

The Marketing Problems of a Contraceptive Behemoth; London Rubber Company, Ernest Dichter Associates, and the Condom in 1960s Britain

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Purpose/Research Implications

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the marketing activities of contraceptive manufacturers, and the oral contraceptive 'Pill' in particular. This work has largely depended on visual sources for evidence and is frequently drawn from Cultural Studies or Gender-Studies perspectives. However, a mixed approach borrowing from the History of Marketing and Business History is also productive in understanding the industrialised commercial contraceptive in its environment. This paper takes an inside-out approach to mid-century contraceptive marketing history by focussing on the condom rather than 'the Pill', and through the foregrounding of marketing problems in preference to output. Specifically, it examines the position of The London Rubber Company (who held the UK monopoly on condom manufacture under the Durex brand) in the early 1960s, and sought counsel from Ernest Dichter Associates when the Pill came to market.

This study is part of on-going PhD research into the marketing, communication, and business interactions of the contraceptive trade in the British 1960s. The subject matter provides historians of marketing and marketing thought with a new case study through which to assess the viability of motivation research in Britain, by combining the well-known work of Ernest Dichter Associates [EDA] with the lesser-known history of the modern contraceptive industry. Contraceptives are frequently viewed by historians as having a social purpose, and evidence of promotion is therefore judged through a social marketing lens, though this is largely outside of the History of Marketing. However, analysis of London Rubber's marketing problems re-replaces condoms in the canon of consumer goods which they were largely considered (or at least intended) to be at the time. London Rubber's problems will also be of interest to marketers and marketing historians because of the unique situation and history of the product, which led to tensions between the need to market commercially and the essential fragility of the condom's image.

Design/Limitations/Sources

The paper is divided into two lines of enquiry. The first considers the background of the rubber condom industry in the UK, and the rise of the London Rubber Company up until the first availability of oral contraception. It then examines London Rubber's position in light of an inability to market condoms directly to consumers, explaining why this situation was made worse with the advent of the Pill. The second line of enquiry outlines the principal findings of the EDA report. These research outcomes are reconciled with the market situation of London Rubber and the pre-existing image problem of the condom. London Rubber's limited ability to implement EDA's recommendations is examined. Finally, a summary of London Rubber's actual marketing activity, post-Dichter report, is presented. The paper has limitations in that it ultimately presents a cross-section of the marketing issues faced by a single company and in a single time period (the early 1960s). It is also focused upon problems, rather than solutions. London Rubber's output following the EDA report is summarised within this paper; detailed examination follows in subsequent work. The EDA pitch, report, and notes are taken from the Ernest Dichter Papers, Hagley Museum and Library, Delaware [items 1380a/c and 1739e]. Primary information on the London Rubber Company is taken from The Family Planning Association Archive, Wellcome Library, London, and from additional sources listed below.

Overview

Prior to pharmaceutical means of birth control, the contraceptive marketplace in 1960s Britain was led by 'appliance' methods such as rubber condoms and diaphragms, and chemical foams, pessaries and creams. When the oral contraceptive Pill was launched in 1961, it threatened to supplant appliance methods. This was partially because of the qualitative advantages of the Pill, and partly because of the communication channels afforded to medicines. The condom was the London Rubber Company's most profitable product. London Rubber was one of the biggest producers and distributors in the world. It needed to attract new customers because of the company's positioning within the contraceptive marketplace, but also because the latex dipping process manufactured product continuously. London Rubber was engaged in a programme of expansion, but was prevented from advertising to new customers because of the condom's poor reputation. This image problem was amplified when the culturally palatable Pill became available in 1961. The Pill, it seemed, reached the places that condoms could not – print journalism and television, doctor's offices, and women's purses. London Rubber commissioned a motivational research study from EDA to investigate how to attract new consumers, and how to increase sales amongst existing ones. EDA reported back on factors which motivated and inhibited people in the purchase of contraceptives, but the results were problematic. Bound by restrictive attitudes to condoms and to its company, London Rubber found EDA's suggestions difficult to implement.

Background: The Condom Industry in Britain

The rubber condom trade became industrialised in 1877 when Lambert's of Dalston commenced mass production of re-usable crepe sheaths. From the late 1920s, single-use latex condoms were available, and these gradually overtook sheath sales. By the mid-century, latex condoms had become the most used 'appliance method' of contraception. The London Rubber Company, which began as an importer of German sheaths in 1915, manufactured and distributed its own latex condoms. During WWII, British industry was rationalised due to a shortage of raw materials. London Rubber became the only latex 'dipper' in the UK, and as such was contracted to supply Durex brand condoms to British troops. Following the war, other former latex dippers could not recover their market share. By the 1960s, London Rubber owned 90% of the UK market, and the Durex brand was well established. In Britain, condoms were not affected by restrictions on the distribution of birth control as they were in the United States. There, the distribution of condoms as contraceptives was prohibited, meaning they were instead labelled as 'prophylactics' and sold 'for the prevention of disease' only. In the UK, however, condoms were sold expressly as a form of contraception. But condoms had a grubby image associated with prostitution and immorality. Reference to disease, which would have made matters worse, was avoided. The 'Durex' trademark had become synonymous with condoms, and London Rubber's brand name adverts were not accepted in print media. When the Pill emerged, it was widely discussed, and London Rubber's attempts at consumer marketing were further disadvantaged.

Findings of the EDA Motivational Research

In a mixed sample from England, Scotland and Wales, contraceptives (and the condom in particular) were found to arouse feelings of guilt, anxiety, disgust, and frustration. The image of Durex was found to be business oriented rather than benevolent, progressive yet old fashioned, and associated with negativity for women. Respondents overwhelmingly felt that condoms should not be commercially advertised and that an oral pill would be the 'ideal' contraceptive. It was clear that the image problem of the old, dirty, rubbery, genital condom would only be foregrounded by the slick pharmaceutical cleanliness and public palatability of the modern contraceptive Pill. London Rubber was advised to promote condoms using Press Releases and PR in lieu of commercial advertising, and to reconfigure the condom as a supplement to the Pill.

Conclusion

Research undertaken by Ernest Dichter Associates was commissioned to aid London Rubber in overcoming barriers to publicity. However, the results largely confirmed what the company already knew about its image problem, and offered a strategic plan that it was not feasible to implement because of that image problem. Disposable latex condoms had emerged in a complex environment and promoting them was no less complex, even in-depth motivational advice.

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