

Snake Oil by Mike DeCinti

The following is an excerpt from Wikipedia: “A traveling ‘doctor’ with dubious credentials, selling some medicine with boisterous marketing hype, often supported by pseudo-scientific evidence, typically bogus. To enhance sales, an accomplice in the crowd would often ‘attest’ the value of the product in an effort to provoke buying enthusiasm. The ‘doctor’ would prudently leave town before his customers realized that they had been cheated.”

This practice of selling questionable remedies for real or imagined ailments still occurs today, but with some updated marketing techniques. The derogatory term “snake oil peddling” is used to describe such practices, and it’s happening within the pages of national and local newspapers all over the country, including this one.

I bring this up because two weeks ago I read a lengthy advertisement in the Robesonian. Notice I said advertisement, and not news article, but you would of had to really be paying attention to know it was an advertisement and not just another news story. I’m almost sure it wasn’t the first time something like this ran in the paper, and I would be willing to guess it won’t be the last.

A full page in the Robesonian measures 22.5 inches in height and 12 inches wide and in that entire space the word “advertisement” appeared just once in the tiniest of print just above the very large, bold heading “Sales are booming for clinical strength diet pill.” So of course there’s a good chance you didn’t notice it and that’s exactly what the company who produced the ad, Universal Media Syndicate, is hoping for. You see their job is to pedal a variety of products through print advertising in a way that makes the reader think they are reading a real unbiased story by a real unbiased reporter. Sadly that’s not the case, but instead they are just trying to sell their client’s products. Now I have nothing against this company for trying to sell products. I’m in marketing, so I fully understand their concept. And I really don’t have anything against media outlets, like the Robesonian, for trying to make a buck. Although I do wish they were all a little more selective in what and how they choose to advertise these types of products. What I do have a problem with was this ad pushing two unproven, untested and potentially harmful “medical” remedies, a “breakthrough weight loss supplement” as well as a “breakthrough joint supplement.”

Amazingly both “breakthrough” products are manufactured by a company called PatentHEALTH who publicize themselves as a premium distributor of “nutraceuticals,” a combination of the words nutrition and pharmaceuticals. However with a simple search on the Internet you will find all you really need to know about this company and the truth about their products. Or perhaps you noticed the most important part in this entire full page ad? A mere 12 words also in the smallest of print and located at the very bottom of the ad next to an asterisk that states, “These statements have not been evaluated by the food and drug administration.”

My hope is that, as I did, you were able to see through this “snake oil” ad and dismiss it. However, I’m afraid to think that there may have been a few readers who either ran out to the local pharmacy or called the 800 number to place an order. But of course, whether they were hoping for joint pain relief or weight loss, they will be disappointed.

Now there’s a chance that you might actually hear of someone who had a positive outcome using one of these products. Perhaps your friend’s sister’s cousin works with a guy who knows someone who lost weight taking one of these supplements, because, there are actually good products in the marketplace that can help. But more than likely, you will hear about them through real news stories, and you will find that the Food and Drug Administration have evaluated them and that there are actual medical doctors who will speak on their behalf. It won’t be a product that tries to trick the reader with questionable credentials, misleading advertising and fake evidence.

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