



POINT OF VIEW

The Evolution of Women's Health & Continuing to Change the Narrative



Deb Silverman and Abby Hoffer

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In honor of Self-Care September, a month dedicated to reminding us that taking care of ourselves is essential, we started thinking about how we approach self-care today, and in particular, how this landscape and narrative has changed for women. From attitudes around self-care evolving from dos to don'ts, to the (albeit slow) transition of women's health topics being portrayed as less taboo, we felt passionate about digging deeper into the continued evolution of women's health.

Wellness & Self-Care

One aspect of the cultural landscape that is evolving, and is highly relevant to this theme of self-care, is that the concept of wellness itself has come to encompass a sociocultural obsession: **how to take care of ourselves in the world**—not as an indulgence, but as a necessary means of self-preservation. This is an important shift and reflects the influence of millennial values and anxieties as this generation tries to navigate uncertain times.

In today's world, it is not surprising that our society is moving away from the “self-help” definition of wellness, with its agenda of deprivation (diets, detoxes, and extreme fitness), toward the “self-care” definition of wellness associated with NOT doing—not being stressed, not opting in to 24/7 connection, and not letting our bodies get run down.

Recognizing Shame Stories & Flipping the Narrative

Another aspect of the cultural landscape that's important to highlight is acknowledgment of the idea that throughout a woman's life, many of her health issues (eg, infertility, sex, gender, menopause, heavy menstrual cycles, osteoporosis) have been uncomfortable or even taboo subjects, and therefore carry with them at least a subtle degree of shame. And because true disruption tends to happen on a cultural level, it's important to clearly see these different health stories for what they are: shame stories that require disruption.

Recent entrants to the marketplace in a number of these categories demonstrate that **it's possible to dismantle the shame story, and in the process create new behaviors and truths**. An excellent example lies in the history of advertising of menstrual products:

In the 1920s and 1930s

- Kotex pads and Tampax tampons were developed when nurses discovered that bandages could address what had been a women's health issue that was so taboo that no products existed for it. Early ads, venturing into unknown territory, featured medical authorities, thus categorizing a natural bodily function as a medical condition.

In the 1950s

- When society was thoroughly comfortable with the existence of the menstrual product category, Johnson & Johnson advertising featured women in evening gowns. The product was no longer medicalized, but the message was clear: menstruation itself was completely at odds with the idealized image of femininity as it existed at the time.



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In the 1970s

- As feminism started heating up and *Our Bodies Ourselves* became a best seller on college campuses, the industry started targeting young women with the language of freedom (corresponding to product improvements that were, in fact, liberating). It's here where we saw the messaging pivot to address the rational and emotional needs of the customer, from a woman's point of view.

In the 1980s

- Two occurrences changed the industry dramatically: 38 deaths from toxic shock syndrome and the entrance of a number of competitive products. This left women in a situation with more choices but less trust in the products available to them.

In the 1990s

- The 1990s saw an explosion of investment to shore up brand equity and rebuild trust. This investment correlated with a new wave of feminism. Dove's Real Beauty campaign launched during this time period, was widely acclaimed for portraying real women in an authentic way, and paved the way for where we are today with women's health products overall.

So Where Are We Now?

Today, the focus is increasingly on shame, and how to continue to push the narrative. Brands that are pushing hard on traditional boundaries include Thinx, Bodyform, and Mooncup. While menstruation itself still remains hidden, brands are more comfortable using straightforward language like "blood" and "period." The challenge today for brands in this space is to continue the hard work of advancing an open conversation about menstruation and bringing it into the light of day. It won't happen today, or this week, or perhaps not even for years to come, but it is the only way that brands in the menstruation category will connect with millennial women, who are more critical consumers of advertising than their predecessors. In the context of menstruation and other similar categories, it's important to note the following key criteria to successfully dismantle a shame story:

1 Exposing the shame

Confront embarrassment. Take the conversation out of the shadows and empower women with permission to speak up.

2 Replacing shame with positivity

These old shame stories don't just die when they come to light. We need to replace the old narrative with a new and positive one.

3 Reinforcing over time

Because shame is deeply ingrained and difficult to disrupt, it requires a relentless, multipronged approach. It requires a drumbeat of consistent communication over an extended period of time.

At Evoke, everything we do ladders up to our north star of making Health More Human™. We are especially passionate about women's health and are committed to doing what we can to change the narrative. If you are looking to improve women's lives and flip the script, give us a call.

Sources:

Bina J. Opinion: The business of shame is giving way to a new league of women's brands. Glossy. August 1, 2019.

Carraway K. When did self-help become self-care? New York Times. August 11, 2019.