

INSIGHT

Strong opinion and analysis from across the global design industry



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Rosie is a journalist and editor who joined the CA team in 2015. She was previously deputy editor of Time Out Buenos Aires in Argentina. Unless you have several hours to spare, don't get her started on the branding of period products in Latin America.



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Jamie is creative director and founder of Supple Studio in Bath – a team of four working with a host of clients including Arjowiggins Creative Papers, Channel 4 and NSPCC. On page 21, he argues that small studios are best placed to face the future.

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ESSAY



A bloody revolution

CA's **Rosie Hilder** argues that despite some notable breakthroughs, branding for period products remains out of step with reality

Branding for sanitary products has always been, well, a bit pants. The packaging is usually garishly bright and the ads show young, attractive women rollerskating, climbing mountains and gallivanting around in white trousers. And then there's the unnatural-looking blue liquid that is poured onto pads, as if menstruating were some sort of strange science experiment instead of a bodily function that roughly half the world's population experience monthly for an average of 40 years of their lives.

I don't know who came up with the idea of equating having your period with a magical burst of energy, but given that most women I know don't want to rollerskate or wear white trousers on a normal day, let alone when they are leaking blood, I seriously doubt it was a woman. And as anyone who's grown up with these products can attest, using them doesn't make you feel any better. They don't make cramps go away or stop you feeling moody or tired.

In recent years, some of the shame and embarrassment around menstruation has lifted as women have opened up about the subject in the public domain. In 2015, Rupri Kaur caused a viral sensation by Instagramming a 'shocking' picture of her, fully clothed but sporting a period stain; Olympic medalist Fu Yuanhui confessed that her period may have affected her performance in 2016; and the classification of sanitary products as 'luxury goods' has been debated in Parliament. Some brands have listened; some are even leading the conversation.

Both big players in the UK sanitary towel market, Bodyform and Always, have taken steps to bring their campaigns in line with modern attitudes. Always claims it is 'on a mission to boost girls' confidence'. Its Black Pencil-winning Like a Girl campaign showed how girls' perceptions of their abilities nosedive once they hit adolescence; a new (and nauseating) ad is about embracing failure. While the points it's trying to make may be valid, equating confidence with sanitary towels is questionable. And the brand's past and persistent message that no one should know you're menstruating has also arguably played a part in girls' negative self-image.

In 2016, Bodyform ran a campaign with the strapline 'no blood should hold us back,' which showed actual women bleeding, albeit because they were doing sport. The significance of showing quite graphic images of blood in an ad about menstruation should not be underestimated. Another Bodyform ad saw a woman putting a sanitary towel in her pants, in a toilet, for the first time ever. In line with old-school period ads, she was also a trapeze artist in a white leotard. But the ad suggests this was her job, and not something she just felt like doing because her uterus was shedding its lining.

One company that has never been shy about what it's offering is Mooncup, whose marketing for its reusable menstrual cups has typically (and sensibly) focused on the environmental and economical benefits of using its product. Its latest ad takes a different approach. A humorous and a clever play on traditional stories of men rescuing women, it has a killer strapline: 'periods, without the drama'. But the ad's message and story is not very clear if you don't know what a Mooncup is, which many don't.

Across the pond, innovative alternatives developed by and aimed at millennial women are disrupting the market. Thinx sells 'period panties' – a revolutionary idea in itself – plus tampons that come in blood red boxes depicting an image of a vagina, with the slide off outer layer revealing a picture of a tampon underneath. Its adverts describe the realities of periods in a clear and engaging way, and have been praised for breaking taboos left right and centre.

The owners of FLEX, who sell a menstrual disc that can be worn for 'mess-free period sex' also deserve kudos for daring to mention 'sex' and 'period' in the same sentence. FLEX's sleek black, gold and white packaging is more akin to expensive sex toys or make-up than 'feminine care'. But at \$20 a month, plus shipping, that mess-free period sex does not come cheap. And as Paula Scher eloquently reminds us with her simple yet effective branding for US charity Period Equity, periods are not luxuries.

Reflecting that its products are necessary basics, without making them look unattractive, LOLA's organic tampons and pads have a simple and chic feel. In the US, they also come delivered to your door in customisable boxes, taking into account that not every period day requires the same product. With similar muted colours to LOLA, Pearlfisher's branding for Chinese tampon company Fémme is feminine, delicate and discreet, and was developed after extensive research of taboos around using tampons in China. The differences between Fémme and products in the West highlight the fact that different approaches are needed in different cultures.

These are all steps in the right direction, but we need to go further. We need more branding that educates everyone about periods – men too. We need more different types of menstruating humans represented in period ads that contain words such as 'vagina', 'bleeding' or 'stain'. We need campaigns showing that this natural process, which sustains human life, is not something to be ashamed of, but that not being ashamed doesn't necessarily mean we want to go on zipwires or climb mountains. And we also need to clear up once and for all, that there is absolutely nothing blue about menstrual blood. ■

What kind of 'period branding' do you want to see? Tweet your thoughts to @ComputerArts using #DesignMatters



Top to bottom: Branding for US charity Period Equity, designed by Pentagram's Paula Scher; Thinx tampons and one of its ads, which were almost banned from the NY subway; FLEX's menstrual disc; LOLA's mix and match products.