

# Rebelling Against the Commonly Evasive Feminine Care Ad

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 [nytimes.com/2010/03/16/business/media/16adco.html](http://nytimes.com/2010/03/16/business/media/16adco.html)

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A COMMERCIAL for U by Kotex, a new line from the 90-year-old feminine care brand, opens with an actress in her early 20s who says, “How do I feel about my period? I love it.”

She continues, “Sometimes I just want to run on a beach,” as footage shows a woman running along the shore. “Usually, by the third day, I really just want to dance,” she says, to footage of women dancing ecstatically. As blue liquid is poured on a pad in another clip, she concludes, “The ads on TV are really helpful because they use that blue liquid, and I’m like, ‘Oh, that’s what’s supposed to happen.’ ”

The spot, by the New York office of JWT, which is a part of WPP, closes with the text, “Why are tampon ads so ridiculous?” along with the campaign tagline, “Break the cycle,” before finally showing the new line of tampons, pads and liners. The commercial was scheduled to appear on television for the first time Monday.

The clips mocked in the spot are actually from Kotex commercials, some shown within the last year in the United States or Europe.

“We are guilty, so it’s not that Kotex is any different,” said Andrew Meurer, vice president for North American feminine, adult and senior care for Kotex’s parent company, Kimberly-Clark. “We’re turning the light on ourselves, and we’re not saying, look at what other people do. We’re saying look at what we’ve done in the past, which typifies everyone in the category.”

Ads for menstrual products remain conspicuously euphemistic, typically featuring women practicing yoga in white spandex, riding white horses along the beach, or airborne in cheerleader outfits.



A print ad for U by Kotex that makes light of the embarrassment some feel about feminine products.

“Fem-care advertising is so sterilized and so removed from what a period is,” said Elissa Stein, co-author (with Susan Kim) of the book “Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation.” “You never see a bathroom, you never see a woman using a product. They never show someone having cramps or her face breaking out or tearful — it’s always happy, playful, sporty women.”

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The U by Kotex campaign aims to both parody such conventions, and to make an impression with marketing that is more frank. But that approach turns out to be a bit too frank for some networks.

Merrie Harris, global business director at JWT, said that after being informed that it could not use the word vagina in advertising by three broadcast networks, it shot the ad cited above with the actress instead saying “down there,” which was rejected by two of the three networks. (Both Ms. Harris and representatives from the brand declined to specify the networks.)

“It’s very funny because the whole spot is about censorship,” Ms. Harris said. “The whole category has been very euphemistic, or paternalistic even, and we’re saying, enough with the euphemisms, and get over it. Tampon is not a dirty word, and neither is vagina.”

The new line primarily caters to women from 14 to 21.

Another spot, which will make its debut next month, opens with a woman strolling confidently toward the camera. “I’m a believably attractive 18- to 24-year-old female,” she says. “You can relate to me because I’m racially ambiguous. Market research shows that girls like you love girls like me.”

The sense of an ad somehow deconstructing itself continues, as she says, “Now I’m going to tell you to buy something. Buy the same tampons I use. Because I’m wearing white pants, and I have good hair, and you wish you could be me.” Screen text near the end of the spot asks, “Why are tampon ads so obnoxious?”

A print ad, meanwhile, shows a woman driving a convertible with this text: “I tied a tampon to my key ring so my brother wouldn’t take my car. It worked.”



A TV commercial for the line features an actress parodying conventions of such ads.

Packaging for the new products are primarily black, with individually wrapped items within in four bright colors.

“This has been an institutional type of product, with products that are white and light blue and boring, and what we have is a variety of bold lipstick colors in each pack,” said Mr. Meurer, of Kotex. “What we like to say is ‘We’re taking the category from institutional care to personal care.’ ”

Visitors to the Web site, [UbyKotex.com](http://UbyKotex.com), designed by the New York office of Organic, part of the Omnicom Group, are urged to sign a “Declaration of Real Talk,” vowing to defy societal pressures that discourage women from speaking out about their bodies and health.

For every signer, Kotex will donate \$1 to Girls for a Change, a national nonprofit based in San Jose, Calif., that pairs urban middle school and high school girls with professional women to encourage social change.

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While the brand may have to finesse some of its newfound candor to pass muster with networks, it is unencumbered online. In what by all accounts is unprecedented in menstrual product marketing, the videos on the Web site show women demonstrating how to use the

products, including video of an actress in a bathroom applying a panty liner, and another of one inserting a tampon in an anatomically correct puppet.

Of both demonstrations, Ms. Kim, the “Flow” co-author, said, “Given what’s gone before, it’s a big step forward.” And she praised the writing and the young actresses for “giving the nod to the fact this might be funny but not modeling shame.”

“We’re really out there and we’re trying to touch women and say we care about this conversation,” said Mr. Meurer, of Kotex. “We’re changing our brand equity to stand for truth and transparency and progressive vaginal care.”