

OBSERVATIONS

MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

The V word: selling genital hygiene products to women

Some companies selling products to help women with purported problems of genital “freshness” are avoiding the word “vagina” in their marketing, writes **Margaret McCartney**, but do women need these products at all?

Margaret McCartney *general practitioner, Glasgow*

In the United States, Lisa Brown was banned from the Michigan House of Representatives in June this year, after saying, in the context of a debate on abortion legislation, “Finally, Mr Speaker, I’m flattered that you’re all so interested in my vagina, but no means no.”¹ The next day she was told that Republican leaders had banned her from speaking for being “disgusting.” But it’s a descriptive, medical, anatomically correct word. Is the V word really so shocking?

In June, the Femfresh brand (www.femfresh.co.uk) was criticised for advertising soaps, deodorant, and wipes designed for women’s genitalia with the slogan “Whatever you call it, love it.” There followed a list of euphemisms without mention of any anatomical descriptors. The reaction on social media was of voluminous ridicule, leading manufacturers Church and Dwight to suspend the Facebook account where much of the reaction took place. Church and Dwight said that it had tried to create a television advert using the word “vagina,” but was told that this would “certainly attract a timing restriction.”

Additionally, it stated that last year, four women’s publications refused to run its adverts because of references to genitals, and that since its products were designed for the “labia, vulva and peri-anal area,” a description with the word “vagina” would have been inaccurate.

So is “vagina” a word that’s allowed to be said in public? Earlier this year, Johnson and Johnson ran an advert in Australia featuring a naked but obscured woman, saying that “that bit of discharge in between your period is our body working to keep the vagina healthy,” and that “damp, less than fresh, feeling” would be aided by its sanitary product, which was designed to be used daily and help women feel “clean, dry and fresh every day.”² This attracted complaint and criticism. In defence, Johnson and Johnson claimed that the advert was a “celebration of the female body,” “71% of women admit to experiencing discharge while 66% are bothered by it,” and many women “do not want to refer to themselves or their anatomy in diminutive or euphemistic terms.” The Advertising Bureau of Australia dismissed the complaints, ruling that the adverts were “sensitive,” and that “vagina” was the correct anatomical term and inoffensive.³

Meantime, Kotex, which is owned by Kimberly-Clark and makes sanitary products, has used the word “vagina” in US print adverts. However, in a statement, it said that “most major networks don’t view the word as acceptable for televised airing.”

So while it was acceptable for drug companies to talk about “erectile dysfunction” in prime time advertising, the word “vagina” had to be changed to “down there,” and two networks still declined to run the material and the idea was dropped.⁴ In the United Kingdom, all broadcast adverts must comply with the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising. This necessitates clearance of scripts and commercials by Clearcast, which is funded by six major broadcasters. They have “no specific restrictions” on the use of anatomical names in advertising, but causing “harm and offence” is not allowed. The Advertising Standards Authority, which responds to complaints about print and online adverts, has never upheld a complaint about the use of the word “vagina” because it caused offence.

Church and Dwight, as part of its market research, asked women what they called their genitals: 600 women gave 189 names, and “vagina” had only seven votes. It is useful to have common terms for genitals that can be used for communication without embarrassment, particularly with reference to medical care. But is the use of the word “vagina” in advertising being pushed for the right reasons?

Regardless of whether or not the word “vagina” is used, there should be no shame attached to having a vagina; yet the message of advertisers seems to infer that there is. Johnson and Johnson said that normal physiological secretions could lead to women feeling “less than fresh” and intends its product to be used daily, not just during menstruation.

Femfresh offers a “feminine freshness deodorant” that is meant to “limit the development of odour to leave you feeling fresh and confident.” It also sells a “daily intimate wash” and wipes for an “instant boost of freshness.” Are these really necessary? Church and Dwight told me in a statement, “It’s concerning that some women don’t wash the genital area with only water—they use ordinary soaps and shower gels as they want to feel cleaner. We know that using these may lead to

infections,” before concluding that its product was better. However, the NHS Choices website recommends simply to avoid perfumed soaps, saying that vaginal deodorants are unnecessary: “It’s normal for the vagina to have a scent.”⁵ Note the difference: “scent” not “odour.” Femfresh, in response to my questions about the efficacy of its products, noted that the motivation for women using its products could be the onset of menstruation, sexual activity, or pregnancy. The company also said that use was also related to “boosting confidence rather than solving a particular problem.”

But if women’s confidence is being knocked because their normality is presented as a problem, V word or not, women’s genitals are simply being treated as bait for insecurities and a

marketing opportunity. We should emulate Lisa Brown, and tell the advertisers to leave our vaginas alone.

- 1 Brown L. Silenced for saying (shock!) ‘vagina’. *CNN* 21 June 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/06/21/opinion/brown-kicked-out-for-saying-vagina/index.html>.
- 2 YouTube. Carefree Acti-Fresh Ad 2012 (AU). 2012. www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpaVxMv-Sw.
- 3 Advertising Standards Bureau. Advertising Standards Board determination: Johnson & Johnson Pacific Pty Ltd. 25 July 2012. <http://122.99.94.111/cases/0307-12.pdf>.
- 4 Adams R. Tampon-makers can’t mention the V-word. *Period. Guardian* 17 March 2012. www.guardian.co.uk/world/richard-adams-blog/2010/mar/16/tampon-vagina-kotex-advertising.
- 5 NHS Choices. Vagina health. www.nhs.uk/Livewell/vagina-health/Pages/keep-vagina-clean.aspx.

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