price elasticity:** In evaluating dosage form alone, this research indicated that consumers may be willing to pay a premium price for a clear softgel over a pressed tablet and over a two-piece capsule. The softgel dosage form does not appear to command a price premium over the gelatin-coated tablet / opaque softgel dosage form.