

Seeing Red In Pink Products: One Woman's Fight Against Breast Cancer Consumerism



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By Newsweek

by Joan Raymond

I just redeemed a coupon from P&G for a Swiffer. For my effort, two cents will be given to the National Breast Cancer Foundation. I would have to buy 500 Swiffer wet thingies to make a \$10 donation. But I needed a Swiffer any. And two cents is better than nothing. So why not use the coupons that were inserted into my newspaper?

Because, says Barbara Brenner, the executive director of Breast Cancer Action, a non-profit, watchdog group headquartered in San Francisco, buying pink products has little to do with helping cure and treat breast cancer. Says Brenner: "Everyone has been guilt-tripped into buying pink things. If shopping could cure breast care it would be cured by now."

Well, I wasn't particularly "guilted," just out of some basic necessities. And hey, two cents is two cents.

But Brenner says consumers need to strip off their pink-tinted glasses.

"Swiffers. What do they have to do with breast cancer? This is about marketing. As long as we are in a situation in which corporate America is trying to solve a problem we don't understand, we are in trouble."

Too much of the money, says Brenner, is going to fund a cure --- with too little being spent on studying what causes cancer in the first place, or towards giving aid to women with cancer. We still know little about how breast cancer works, or the best way to treat it, or how often we should screen for it. And shopping, she says, won't help.

"We have to get past the idea that a simple answer is going to solve a complicated problem," she says, noting that the huge increase in pink products in this month may afford the disease to just 30 days worth of attention per year. "People think breast cancer only happens in October," she says.

On the other hand, the extreme amount of attention it does receive this month gives people the impression that breast cancer is well taken care of, says Brenner. "I got an email in late October last year and it said the breast cancer problem is solved, why aren't you guys working on autism? I was floored. The breast cancer problem is not solved."

Seven years ago, BCA launched Think Before You Pink thinkbeforeyoupink.org/, a watchdog group monitoring products marketed for breast cancer awareness. The group came in response to the Breast Cancer Action's concerns that called for more transparency and accountability by companies taking part in breast cancer fundraising. They want consumers to start asking a lot more questions before they whip out their pink credit card to pay for that pink household cleaning product.

She is particularly concerned about 4 categories of product cause marketing related to breast cancer: cosmetic companies that use substances that have been tangentially linked to breast cancer; automobile companies (Ford, for example, which has its Warriors in Pink breast cancer awareness program) since there are toxins coming out of the tailpipe; dairy companies using bovine growth hormone rbGH; and alcohol manufacturers who cash in on pink "when we know that too much drinking" can lead to breast cancer, says Brenner.

"Companies say they care about breast cancer," but they have elements in their products that can "cause" breast cancer, too, she says. And it doesn't make her happy.

I asked her if she thought I was stupid to cut out my little coupon and buy my Swiffers.

"Nobody who buys this stuff is stupid," she says. "But they've been told by corporate America that buying solves the problem."

Brenner was diagnosed with breast cancer 16 years ago. "I'm fortunate to still be here," she says. "Breast cancer gets so much attention, but what kind? Awareness is not what we need, and buying things ain't going to solve the problem."

Advocates for pink marketing disagree. "I'd say pink is doing its job very effectively - I'm thinking there should be even

more pink if it helps us get rid of this disease forever," said Ambassador Nancy G. Brinker, founder of Susan G. Komen for the Cure [www5.komen.org] in a statement to NEWSWEEK. "These products provide tens of millions of dollars for research and support programs; they remind people to get their screenings and allow people to participate in this movement conveniently... Of course, people should look at web sites and labels to make an informed choice, but it's short-sighted to simply dismiss the positive impact that businesses are having in our fight to end an awful disease."

While it's unlikely to stop consumers from shopping, Think Before You Pink has taken a more proactive view as well. Several years ago, they focused on Yoplait's pink-lidded yogurt, which was sold to raise money for breast cancer, but was made with dairy stimulated with the hormone rBGH.

The online campaign called on General Mills, the manufacturer of Yoplait to "put a lid" on rBGH, and gave activists the tools to send that message directly to the CEO. Working with many partners dedicated to ridding the world of rBGH, BCA activists persuaded General Mills to do the right thing. As a result, Yoplait is now rBGH free.

Two weeks after General Mills announced they were going rBGH free, Dannon responded to public pressure and made the same promise to consumers. These two companies represent two-thirds of America's dairy products.

Brenner and Think Before You Pink weren't able to stop the tidal wave of pink products that flood the market each October. But they were able to make some of those products safer for women. It's a small step – but an important one.

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