Condom companies face unfair marketing limitations

With AIDS remaining incurable, activists continue to press for 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 No. 3 in sales with a shrinking market share. Lifestyle 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 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 condom commercials, 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.) Stations 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 encouraging promiscuity. It’s not easy to tastefully advertise condoms or safe sex. Throughout her tumultuous tenure at 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 profit 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 factors limit the appeal 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.

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Privacy debate brews even in peace-loving, little Switzerland

A recent article in Dor Band, the leading newspaper in Basel, Switzerland, "The Glass Customer at Reduced Prices" referred not to buyers of glass but to super-market customers whose purchase patterns have been visible by scanners in club-card programs. Migros, Switzerland’s largest supermarket chain, has started a shoppers’ club program called “Comulus.” The program records shoppers’ purchases, and credits them with points equivalent to 1/8 of the purchase amounts.

The article noted that the 1% rebate averages about $100 a year for the typical household. Club members get a quarterly statement with vouchers, used like cash at Migros stores, and special coupon offers. The program is popular; one million households, almost 50% of the population, signed up during its first 10 days.

For the time being, the data collected are limited only to aggregate databases; Migros’s scanner installation program will not be complete until late 1998. Once in place, according to the Band article, “regular purchasers of dog food can look forward to receiving promotions and coupons for dog food.”

Switzerland has a federal bureau that protects data confidentiality, raising the same privacy questions that are raised here. In Switzerland, this bureau is concerned that consumers may not be fully aware of the trade-off between the discount offered and the use of the information to Migros. A bureau spokesman noted that the discount is emphasized in the program description while the advantages to Migros are not, and that “Swiss consumers have not been made sufficiently aware of the problem of information confidentiality.”

A Migros spokesman responded that the marketing use of the recorded information is clearly stated, that participation in the program is entirely voluntary, and that a check-off box is provided for consumers to request that no promotional material be sent to them. He noted that only 3% of club applicants choose that option.

It sounds familiar. A federal official worries that his mandate lacks popular support, and a corporate spokesman quotes an irrelevant statistic—the check-off option does not require Migros to stop recording the purchase information, only not to send promotion material.

Privacy is a broad, rather fuzzy concept. It probably does not cover dog food purchases, but it may apply to the purchase of tobacco products by someone who claimed to be a nonsmoker on his life insurance application. That person, however, is a liar and a fraud; is privacy largely a matter of protecting liars and frauds?

It’s an old question, and this column can’t settle it.

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These books are among the many received at the AMA’s Marguerite Kent Library/Information Center. AMA members can borrow most, but some are available for reference only.

