Corporations Flock to Selling for the (Breast Cancer) Cure

All across America, people are “shopping” for a cure for breast cancer, funneling millions into the coffers of several large breast cancer advocacy foundations and at least one cancer center by purchasing products that are somehow tied to national fundraising campaigns for breast cancer awareness and research. The opportunities seem ubiquitous in October—National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Saturation of such “cause-related” marketing, known as “pink” campaigns, is so complete, in fact, that some advocates privately laugh about efforts they say range from “driving for the cure”—BMW will donate $1 for every mile that is test-driven by a potential buyer—to what they dub “wiping for the cure”—the 50 cents that Quilted Northern Ultra toilet tissue will donate for each proof-of-purchase code mailed back to the company.

But a number of breast cancer advocates complain that some corporations are using breast cancer to sell their products, and that saturation of breast cancer awareness messages may actually be sending the wrong message to American women—that researchers are closer to a cure than they really are.

Proceeds from many such campaigns—including those from BMW and Quilted Northern—go to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, which will also receive funds from the 57 other corporations or businesses listed on their Web site. They include campaigns by Yoplait yogurt, KitchenAid appliances, Mohawk carpeting, pink and white M&Ms, Smart Health latex medical examination gloves, SBC Communications, Pinnacle golf balls, and Wyndham Hotel & Resorts, which is sponsoring “Dream for the Cure.”

The foundation’s success has been remarkable. Through these campaigns and other fund-raising activities, the foundation has amassed more than $740 million for its “fight against breast cancer” since the organization was established in 1982. They garnered $30 million in cause-related marketing last year alone. From all of its fund-raising activities last year, the foundation said it gave 74% of total spending, or $96 million, to such “Komen missions” as breast cancer education (36%), breast cancer research (22%), screening (11%), and treatment (6%). The foundation has given more than 1,000 research grants, totaling more than $144 million, since 1982.

Other organizations have similar so-called cause-related marketing efforts. The 10-year-old Breast Cancer Research Foundation, founded by Evelyn Lauder, senior corporate vice president of the Estee Lauder Companies, has raised $90 million to support breast cancer research nationwide. Lauder originally promoted the pink ribbon now widely associated with breast cancer awareness, and often focuses its corporate cause-related marketing campaigns to beauty products, as well as to women’s clothing and extras, such as plush puppies and teddy bears.

The only comprehensive cancer center that has an extensive cause-related marketing effort of its own, City of Hope National Medical Center, in Duarte, Calif., has raised about $12 million in the last 5 years but expects to raise $7 million this year and $10 million next year. Among its 17 “companies for the cause” listed on its Web site is 3M, the makers of Post-it notes, which offers special note pads that feature a pink ribbon and the City of Hope name on each pack. That campaign alone will raise about $300,000 that the City of Hope will use for its own breast cancer research projects, said Maureen Carlson, associate vice president of cause-related marketing. These fund-raising efforts have been so successful that Carlson is pursuing “multi-tier, multilayer campaigns that run all year long.”

A Call to “Think Before You Pink”

Fran Visco, president of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, points out that breast cancer still kills more than 40,000 women a year, and commercialized campaigns “obscure the devastation,” she said. “They give the appearance that enough money and much attention is being paid to breast cancer and that there is not much left to be done to get rid of breast cancer—except to buy products.”

Visco predicts there “will be a backlash against breast cancer. People will say ‘look at all the attention breast cancer is getting,’ and they will move on.”

Others wonder if, along with an oversimplified message, groups like the Komen Foundation are pushing hard enough for original research. Not
enough money is devoted to true prevention of breast cancer, or to effective treatment of advanced disease, says Susan Love, M.D., of the Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation. “I think most of these pink funds are not going to innovative research, but are going to iterative changes that are not necessarily bad but will not get us to the end that much faster,” she said.

One advocacy group has been trying to force a public debate on these issues. The watchdog group Breast Cancer Action has conducted a “think before you pink” campaign since 2002 in reaction to corporate encouragement to “think pink.” The nonprofit organization does not accept corporate donations and its executive director, Barbara Brenner, says Americans should question the motives of companies that are “exploiting women’s lives. It is more about their profits than it is about breast cancer,” she said.

Approximately 100 companies have national ad campaigns devoted to breast cancer awareness, “yet we often have no idea how much money these companies are raising or how it’s being spent,” said Brenner. “We have been trying to find out for years whether anything worthwhile is being done for women with, or at risk for, breast cancer.”

The amount of money these foundations donate is also deceptive—much less per product than many people assume, said Brenner. For example, a person would have to eat 360 containers of Yoplait yogurt to raise $36. Whenever someone buys a $170 Eureka WhirlWind Lite Speed model, the company will donate $1 to the Komen Foundation—which Brenner likens to “cleaning up” in the name of breast cancer. American Express’s “Charge for a Cure” campaign donates one penny every time a cardholder makes a transaction. That means, of course, that cardholders would have to make 100 transactions to donate $1 to the Komen foundation. American Express also caps its total donation at $500,000, which the corporation can then write off on its taxes.

Breast Cancer Action’s campaign is gaining some attention. Its new Web site, www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org, has had more than 14,000 hits. An e-mail broadcast in late September by the group, sent out by author Barbara Ehrenreich, has also resonated, according to Brenner. Ehrenreich, who has written about what she calls the “cult of pink kitsch,” said that October is beginning to seem more like “Breast Cancer Industry month. Right now over 30 federal agencies and dozens of foundations, pharmaceutical and biotech companies are conducting or funding research; thousands of companies are raising money for research. But how much closer are we to finding answers?”

But Brenner admits that there has been no slowdown in the explosion of cause-related marketing over the past several years, and now the group is changing its tactics, asking that groups that receive these monies, as well as all other public and private organizations that fund breast cancer research, work together to create a shared research agenda.

“What is needed now is not more money but a handle on the research that is already being done,” Brenner said. “We are saying to the research community—why not talk together about how we can restructure research to get the answers that the public is demanding?”

Filling in the Gaps

Susan Braun, president and CEO of the Komen Foundation, answered Brenner’s challenge by saying that the foundation is already working to identify and fill in the gaps that exist in breast cancer research by participating in the International Cancer Research Portfolio (ICRP), a database of information on cancer research awards in the United States and the United Kingdom. The American Cancer Society said, also in response, that it stays informed about other groups’ projects to avoid duplication of effort.

Larry Norton, M.D., deputy physician-in-chief for Breast Cancer Programs at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, dismisses the complaints. He agrees there “is a lot of pink out there,” but he sees no problem with it. “I can’t see a downside to it,” said Norton, whose serves on the medical advisory board of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation and who has also received grants from the group. “If a company receives recognition for doing good work, what is wrong with that? Who is hurt? All I see is benefit.”

And he said that although it is “commendable and important to coordinate activities, you have to leave the door open for creativity, especially when the stakes are so high.” Norton maintains that the researchers funded by the Breast Cancer Research Foundation are “very productive giants in the field that can be trusted to follow their own research instincts.”

Carlson, from the City of Hope, said she can understand criticism of cause-related marketing, and in fact has had to shun companies who try to use the cancer center to sell their products. “I get a lot of calls, and I have to walk away from a lot of organizations that want to build their products or brands around us,” said Carlson. She also worries that Americans will become weary of the “one-off” campaigns during October—which is why Carlson is considering year-around cause-related marketing “so that it becomes part of an ongoing relationship between consumers and corporations.”

But Carlson said that complaints by the advocates disappear in the face of feedback from breast cancer patients, who are pleased about the campaigns. “All I hear is the message that anything out there that funds research or treatment will make it easier for the next woman, or a daughter, to go through something that has been so horrible for them,” said Carlson. “They are so happy about these donations and believe they will have an impact.”

—Renee Twombly