

How an also-ran became the best-selling drug of all time

By Rick Shalvoy [A](#) November 25, 2024

When Lipitor® (atorvastatin calcium) was getting close to FDA approval in 1996, it was virtually dismissed as an also-ran in a crowded class of cholesterol-lowering drugs, three of which had already achieved blockbuster status. These market dynamics prompted a long list of pharmaceutical industry analysts to criticize Pfizer for partnering with Warner-Lambert to co-market Warner-Lambert's "latecomer" statin. The cholesterol-lowering drug market was "saturated," the analysts said, and limited by a finite number of hypercholesterolemic patients.

Pfizer was impressed by a 1996 study that showed Lipitor® to be more effective at lowering LDL cholesterol than every other statin, but no matter how much more effective Lipitor® was than its market-leading rivals, Pfizer and Warner-Lambert were faced with the monumental task of educating about 200,000 physicians, breaking down the brick wall of medical practice inertia and changing the prescribing habits of a massive number of healthcare providers.

With evidence-based reasons for believing that there were still an enormous number of hypercholesterolemic Americans who had not yet been diagnosed, I urged the Lipitor® product management team to add a consumer outreach campaign to their strategic plan in order to educate consumers about the importance of cholesterol **screening**. The ***Know Your Numbers*** consumer health education campaign that was sponsored by Pfizer and Warner-Lambert in 1997 naturally prompted millions of asymptomatic people with or without obvious risk factors for cardiovascular disease to **GET TESTED**.

Meanwhile, Pfizer and Warner-Lambert were shipping **Lipitor®-branded** cholesterol screening test kits to medical supply distributors and paying them to stock these kits as goodwill giveaways for their sales reps to give to their CLIA-waived physician office customers. These kits were also being shipped to Pfizer and Warner-Lambert sales reps who were giving the test kits to clinicians and medical office personnel along with free samples of Lipitor® and bar charts showing the cholesterol-lowering performance of Lipitor® compared to other statins. My firsthand knowledge of these details stems from the fact that Warner-Lambert embraced my proposal to add cholesterol screening test kits with Lipitor® branding to the physician outreach plan.

The subsequent increase in cholesterol screening and follow-up testing gave rise to a corresponding increase in the number of newly diagnosed hypercholesterolemia patients. Thousands of providers prescribed Lipitor® for those newly diagnosed patients in addition to switching millions of patients from other statins to Lipitor®.

During the years following the successful launch of Lipitor® in 1997, the overall effectiveness of cholesterol management in the U.S. improved significantly, Pfizer acquired Warner-Lambert in a stock-based transaction valued at \$90.2 billion (~\$160 billion in 2024 dollars), Lipitor® went on to become the best-selling drug of all time, and we proved that pharma market analysts are missing a critically important piece of the market analysis puzzle whenever they fail to see the potential for the undiagnosed population to **GET TESTED** and turn a bleak outlook into a remarkable success story.

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