

PINK RIBBON BLUES

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On September 28th, 2004, BCAM presented the first Lanie Melamed Memorial Lecture featuring guest speaker Barbara Brenner, Executive Director of Breast Cancer Action in San Francisco. BCA spearheaded a "Think Before You Pink" campaign to direct public attention to the growing corporate interest in funding breast cancer research. Nancy Guberman, BCAM member, welcomed the crowd of about 150 to the D.B. Clarke Theatre of Concordia University, and invited the moderator, journalist Donna Nebenzahl, to introduce the speaker.

Cause marketing

A rising incidence in breast cancer in North America has attracted much interest from corporations. In fact, breast cancer has rapidly become a leading social cause, a "poster child" for North American marketing, with literally hundreds of companies joining in. According to Barbara Brenner, this happened gradually because breast cancer is a 'socially acceptable' disease, because it was encouraged by research foundations, and "partly because we're a society that really likes to focus on breasts."

Referring to corporate support as only "one piece of the breast cancer funding network", Brenner explained the concept of cause marketing, or linking a product to a social cause. Companies benefit in two ways — corporate image is enhanced and sales increase.

Cornerstone to this marketing is the pink ribbon, and Brenner summarized the fascinating story of 68-year-old activist Charlotte Haley, whose daughter, sister and grandmother had fought breast cancer. Inspired in the early eighties by the AIDS ribbon, Haley attached peach-coloured ribbons to cards with the hand-written message, "The National Cancer Institute annual budget is \$1.8 billion; only 5 percent goes for cancer prevention. Help us wake up our legislators and America by wearing this ribbon." By the time *Self* Magazine and the Estee Lauder Company took an interest, thousands of peach ribbons had been distributed, and letters were flowing to the National Cancer Institute. Asked by the companies to relinquish the symbol for a national promotion, Haley refused, apprehensive of the ribbon being commercialized. Following legal and focus group research, *Self* and Estee Lauder launched a campaign using a new colour — pink. The Susan G. Komen Foundation — the major funding foundation for breast cancer research in the U.S. — later failed in an attempt to patent the pink ribbon for its exclusive use.

Asking questions

Years of fruitless research tracking corporate fundraising for breast cancer led BCA to develop an awareness campaign to challenge corporate marketing claims and to engage the public in asking important questions. "We think it's time that people understood the realities of this disease and its treatment, and pink ribbons are not getting us there," said Brenner. "We are challenging the notion that companies can exploit disease for their profit while so many of us are getting sick, and we think it's time that stopped."

The first Think Before You Pink campaign in 2002 included a newspaper ad depicting a Eureka vacuum cleaner sucking up a pink ribbon, accompanied by the caption "Who's really cleaning up here?" Interestingly, the Eureka pink campaign ended within months.

Brenner's transparency test is based on a few simple but crucial questions: how much money goes to the cause [when I buy the product]? How is the money being raised? What exactly does that money support? and Are these products killing us?

How much money is raised?

Advertisements for "Charge for the Cure", a multi-year campaign by American Express, announced that every transaction made during October — breast cancer awareness month — would result in a contribution to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The fine print reveals that the company's contribution per purchase is one cent, regardless of the amount charged. After BCA drew attention to the fact that a hundred transactions were needed to generate a single dollar for the Komen Foundation, the campaign ended.

Yoplait's Save A Lid, Save A Life campaign pledges 10 cents to a breast cancer fund for every yoghurt container lid returned to the company by mail. Contrasting the \$726 spent on yoghurt (three containers daily during the 3-month campaign) with the \$27 portion donated to breast cancer, Brenner is sceptical: "Yoplait is getting an awful lot of credit. Wouldn't it be easier to write a cheque?"

Hush Puppies and Cineplex Odeon, whose ads promise a "portion of the proceeds" to breast cancer, fail to specify how large a portion, and were noted for their reluctance to disclose those amounts when approached.

What does the money support?

KitchenAid was singled out for not knowing, or rather for not appearing interested in knowing how its campaign contributions are used. "We asked Kitchenaid what happens to their money and they said: "Ask the Komen Foundation; we have no idea," Brenner told the audience, "Because they frankly don't care; it's not about breast cancer to them, it's about their market."

Are these products killing us?

BCA is paying attention to companies that raise funds for breast cancer while marketing products that might be harmful, or more significantly, that might be carcinogens. Targeting what it calls 'two-timing companies', the organization's public ad in 2003 featured the headline "The cosmetics companies and breast cancer — philanthropy or hypocrisy?" It concluded with the statement "...corporate conscience belongs in a company's products, not just in its marketing".

To Brenner, the marketing opportunity for the cosmetics industry is clear: "Most people who buy cosmetics are women, and women fear breast cancer more than any other disease, no matter how illogical that is... so if you tie yourself to breast cancer, clearly, you are going to sell more products". And many personal care products contain parabens and phthalates, two families of synthetic chemicals that are suspected hormone disrupters and potential carcinogens. (see summary at right)

[N.B.: Cosmetics companies are not required to disclose ingredients on the product label in North America, but Europe has recently adopted a law requiring it; Health Canada has tabled a proposed labelling law, but the timetable for implementation is not yet known. Brenner suggested consulting www.drugstore.org, which lists the ingredients of products sold through its website].

The car industry, also identified for its 'pinkwashing', could accomplish far more by improving its products. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and 1,3-butadiene — both released in car exhaust — are presumed to have a causal relationship to breast cancer. "Ford should not be able to have it both ways", says Brenner. "If Ford cares about women's lives, it should ... reduce the emissions from its vehicles (being the worst offender in emissions in the U.S. for the last five years running, according to the Environmental Protection Agency), and it should [improve the] fuel efficiency in its cars ... instead, they would have you believe that they care because they support the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. And they're not alone - General Motors does it, Mercedes-Benz does it, BMW does it. Toyota supports the American Cancer Society."

Resources:

www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org/Pages/Resources.html features a list of products that are free of phthalates and parabens

www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep/ has an in-depth report on potentially hazardous ingredients in cosmetics as well as a searchable product guide to find out the ingredients in brand-name products

www.drugstore.com lists the ingredients in cosmetics sold through its web site

<http://www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org/Pages/PrettyInPink.html> has the full story about the pink ribbon in an article by Sandy M. Fernandez; the BCA web site also features many other articles.

<http://www.ecotalk.org/BreastCancer.htm> has an article by Lynn Landes on the corporate role in Breast Cancer Awareness Month

<http://www.bcaction.org/PDF/Harpers.pdf> has Barbara Ehrenreich's article "Welcome to Cancerland", published in *Harper's* magazine in 2001.

Parabens (methylparaben, propylparaben, butylparaben & others):

synthetic preservatives used to improve shelf life. Mimic oestrogen in the body. No proven link to breast cancer, but found in the tissue of breast tumours. Used in shampoo, moisturizers, antiperspirants, makeup, and more.

Phthalates: synthetic chemicals used to make plastic pliable and/or durable. Associated with premature breast development, which is linked to early onset breast cancer. Used in nail polish, hair products, fragrances, antiperspirants, plastic toys, baby bottle nipples, plastic food wrap..

Acrylimide: used as a stabilizer in cosmetics; also produced by grilling and frying certain foods. Listed by the EPA as a probable carcinogen. Used in cosmetics,

Ethylene oxide: Disinfectant and sterilant. Listed as a known carcinogen. Used in soaps, detergents, and as a pesticide.

Taken from <http://www.bcam.qc.ca>