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Some say the flood of pink breast cancer products is misguided



Jan Simpson gave out balloons to survivors at the 2005 Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation Race for the Cure in Plano. (File photo - Staff photo)

It's Pinktober, and not everyone is happy about it.

As pink merchandise floods the fall marketplace, many breast cancer survivors see red when surrounded by the symbol that raises awareness, profits, and emotions in a single loop.

“As a marketer with a focus on cause-related marketing, I know that companies can use this time of the year to make money,” said survivor Claudia Schmidt, 52, by email from Clinton, N.J. “It drives me crazy to see all the pink — it’s such an easy way out of a very complex and complicated disease. It’s like putting a pink bandage on a huge gaping wound; it may be nice to look at, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t really do anything for the wound.”

Schmidt’s views reflect the feelings of many women who responded, on and off the record, to a question about their attitude toward the pink torrent. Others say the effort still serves a vital function, even when their own feelings are mixed.

Survivor Carol Sorgen, 66, of Baltimore, for example, won’t wear pink products because she doesn’t

want to be defined by her breast cancer. But she doesn't object to the marketing. "As a journalist, I'm all too aware of the fact that there are still large segments of the population who aren't as educated,"

Sorgen wrote. "If these campaigns help save even one life every year, that's someone's wife, mother, sister, friend, who will hopefully still be around because of these efforts."

Survivor Rebecca Matthews, 58, of Newton, Mass. added: "I'll continue to support more research on genetic testing, more accurate screening tools, more targeted radiation, and more streamlined reconstruction techniques. I will not, however, be buying any pink ribbons this October."

Matthews said that's because she's become leery of pink retail operations. "There's an assumption," she said, "that all or a large percentage of the money is going to the cause. Sometimes that's the case, and sometimes it isn't." It also, she thinks, has to do with the lone act of purchasing the product itself. "If someone buys something, they think their job is done and they have taken care of the issue."

For many families and friends, there's an emotional component to giving pink products. "I think people feel so helpless when someone they know has a cancer diagnosis and don't know what to do," says survivor Catherine Gigante-Brown, 55, of Brooklyn, N.Y. "Sending a pink or breast-cancer themed gift makes them feel better, like they're doing something, at least, reaching out, making a connection."

Jennifer Ehren, 38, of Laguna Hills, Calif., diagnosed 6 weeks before she got married, can relate: "I was very touched when everyone wore pink ribbons at my wedding ... As a research scientist and survivor I've benefited from the awareness raised and am indebted to those who have raised it."

This picture of pink socks is not viewable on this device.

Pink ribbons

It wasn't supposed to be this way, dividing the very women the campaign was designed to help.

Californian Charlotte Haley made some of the first breast cancer ribbons in 1991, to honor her sister and daughter, who had breast cancer, and her mother, who died of cervical cancer. That same year, pink ribbons were handed out to every breast cancer survivor at New York's Race for the Cure.

Haley's ribbons weren't pink but peach (her favorite color), and they were attached by hand to a postcard mailed or given to anyone who would read it, with the goal of increasing money spent by the National Cancer Institute on prevention.

Haley died last year at the age of 91. Her daughter, cancer survivor Nancy Haley, said in an interview that her parents rebuffed big-name sponsors who wanted to use the symbol widely.

"They took no donations," Haley said, "and my dad got a second job to help fund it." She says both her parents were incensed at the idea that anyone would profit from cancer, especially her father: "He said, 'There's no way they're going to make money off of women's suffering.'"

Susan G. Komen spokeswoman Andrea Rader said that their partnerships often come about when they're approached by corporations. "Usually it's the result of some kind of personal experience with breast cancer," she said. "An employee has breast cancer, or a group of employees who want to help."

The benefits of the partnerships, she said, are many. "It allows us to raise money and do our work, and also gives people a very easy and meaningful way to participate in making a difference for people with breast cancer ... We vet these products very carefully."

As for the color pink, “Some people feel like maybe it’s not a serious color, but it makes an awful lot of things possible,” Rader said.

Many survivors feel that the awareness aspect of the campaign has long been achieved. Dallasite Barbara Gold, 67, a survivor and therapist, disagrees. “There are still those who will stick their heads in the sand until it is too late, so any reminder is a potential pull against that inclination.”

Survivor Sandy Tevelin, 66, of Arlington, Va., is conflicted about the pink market — she’s not a fan, but has witnessed the solidarity it can inspire: “I see the women here walking in May, some with scarves covering their lack of hair, others proudly wearing their pink survivor T-shirts. They are smiling and walking with their families, friends and supporters ... For perhaps just an instant, they forget about their own treatments and their fear of the cancer coming back ... and they celebrate.”

Kathy LaTour, 66, of Dallas, is co-founder of *CURE Magazine*, the largest direct-to-patient cancer publication in the country, and a breast cancer survivor who lost her mother to the disease. LaTour thinks that the pink products can serve a purpose if people are smart about them.

“The reality is that more than 40,000 of us will die of the disease this year alone,” she said. “So find an organization that focuses on the aspect of breast cancer you are most interested in, whether it be research or education, and after due diligence, donate. Or better yet, volunteer for the organization.”

“I’ve seen what can happen when women come together,” LaTour said. “It’s a powerful thing to belong to something and to work together to eradicate this disease.”

Cancer survivor Melissa T. Shultz is Dallas-area freelance writer whose first book will be published by Sourcebooks next year.