

Condom companies face unfair marketing limitations

With AIDS remaining incurable, activists continue to pressure the mass media to accept condom commercials as part of the effort to slow the spread of the disease. But condom companies have their own marketing problems and priorities, which do not necessarily mesh with those of the activists. Further, none of the condom companies have large advertising budgets.

Above all, condom companies want to promote demand for their brands—not generic use of the product. Trojan, the largest brand, might be happy with generic advertising appeals, assuming its brand share would remain constant and they'd still get three of every five new users. But that's not a safe assumption. Durex is, by far, the second-biggest spender, but is No. 3 in sales with a shrinking market share. Lifestyles is the No. 2 brand so it, like the others, certainly would use its limited marketing budget for brand demand within the group of users.

But it is difficult to promote brand image because the mass media limits the form, format and content of condom commercials. The restrictions limit companies' abilities simply to promote the product, much less promote it to

Herbert Rotfeld on Misplaced Marketing



those most at risk for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. ABC, NBC and CBS state in their written codes that they will not accept any condom advertising, a policy also followed, if not written, by their owned and operated stations. Meanwhile, Fox says it "might" accept condom commercials, but every year has rejected all that were submitted.

Network affiliates and cable networks accept condom ads, but not without limitations on their form or content. Some TV stations accept condom ads if the message promotes safe sex for disease prevention, but not if the message is about birth control. (Although as far as I know, the product is used the same way for either goal.) Station and network managers want to avoid complaints, and they fear that parents will object to messages about sex. Many see public health appeals that discuss "safe sex" as encourag-

ing promiscuity.

It's not easy to tastefully advertise condoms or safe sex. Throughout her tumultuous tenure as U.S. Surgeon General, Joycelyn Elders continuously pressed for more condom advertising on television. One of her critics, Janet Parshall of Concerned Women for America, said, "Condom manufacturers profiteer from teen-age promiscuity. The Surgeon General should be pushing for abstinence, not condoms."

It's difficult for many people over 30 to realize that AIDS is not news. For young people starting college this year, AIDS always has been a part of reality. One corporate marketing manager, returning from research at various spring break activities in Florida, discovered that the topic of safe sex is passé. In fact, the phrase "safe sex" verges on being a joke, something young people have heard all their lives, like "buckle your seat belt." And, like seat belts, if young people do engage in unsafe sexual behavior, it is not from a lack of information on the risks.

Most condom users are 18 to 35 years old. New users constantly come into the market while others drop out, but condoms are an established product. Some demographic correlates do exist for users of specific brands, such as Lifestyles, and the goal of the companies is to develop these market segments for brand image and demand.

In this context, the companies are caught in a three-way conflict: They are limited in what they can say, they are pressured by activists who want to see generic appeals that do not serve company goals, and they face critics who believe that any marketing of their product to young people sends the wrong message. ■

Herb Rotfeld is a professor of marketing at Auburn University in Alabama.

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