

Vibrators: A Mainstream Product Continues to Shed its Taboo Past

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Abstract

In the past fifteen years, vibrator use has entered the mainstream. Research showed that a majority of men and women believed vibrator use to be a healthy part of their sexual lives. However, others found the use of vibrators embarrassing. Vibrator marketers addressed the image problem with innovative messaging and sampling strategies that connected sexual pleasure to a healthy lifestyle. Stressing the product's popular acceptance and mass market availability, marketers gave consumers confidence to buy a vibrator without shame. This case can be used in marketing communications, public relations, or promotions classes at the undergraduate level.

Keywords: vibrators; public relations; strategic planning; marketing; promotions; marketing communication; taboo products

Introduction: The Historical Context

Today, the word hysterical brings to mind an irrational person or hilarious situation. But, until roughly the middle of the 20th century, its meaning was linked to the disease hysteria. Physicians described hysteria as a female disease of the uterus with symptoms such as fainting, nervousness and chronic anxiety.

In mid-1800s Britain, this widespread ailment was thought to afflict up to 75 percent of the female population (Aitkenhead, 2012). Some women turned for relief to midwives or physicians, who massaged their patients' genitals to reach a "hysterical paroxysm"—the pleasing end result we now call an orgasm. Historian Rachel P. Maines wrote in *The Technology of*

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Orgasm that this treatment was a lucrative staple of many Western physicians' medical practices from Hippocrates' time until the 1920s, and, as a reporter for *The Guardian* quipped, repeat business was "all but guaranteed" (Aitkenhead, 2012; Maines, 1999). Still, physicians found the pelvic massage tedious and time-consuming. Mechanizing the treatment would let them treat more women in less time.

Early attempts at mechanization were clunky at best. In 1869 American George Taylor invented the Manipulator, a steam-powered, coal-fired vibrator unsuitable for most physicians' offices. The electromechanical vibrator invented by London physician Joseph Mortimer Granville and manufactured by the British firm Weiss in the 1880s proved more popular. Even so, the Weiss model was not easily portable as it was attached to a 40-pound wet cell battery. Within fifteen years, some dozen manufacturers were making models powered by foot pedal, water turbines, and the new "line" electricity. While costs varied, physicians in 1904 could buy a top-of-the line vibrator called the Chattanooga for \$200 plus shipping.

Soon vibrators moved out of doctors' offices and into homes. In the early part of the 20th century, manufacturers advertised vibrators as home appliances in magazines such as *McClure's* and *Woman's Home Companion*. Advertisements loaded with innuendo promised women "all the pleasure of youth... will throb within you" (Maines, 1999). The vibrator disappeared from the popular press in the 1920s for several decades, reappearing in the 1970s with the launch of Hitachi's new women's vibrator called the Magic Wand, known as the "Cadillac of vibrators" (Dangerfield, 2013).

Since the 1970s, vibrators have been used to treat men for erectile dysfunction and to help in rehabilitation for men with spinal cord injuries (Dangerfield, 2013). In 1994, the first commercially available men's vibrator was launched, called the Fleshlight, and marketed as the original male masturbator (Dangerfield, 2013).

No longer portrayed as a medical instrument, the vibrator had moved into the modern lexicon as a daring sex toy (see Table 1). Dusenbery (2012) offers [a useful timeline depicting the evolution of sex toys](#) in a *Mother Jones* article as well.

Table 1. Most popular sex toys in 2012.

Item	Percent of Sex Toy Purchases
Vibrators	19.2
Rubber penises	16
Lubricants	14
Anal beads	12
Penis rings	11.8
Rubber vaginas	8.5
Blindfolds/feathers	5
Harnesses/strap-on penises	4
Furry handcuffs	3
Bondage gear	2
Other	4.5

Source: Adam & Eve (2012).

This case shows how the vibrators' increasing acceptance into modern-day culture offered an inroad for vibrator manufacturers and retailers to reframe their products as everyday items for a healthy sex life. While a number of vibrator manufacturers now sell their products in mainstream venues, this case focuses on Trojan Vibrations and Jimmyjane, two companies whose messaging and sampling strategies illustrate the new marketing milieu for this once-taboo product.

Background: From Taboo to Prime Time

In the past fifteen years, the vibrator has shed its taboo image. No longer an embarrassing item that men and women purchase secretly online or at sex shops, vibrators sit unabashedly on mainstream drugstore shelves a few steps from the toothpaste aisle. They have also made a big buzz on television and in the movies.

Vibrators played minor roles in scenes in 1990s movies such as *She's the One*. But they entered popular culture with gusto when the Rabbit Pearl vibrator made a guest appearance in a 1998 episode of HBO's *Sex and The*

City called “Turtle and the Hare,” and the character Charlotte narrowly escaped addiction to the pink-colored novelty. A YouTube clip of the episode has attracted almost a half million views (dangerouslylilly, 2011). In the 2007 “Indian Summer” episode of AMC’s award-winning *Mad Men* series, character Peggy Olsen found the Electrosizer weight-control device sexually exciting, and she suggested a new name and tagline: “Rejuvenator – You’ll love the way it makes you feel” (Hesse, 2012).

Nudity and frank coverage of topics such as “the biology of copulation and orgasm” (Wiegand, 2013) mark Showtime’s popular *Masters of Sex* series, based on a biography of sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson. The show, which began its second season in July 2014, also featured a high-tech vibrator implanted with a camera called Ulysses (Nicholson, 2013).

The vibrator’s history takes center stage in Sarah Ruhl’s 2009 Broadway drama *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, which received three Tony nominations. The 2012 romantic comedy *Hysteria* starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Hugh Dancy was also set in Victorian England where a young doctor develops carpal tunnel syndrome from massaging female patients to “paroxysms” (Howard, 2011).

On the print side, the erotic fiction trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey* stayed at the top of *USA Today*’s best-selling book list 20 weeks and sold some 70 million copies worldwide (Trachtenberg, 2013). The popular page-turner found its way into the hands, or eReaders, of women of all different age and economic backgrounds. The topic of sexual pleasure was definitely out of the bedroom.

But the uptick in chatter about vibrators and female sexuality was not just the fare of fiction. The *Today Show*, which for years considered sex off-limits for its early-morning format, finally invited sex educator Logan Levkoff to appear. Other sex experts made the guest lists of a variety of daytime shows. Sex and relationship advice also flows freely on OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network’s popular program [In the Bedroom with Laura Berman](#). The relationship expert “sparked a national debate,” according to the *New York Times*, when she advised mothers in 2006 to buy vibrators for their teenage daughters (Howard, 2011). From hit television series to beloved talk shows, vibrators had become part of the conversation.

Scholars were also taking note of changing cultural attitudes toward sex. Sociologist Treas (2002) documented changes in how Americans viewed premarital, extramarital, transsexual, and teenage sex. Rathus, Nevid, and Fichner-Rathus (2013) provided an extensive look at shifting attitudes toward sexuality in their book *Human Sexuality in a World of Diversity*. Attwood (2005) found that web-based sex businesses today try to “distance sexual products from the representation of sex as ‘dirty’” (p. 403) and noted that the shift to discussing sex in terms of pleasure and image appeared across a variety of media.

Considerable research has been conducted on masturbation in the U.S. and in other countries. In American culture, female masturbation typically has been viewed as more taboo than male masturbation (Leitenberg, Detzer, & Stebnik, 1993). Das (2007) found that for some people, “masturbation complemented an enjoyable sex life, while for others it complemented for a lack of partnered sex or satisfaction in sex” (as cited in Keels, Lee, Knox, & Wilson, 2013, p. 213).

Because vibrators were used as masturbatory aids, scholars have conducted research in this area, too. Reece et al. (2009; 2010) surveyed a national sample of men to discern how prevalent their use of vibrators was and the sexual situations in which they used them. The researchers concluded vibrator use was widespread, with close to half the men indicating they had used a vibrator at some point in their lives (Reece et al., 2009, 2010). Reece, director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University, noted the national study documented for the first time that vibrator use was common among men and also pointed to changing consumer attitudes: “Also, both studies help us to further understand the way in which American consumers are turning to the marketplace for products that promote their sexual health, and that has important economic implications” (“IU Researchers,” 2009).

Research: Who Uses Vibrators? And Why?

Vibrators constituted a market of \$1 billion dollars in the U.S. alone (Chiang, 2011). There have been a number of studies commissioned to understand behaviors and beliefs on sexual activity of U.S. men and women (Herbenick et al., 2009; Herbenick et al., 2011; Reece et al., 2009).

This extensive research led to significant insight about Americans. Most Americans believed good sex was an important part of overall health and well-being, and they sought to make their sex lives more exciting. (Silverberg, n.d.). Further research by Trojan in 2012 indicated that 81 percent of Americans were looking for ways to increase pleasure in the bedroom, and 72 percent were open to the idea of using a vibrator to spice up their sex lives (“New Trojan,” 2012).

From a marketing perspective it was important to know about the women and men who used vibrators. Who were they and what did they think about vibrator use? The answers helped all manufacturers, marketers and retailers capture part of the growing and lucrative category defined as the personal vibrators.

Studies by well-known sex researcher Alfred Kinsey in 1953 showed vibrator use was “not appreciable,” and work by researcher Shere Hite two decades later, in 1976, indicated vibrator use remained at less than 1 percent. Data from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey indicated only 2 percent of women had bought a vibrator in the last year (Herbenick et al., 2009).

But in the 21st century, those numbers had changed considerably. To understand current vibrator usage beliefs and behavior, two of the most comprehensive studies on these topics in almost two decades – the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB), conducted by researchers from the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University’s School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation – began in April 2008. Church & Dwight, the maker of Trojan brand vibrators, funded the research to help quantify consumer interest (Winerip, 2009). The researchers surveyed 2,056 women and 1,047 men aged 18-60 years in the U.S., uncovering the following interesting facts, which they reported in a series of publications (Herbenick et al., 2009; Herbenick et al., 2011; “IU Researchers,” 2009; Reece et al., 2009):

- More than one in two American women (52.5 percent) had used a vibrator during their lives;
- 76 percent of women who used vibrators agreed or strongly agreed their use were part of a healthy sex life;

- A majority of men and women disagreed with the statement that vibrator use is “intimidating to women’s partners”;
- Men who used vibrators were more likely to participate in sexual health promoting behaviors such as testicular self-exam; and
- 44.8 percent of men had used a vibrator during their lives, and 60 percent agreed that vibrators can make sex with a partner more exciting.

The NSSHB research showed that vibrators were already widely in use by women and men. Figures from the online sex toy retailer Adam & Eve (2012) also reflected wide usage and indicated that a majority of female users are in relationships, including in marriages:

- 44 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 60 have used a sex toy;
- 20 percent of women masturbate at least once a week, and 60 percent of those who masturbate own and use a sex toy;
- 78 percent of women who use or have used a sex toy said they were also in a relationship; and
- Married women are twice as likely to use a vibrator than single women.

Herbenick et al. (2009) found that some vibrator users felt uneasy about negative stigmas associated with sex aids. Among women participants, 28.3 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that vibrator use “is embarrassing for women;” for men, the number was 23.4 percent. It seems some American adults were willing to introduce a vibrator into the bedroom to shake things up, yet others remained too embarrassed to admit it.

Fortunately for vibrator manufacturers, a more common theme emerging from research in the vibrator category was that for a large number of

consumers, sexual pleasure was not something to be ashamed of, nor did it have a negative connotation. They viewed using vibrators simply part of their healthy sexual well-being. There existed a segment of vibrator consumers who were content with the sexual satisfaction of vibrators and had a natural and positive outlook on sexuality (Herbenick et al., 2009; Herbenick et al. 2011; Reece et al., 2009).

The consumers who bought vibrators were not the same people who purchase gimmicky sex toys. They were individuals, like those consumers waiting outside Apple stores for the newest iPhone model, who typically surround themselves with brands that reinforce a self-concept, spend money on quality products and care about the safety of these products.

Messaging Strategy: Inspiring Better Sex in the U.S.

The manufacturers' messaging strategy needed to reflect today's vibrator consumers and where they were likely to purchase the products. Years ago, the only place to purchase vibrators were specialty shops. Many mainstream food, drug, and mass retailers now stock vibrators, signaling a change in the taboos toward this intimate product. Sales data indicated this was a growth category. Merchandisers, not including Walmart, saw sales growth in the sexual enhancement devices category of 23.2 percent, to \$16.1 million, in a 12-month period ending July 8, 2012 (Newman, 2012). In addition, online retailers, such as Adam & Eve, offer some 29 different brand options (*Adam & Eve*, 2014).

This case, however, looks in detail at two manufacturers, Trojan and Jimmyjane. In particular, their messaging and sampling strategies offer good examples of companies working to bring vibrators into the mainstream.

Trojan's messaging strategy focused on sexual pleasure as part of a healthy lifestyle. Marketing materials emphasized vibrators' growing popularity and how consumers could easily find vibrators in their local stores. The message was one of personal empowerment, with Trojan making the tools of pleasure readily accessible (Church & Dwight—Trojan Vibrations & Edelman, 2013).

On the retailers' side, Ethan Imboden, founder of San Francisco-based Jimmyjane, which designs and sells sexual products, was executing a similar message strategy in the promotion of his firm's high-end vibrator product line. In an interview with *The Atlantic* reporter Andy Issacson, Imboden said, "placing their products on familiar cultural ground had a positive and normalizing effect" (Issacson, 2012). Imboden felt that viewing and marketing a vibrator as a lifestyle accessory shifted people's perceptions about how sexual products fit into their lives and pushed Americans into more comfortable territory around sex in general. However, the challenge he had to address was how to do this without conflicting with mainstream sensitivities and concerns (Isaacson, 2012). Jimmyjane, whose products have been recognized with national design awards and featured in consumer magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Men's Health*, faced another hurdle when Google blocked its vibrator ads ("Vibrators," 2014). The company responded with an infographic challenging Google's decision to ban its ads for sex toys while allowing ads for weapons (see Figure 1).

In general, most marketing efforts in the category addressed these two strategies:

- 1) Continue to position vibrators as mainstream products in the consumer's mind
- 2) Link vibrator usage to a healthy and meaningful sex life

Some vibrator manufacturers, especially firms such as Trojan that market condoms, already had distribution networks in place at the retail levels with stores like Walmart and CVS. Using these strategies, these firms were expanding their brand equity and moving away from a message focused on prevention to a positive one oriented to pleasure.

Execution: Creative Sampling Strategies

The strategy of inspiring better sex was implemented at the manufacturer and retailer level.

WHICH IS MORE OFFENSIVE?
 Google blocked Jimmyjane vibrators ads for "inappropriate content," yet they allow ads for deadly weapons and violent books. Vibrators are a healthy part of a safe and happy sex life. What do you find more "inappropriate"?

JIMMYJANE
 GRAPHIC INFO

<p>Barnett Crossbow</p>  <p>Risks – serious injury, loss of limbs, death. On Google Shopping for \$453</p>	VS.	<p>FORM 6 Vibrator</p>  <p>Risks – flush of hormones, slight perspiration, orgasms. Banned from Google</p>
<p>M60 Airsoft Machine Gun</p>  <p>Risks – welts, loss of eye, potential security threat. Google Shopping for \$500</p>	VS.	<p>FORM 2 Vibrator</p>  <p>Risks – capillary dilation, heart palpitations, orgasms. Banned from Google</p>
<p>Getting Off: A Novel of Sex & Violence</p>  <p>Risks – corruption of America's youth, insomnia, possible copycat murders. On Google Shopping for \$13</p>	VS.	<p>FORM 4 Vibrator</p>  <p>Risks – shortness of breath, uncontrollable moaning, orgasms. Banned from Google</p>
<p>Fallkniven Hunting Knife</p>  <p>Risks – lacerations, organ damage, death. On Google Shopping for \$1435</p>	VS.	<p>14k LITTLE GOLD Vibrator</p>  <p>Risks – momentary insanity (reports of seeing God). Banned from Google</p>

Pass this along if you agree that Google should change their policy.

WWW.JIMMYJANE.COM #gunsVSvibrators

Figure 1. Jimmyjane’s response to Google’s banning of its ads. Source: Jimmyjane (2014).

From the marketer's and manufacturer's side, multinational companies were using an empowering messaging strategy. Trojan, Johnson & Johnson, Durex, and Lifestyle are some of the consumer goods companies that were developing products to inspire a better sex life. These large multinational companies saw the profit potential in the personal vibrator category and were expanding distribution through mass-market retailers.

With Trojan, taking this product to mass retailers made a strong statement: vibrators were now mainstream. What's more, it's okay to talk about sex and pleasure outside the bedroom and walk into your local retailer and buy one. The company's 2008 commercial for its Trojan Vibrating Touch Fingertip Massager featured a middle-aged woman, showing an interest in reaching the baby boomer market (Winerip, 2009).

The execution of the messaging strategy was important, but one marketing tactic was critical to products in the vibrator category – sampling. Many people want to try these products but they need an initiator to get them started.

In one particularly unique and successful sampling effort, Trojan crafted a 10,000-vibrator giveaway using a fleet of carts modeled after New York City's famous hot dog carts. Stocked with boxes of vibrators, the carts with striped umbrellas captured the attention of New Yorkers and the media (Reynolds, 2012; "Trojan Vibrations," 2012).

Trojan and its agencies selected August 8 and 9 – steamy summer days that would reinforce the giveaway's idea of "turning up the heat" and "raising the heat index" ("Trojan Vibrations," 2012). Cart vendors, vivacious twenty-somethings of both genders, sported lavender polo shirts coordinated with the color of the carts and brand packaging. The carts featured sayings such as "Getcha vibes here!" and "Relish the Moment" (Newman, 2012). Locations included key high-traffic locations in Midtown, East Village, Union Square, and Soho, as well as the Flatiron, Meatpacking, and Financial districts ("Trojan Vibrations," 2012).

A *New York Times* story heralded the start of the giveaway (Newman, 2012). The next morning, listeners heard live radio reads by Howard Stern on his program on Sirius XM Radio, as carts parked on the plaza outside

his studio offered free vibrators. However, a public relations debacle seemed imminent when New York City officials shut down the sampling activity, concerned when streets became clogged with long lines of people waiting to receive their free vibrators. But quick work by Trojan's public relations agencies turned the shutdown into positive publicity; as national and international media attention poured in, the *New York Post's* front page decried the mayor's decision with the headline "Buzz Kill!" (Doll, 2012; Reynolds, 2012). A headline in *the Guardian* a few days later keyed into shifting cultural mores: "New York's vibrator giveaway shows how far this sex toy has come" (Cosslett, 2012). The same evening of the shutdown, the New York Mayor's Office reversed its decision, and the carts resumed the vibrator giveaway.

On the retail side, execution of the messaging strategy and sampling was also critical. Many people wanted to try these products, but they needed a trigger to get them started. Jimmyjane's sampling program played into the discussion around sex and well-being. Guests at the W Hotels looking for condoms would find Jimmyjane's pocket pleasure set in their rooms' minibars. A slim package containing condoms, a mini vibrator, a feather tickler and "the love decoder," a piece of paper folded like an origami fortuneteller that engages players in titillating acts through the game of chance, was available for purchase. According to Jimmyjane founder Ethan Imboden, when consumers see sex products show up in such normal circumstances, their perceptions change about how these objects fit into everyday lives (Isaacson, 2012).

For these types of unique sampling programs, removing obstacles and giving people permission and the opportunity to use the product were paramount. Vibrator usage was also increasingly acceptable among the general population, as consumer beliefs had slowly shifted toward acceptance in popular culture.

Evaluation: Were Communication Efforts Effective?

Sales growth and revenue were the most common methods used to evaluate the success of vibrator marketing strategies and executions. In the 1960s and 1970s, vibrators achieved a revival due to both a change in consumer attitudes brought about from popular culture and from unique marketing efforts (Dangerfield, 2013). Today, according to the Center for

Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University, U.S. consumer attitudes toward women's vibrator use are, in general, overwhelmingly positive ("IU Researchers," 2009). The increase in sales of women's vibrators can be attributed to changing consumer attitudes and marketers recognizing and taking advantage of this change.

In terms of the legal environment, times were changing, too. In 2008, a federal appeals court overturned a Texas statute outlawing sales of sex toys, ruling the law violated the right to privacy guaranteed by the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution ("Ban," 2008). That left Alabama as the only state in the U.S. where it was illegal to sell sex toys or vibrators. John W. Rogers, an Alabama state representative, tried to change this but was not successful. Alabama Citizen's Action Program Executive Director Dan Ireland told a reporter that the ban of sex toys should remain as it served "to protect the public against themselves" (Lyman, 2007). In another widely quoted interview, while discussing why the state should ban sex toys but not high-grade weapons, Ireland stated: "There are moral ways and immoral ways to use a firearm... There is no moral way to use these devices" (Appel, 2009). Critics of the use and sale of vibrators existed, but they remained a minority.

While vibrator sales increased due to changes in women's attitudes, increases in sales also resulted as attitudes changed toward men's vibrators (Dangerfield, 2013). In an interview with *South Florida Gay News*, Carol Queen of the Good Vibrations company, said that men have been a significant part of the firm's customer base since the 1980s, with the numbers increasing gradually (Nahmod, 2013). With the popularity of the *Fleshlight* vibrator developed specifically for men, vibrator manufacturers began to consider the male consumer in their marketing efforts. Dangerfield (2013) noted that the adult toy store Babeland has reported that 35 percent of its customers are men, a demographic that its stores accommodate with a separate section.

In addition to the rise in hard sales numbers, vibrator marketers were considered successful with their communications programs. Vibrator marketers showed a solid grasp of their target audiences both male and female. Common knowledge-based metrics indicated that category awareness and brand awareness had increased. In terms of message association, the prevention message was being replaced with a pleasure

message that consumers were able to understand and that was consistent with existing consumer attitudes. Vibrator use was growing and considered mainstream.

A specific marketing program for Trojan developed by its public relations agency, Edelman, won the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) highly coveted Silver Anvil Award of Excellence in 2013. The case study, accessible to members of PRSA, summarized the objectives and evaluated the Trojan Vibrator giveaway program, some of which are outlined in Table 2 (Church & Dwight—Trojan Vibrations & Edelman, 2013).

Another way of evaluating the success of marketing efforts in the category was the impact on the channel among independent and mass national-chain retailers. The broad distribution of vibrators helped grow the category by giving mainstream consumers access to vibrators at the retail level. Communication programs that included packaging, sampling, advertising, social media, public relations, distributor marketing programs, and database marketing, supported this distribution.

Interestingly, channel conflict was not an issue in driving sales growth. Carol Queen, curator of the Antique Vibrator Museum and a staff sexologist with sexual products retailer Good Vibrations, told a *New York Times* reporter that she did not view the growing availability of vibrators at mass retailers as a threat to her specialty retail shop. She noted that consumers often buy their first device on an impulse at mass retailers and later go to boutique stores to talk to knowledgeable staff members who can answer questions (Newman, 2012).

Analysis & Discussion: Why this Case is Important

This case provides students with an introduction to the practices used in marketing socially sensitive products. Whereas consumers once viewed women's vibrators as a forbidden product, savvy marketers successfully helped the sex item shed its controversial past.

The main theme of this case is how professionals communicate messages about taboo products that strategically help firms change a product's old-fashioned or socially unacceptable image. Social taboos created an

Table 2. Evaluation of Trojan's sampling program.

Objective 1: Bring the conversation about vibrator usage into the mainstream.

- Results:**
- 90 percent coverage included messages about the mainstream nature of vibrators and usage statistics
 - More than 100 broadcast pieces profiled people speaking candidly about vibrators
 - More than 7,500 tweets

Objective 2: Secure pleasure positive messaging through media coverage and consumer testimonials, linking pleasure and VIBRATOR products to a healthy, more fulfilling life.

- Results:**
- 95 percent of coverage featured messages about pleasure tied to Trojan brand
 - 100 percent of coverage included product messaging and/or imagery

Objective 3: Generate a 10 percent increase in earned media coverage over the 2011 Trojan Vibrator Truck Tour.

- Results:**
- Spending a third of the budget from prior year, resulted in 400 percent increase in coverage with 400-plus original news placements.
 - Widespread coverage in prestigious media outlets, including the *New York Times*, Associated Press, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, TMZ, CNN and ABC
 - International coverage in more than 15 markets, including Great Britain, China and Australia

Objective 4: Drive sales and market share of Trojan products.

- Results:**
- Trojan saw a 33 percent lift in revenues versus week prior
 - Trojan vibrations.com experienced a 55 percent increase in visits versus week prior
 - Direct Response metrics showed an increase in ROI – 1.14 to 1.42

Source: Church & Dwight—Trojan Vibrations & Edelman (2013).

environment where the discussion of many of the details about the use of women's vibrators was awkward and uncomfortable. This discomfort jeopardized sexual quality-of-life by keeping information secret. Thus isolation resulted and consumers had limited, biased, and highly opinionated information upon which to make informed decisions. In effect, consumers and society faced a cultural barrier in assessing and trying the product. From a strategic communication perspective, this represented a unique marketing challenge where thoughtful planning and insight were critical.

This case illustrates a common practice in the communication discipline, most specifically messaging strategy. Communication professionals must listen to their customers and watch how culture is portraying the products that they use. The communication approach taken was to give consumers permission to talk about vibrators in new ways with new media.

This approach was not without some controversy, though. Marketers understood that not everyone would agree. The case shows that while vibrator use was becoming increasingly popular, the product was less accepted by consumers who held strong religious beliefs. Some saw vibrators as wrong in that the product emphasized physical and not emotional intimacy, it focused on a single experience and not mutual experiences, and it re-created body parts in unrealistic ways (Gregorie, 2011). Some religious organizations considered vibrator usage as masturbation, which many faiths considered a sin.

Another important theme from the case is that strategic communication professionals have the power to shape mass tastes and behavior if their communication strategy and messaging are built on a solid understanding of the consumer and culture. The marketing effort in the vibrator category was an example of how communications may both reflect and influence popular culture.

Finally, this case illustrates the growing cultural acceptance of men's and women's vibrators and the marketing efforts that supported this trend. In the process, vibrator manufacturers not only drove sales they played an important role in shaping how Americans viewed sexual pleasure.

Discussion Questions

1. What barriers do marketers face in promoting women's vibrators? What barriers do marketers face in promoting men's vibrators? Do you see these as similar or different marketing problems to address? Please discuss your reasoning.
2. How might marketers address the perception that vibrator usage is wrong? Should they be concerned?
3. Please discuss the ethical tension in this case when it comes to promoting vibrators and sampling in particular. What might you do as a strategic communication professional to address these issues? Please provide at least three recommendations.
4. Torben Vestergaard and Kim Schroder, authors of *The Language of Advertising* (1985) write that strategic communication reinforces change rather than imposes change. After reading this case, do you think this case supports their view? Do you agree or disagree? Please answer yes or no and discuss your reasoning.
5. All strategic communication professionals need to consider the clients and the brands they work on. Would you be willing to promote vibrators? Please answer yes or no and discuss your reasoning. Please discuss how working on a vibrator brand is different from working on a firearm or cigarette brand?
6. Describe the consumer attitudes towards personal vibrators among mainstream consumers in the U.S. How have taboos and attitudes changed over time? How did communication professionals (advertising, public relations, marketing) use this knowledge to develop a messaging strategy?

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Acknowledgments & Declarations

This case study is intended as a basis for class discussion. The views represented here are those of the authors based on their professional judgment and a review of secondary information and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Case Studies in Strategic Communication*, Church & Dwight, the owners of Trojan, or their affiliated agencies, or Jimmyjane.com and Adam & Eve.

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