Online Age Quiz Is a Window for Drug Makers

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Americans yearn to be young. So it is little wonder that RealAge, which promises to help shave years off your age, has become one of the most popular tests on the Internet.

According to RealAge, more than 27 million people have taken the test, which asks 150 or so questions about lifestyle and family history to assign a “biological age,” how young or old your habits make you. Then, RealAge makes recommendations on how to get “younger,” like taking multivitamins, eating breakfast and flossing your teeth. Nine million of those people have signed up to become RealAge members.

But while RealAge promotes better living through nonmedical solutions, the site makes its money by selling better living through drugs.

Pharmaceutical companies pay RealAge to compile test results of RealAge members and send them marketing messages by e-mail. The drug companies can even use RealAge answers to find people who show symptoms of a disease — and begin sending them messages about it even before the people have received a diagnosis from their doctors.

While few people would fill out a detailed questionnaire about their health and hand it over to a drug company looking for suggestions for new medications, that is essentially what RealAge is doing.

The test has received widespread publicity because of its affiliation with Dr. Mehmet Oz, a popular author and

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regular on “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” Dr. Oz — “America’s Doctor,” as he is known on Oprah — is a RealAge spokesman and adviser, and his soothing, simple approach to health is reflected in RealAge’s message: you can change.

And it has become something of a sensation in the marketing world. Many marketers, online and off, segment potential consumers within broad categories. But RealAge gathers very specific information and, unlike some sites, it gives its consumers an incentive to tell the truth, namely, a chance to live longer.

Whether they are attracted by Dr. Oz’s appeal or by the ads all over the Internet for the test, people come to the site, then provide an e-mail address to take it. They are asked throughout the test if they would like a free RealAge membership. If people answer yes to any of the prompts, they become RealAge members, and their test results go into a marketing database.

RealAge allows drug companies to send e-mail messages based on those test results. It acts as a clearinghouse for drug companies, including Pfizer, Novartis and GlaxoSmithKline, allowing them to use almost any combination of answers from the test to find people to market to, including whether someone is taking antidepressants, how sexually active they are and even if their marriage is happy.

RealAge sends the selected recipients a series of e-mail messages about a condition they might have, usually sponsored by a drug company that sells a medication for that condition.

“Our primary product is an e-mail newsletter series focused on the undiagnosed at-risk patient, so we know the risk factors if someone is prehypertensive, or for osteoarthritis,” said Andy Mikulak, the vice president for marketing at RealAge. “At the end of the day, if you want to reach males over 60 that are high blood pressure sufferers in northwest Buffalo with under $50,000 household income that also have a high risk of diabetes, you could,” he said.

RealAge’s privacy policy does not specifically address the firm’s relationship with drug companies, but does state, in part, “we will share your personal data with third parties to fulfill the services that you have asked us to provide to you,” and it adds test results to its database only when respondents become RealAge members. Some critics, however, charge that consumers do not have enough information when they join.

“Literally millions of people have unknowingly signed up,” said Peter Lurie, the deputy director of the Health Research Group at Public Citizen, a public interest group in Washington. The company, he said, “can create a group of people, and hit them up and create anxiety even though the person does not have a diagnosis.”

Steve Williamson, an executive at the medical company Hologic, uses RealAge to sell a treatment called NovaSure, which removes the endometrial lining in post-childbearing, premenopausal women who have heavy periods.

With RealAge, he buys lists of women who have answered a test question by saying they have heavy menstrual bleeding, among other criteria. He chooses the ones in the 37- to 49-year-old age range, then sends them a series of e-mail messages. Several of the messages do not mention NovaSure, they just identify heavy bleeding as a problem — then, he said, the messages suggest NovaSure as a solution.

“We’re trying to get out to those customers right now and let them know that it is an
option for them,” said Mr. Williamson, the vice president for sales and marketing for the gynecologic surgical products division of Hologic. “A lot of women don’t know it’s a problem, and that’s the thing. It’s not something they necessarily talk about.”

RealAge acts as the middleman between the drug companies and its members: it sends the e-mail messages from its own address and does not release members’ names or e-mail addresses to drug companies. That is because pharmaceutical advertisers are among “the most heavily regulated industries in the world, and they don’t necessarily want those e-mail addresses — they like that we’re a proxy for their messages,” Mr. Mikulak said.

Its access to health information has made RealAge valuable. Founded in 1999, it was acquired by Hearst Magazines in 2007 for an estimated $60 million to $70 million. Though its sales — and the fees it pays Dr. Oz — are not public, it is profitable, and had about $20 million in revenue when Hearst acquired it.

Annie Tomlin, a 30-year-old Web site editor in San Francisco, is a vegetarian who walks everywhere, one of the healthy consumers that RealAge prides itself on. She first took the test after her mother heard about it on Oprah — scoring seven years younger than her actual age — but did not realize the answers were being used by marketers.

“It bothers me because I’m not a fan of the drug companies, and I don’t enjoy the idea of me giving them any help in marketing their medicine,” she said. “While it’s fantastic that we have certain medicines that help save people’s lives, there are also a lot of medicines that are very, very profitable that are pushed on people who don’t need them.”

Mr. Mikulak said that RealAge protected privacy: it does not give personally identifiable information to the drug companies and the advertisements in e-mail messages are clearly labeled as such. RealAge is “providing value in return for the information,” he said.

That is a fair trade-off, some members said. Leslie Swan, 31, a stay-at-home mother and former pharmaceuticals saleswoman in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., took RealAge after a Dr. Oz appearance on Oprah. She had not been aware that drug companies had access to her answers, but, she said, she was not bothered by that.

“So many patients are so clueless and they count on their doctor to know everything and be right 100 percent of the time and don’t always inform themselves, and I think that’s a huge mistake,” Ms. Swan said. “As a patient and a person, you have to take your health into your own hands.”