

PART VI



Media, Public Policy, and Health Promotion

CHAPTER 26



The Pink Elephant in the Room

Breast Cancer Awareness Marketing

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Every day for six weeks Sarah arrived at the small clinic in northern Massachusetts by 7:45 a.m. to squeeze in radiation treatment before work. Diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma at just 23 years old, Sarah's body had already been ravaged by six rounds of chemotherapy, and the skin on her neck and chest were red and raw from the radiation.

"In the women's waiting area there was a pink poster on the wall with a poem titled 'What Cancer Cannot Do,'" Sarah remembers. "It was surrounded by roses and butterflies and the lines were printed in a loopy, flowery script. I loathed it. The visual message of the poster was so at odds with what I was going through. My hair was gone, skin burned, nails cracked, and my mouth and lips were covered in sores. I felt like the poster was mocking me as I waited alone in that room, completely exhausted, trying to squeeze in cancer treatments before going into my office for a nine-hour day. There was nothing pretty, pink, or girly about my cancer experience."

The color pink has been associated with cancer awareness campaigns since the inception of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation in 1982. In October 1991, Evelyn Lauder, breast cancer survivor and senior vice president of Estée Lauder, guest edited a special section of *Self* magazine for Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The same year, pink ribbons were distributed at make-up counters throughout New York alongside Estée Lauder products. In ensuing decades, marketing "pink" products under the auspices of raising money and awareness for breast cancer issues exploded in popularity.

"I hate October," says Jessica, who has been in remission for three years. "I hate seeing all the pink stuff on shelves in the stores. It's like I'm being forced to

think about breast cancer all the time. It brings back all the trauma and stress of cancer at times when I'm not expecting it. I'm jolted out of my perceived notions of health and pulled back into it."

The ubiquitous nature of breast cancer marketing is a relatively new phenomenon. Until late in the 20th century, cancer (especially breast cancer) was not a topic discussed in polite company. This taboo was shattered by Betty Ford in September 1974 when, just three weeks after her husband was sworn in as President of the United States, she made the unprecedented decision to announce publicly that she would be going through treatment for breast cancer. With this historic televised press conference Ford brought the subject of breast cancer out of the shadows.

"Too many women are so afraid of breast cancer that they endanger their lives. These fears of being 'less' of a woman are very real, and it is very important to talk about the emotional side effects honestly. They must come out into the open. . . . Cancer also produces fear—and much of that fear comes from ignorance about the progress already made and ignorance of the need for preventive medicine for men and women alike," said Ford during a speech to the American Cancer Society in November 1975.

According to the National Breast Cancer Foundation, one out of every eight women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer. According to recent studies examining news coverage of cancer, breast cancer is mentioned far more frequently in the media than other types of cancers, leading people to overestimate its actual frequency.

Although the Susan G. Komen foundation is the largest breast cancer association, thousands of other advocacy organizations also work to support breast cancer patients and survivors. While there is no question that breast cancer activism has resulted in increased visibility for the disease, the rapid growth of these campaigns has led some to question their effectiveness.

"The concept of awareness disturbs me," says Kathy, a metastatic breast cancer patient who blogs prolifically about living with incurable cancer. "Awareness was probably necessary back in the late seventies when it all started, but [breast cancer organizations] haven't progressed beyond that idea. Only about 17% of money raised by the Susan G. Komen foundation goes to research today, while the remainder goes towards education. This is specifically bothersome to metastatic breast cancer patients. . . . It no longer makes sense to say that early detection will cure cancer, because now we know that it doesn't [for some people]." According to the Susan G. Komen 2015 annual report, 20% of their total funding went to research efforts, while 37% was spent on education, 16% on screening services, 8% percent on treatment, and 19% on fundraising and administration costs.

For Kathy, the most disturbing part of many pink marketing campaigns is that companies can make money off of a disease without helping those who are suffering from it in any tangible way. Many breast cancer organizations participate in cause-marketing, which involves a mutually beneficial partnership between a business and a nonprofit entity. For example, in 2010 Susan G. Komen partnered

with Kentucky Fried Chicken on their “Buckets for the Cure” initiative. The fast food chain pledged to donate 50 cents from each specially branded pink bucket to the Susan G. Komen foundation with a fundraising goal of \$8.5 million. KFC’s final donation amount was \$4.2 million, making it the largest single donation Susan G. Komen had ever received.

Jane, a conscientious shopper, has her own take on pink merchandise. “My grandmother has a keychain that she bought from the post office several years ago of a pink ribbon design on a stamp. ‘Breast Cancer Awareness’ is written across the top. I don’t know how much she paid for it or what ‘charity’ the proceeds went towards, but I know that there are several campaigns and organizations that use the pink ribbon to promote . . . *stuff*, and it’s greedy.” Pink bottle openers, pink cola cans, pink socks, pink NFL jerseys, pink, pink, pink. The progression of pink marketing has been quick and evolutionary. “Just today I saw someone at work with a bracelet touting ‘I Heart Boobies’—a bracelet from a charity completely unassociated with breast cancer.”

The pink ribbon symbol is not trademarked, and no corporation or organization has exclusive rights to its use. Although many consumers reasonably assume that products or services that use the pink ribbon are in some way supporting breast cancer charities or research, there is no regulation on the use of the popular symbol.

Breast cancer–related cause-marketing campaigns have been used to promote products and services that run seemingly in contrast to promoting public health, including fracking, alcohol companies, pornography, and fast food. With breast cancer used as a marketing tool for products ranging from drill bits and handguns to cosmetics and clothing lines, some breast cancer survivors are speaking out about the commercialization of their disease.

In 2002, Breast Cancer Action (a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting people with breast cancer) launched the Think Before You Pink® project to encourage greater transparency and accountability by companies that take part in breast cancer fundraising. The organization also advocates for greater consumer awareness when it comes to supporting pink ribbon promotions. Think Before You Pink® has convinced several organizations that use breast cancer cause-marketing promotions to sell products that may, either directly or indirectly, have carcinogenic effects to change their products. For example, in 2008 the group successfully lobbied Yoplait, sponsor of the “Put a Lid on It” campaign, to stop using dairy stimulated with the hormone rBGH. Think Before You Pink® has also been a vocal critic of the cosmetic industry, in which breast cancer marketing is pervasive, because many personal health and beauty products include known carcinogens and reproductive toxins.

Jessica says that having breast cancer made her far more aware of her buying habits. “I am very skeptical of marketing campaigns and try to only buy things when I know what’s in them and how they’re made,” she says. “There are so many pink products that are actually unhealthy. I just never really felt solidarity with pink. Let’s start focusing on the toxicity of chemicals in our products. Put pressure on our companies to make the products safer.”

Sarah also became a more critical consumer after going through cancer treatments. She says she stays away from pink-branded products unless the packaging clearly states that proceeds from the sales will go to groups that directly fund cancer research or support survivorship issues. Sarah’s chemotherapy treatments put her at a much higher risk for a future cancer diagnosis. At the advice of her oncologist, she started yearly mammograms when she turned 30, and she hopes that if a secondary malignancy does arise they will catch it early.

As Kathy wrote in a blog post, “Pink Ribbons, awareness walks, and community gardens won’t cure breast cancer, but putting those hard-earned donated dollars towards research may. Wouldn’t it be amazing if people realized awareness has been achieved, and it’s time to move to Phase 2—a cure?”

RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Breast cancer	Cancer	Mass communication
Breast cancer promotion campaigns	Channels of communication	

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the research conducted by Kathy Charmaz in 1990, ill individuals construct and modify their identities, based partly on the input of people around them.
 - What identity is suggested for breast cancer patients and survivors based on pink marketing messages?
 - What are some challenges you see reflected in this case study concerning the actual diversity of people coping with breast cancer?
 - From your own experiences with the media, how are other health conditions (e.g., dementia, obesity, depression) and the people who have them portrayed?
2. As reflected in the case study, pink marketing is prevalent in today’s society and marketplace. What products and message have you seen that reflect breast cancer awareness or show the pink ribbon?
3. The channels used to promote breast cancer awareness messages can be assessed in terms of *reach* (how many people are exposed to the message), *specificity* (how much the message targets some people but not others), and *impact* (how persuasive the message is).¹
 - How often do you notice pink ribbons or other symbols related to breast cancer awareness?
 - How do these messages affect you?
 - How do you believe these messages impact people affected by breast cancer?
4. The tone and voice of campaigns impact how audiences perceive them. Based on your experience with breast cancer awareness campaigns and the perspectives given in the case study, what voice(s) and tone(s) do particular breast cancer awareness campaigns demonstrate?

NOTES

1. Schooler, C., Chaffee, S. H., Flora, J. A., & Roser, C. (1998). Health campaign channels: Tradeoffs among reach, specificity, and impact. *Health Communication Research*, 24, 410–432.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

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- Jaggar, K. (2014, October, 21). Komen is supposed to be curing breast cancer. So why is its pink ribbon on so many carcinogenic products? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/21/komen-is-supposed-to-be-curing-breast-cancer-so-why-is-its-pink-ribbon-on-so-many-carcinogenic-products/>.
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