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Up Front With Family Planning

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-By Dan Alaimo

Consumers have stopped whispering about the family planning category.

Many years ago, the condom customer was easy to spot. It was the guy — always a guy — hanging around the pharmacy counter, waiting for the line to go down so he could talk privately with the pharmacist.

Today, condoms, along with lubricants, pregnancy testing kits and some new related items, are out on the shelves, and customers — men and women — don't hesitate to put them in their shopping cart and pay at the front.

At the same time, the so-called “morning after pill” — given the brand name Plan B by Barr Pharmaceuticals of Montvale, N.J. — is sold by pharmacists from behind the counter. Last month, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) lowered the age limit for purchasing this product without a prescription from 18 to 17, following a judge's order. Prescription sales of other contraceptives continue.

Advertising and promotion for the over-the-counter family planning products has increased in recent years, and there is some related impact from the heavy ad rotation on behalf of products like Viagra. Although targeted at different audiences, some see the cumulative effect of all this promotion as making people more comfortable with sexual topics in general.

Additionally, the Obama administration is expected to step up sexual education efforts in schools, which should be good for condom sales.

“There's a whole process that is going on about stuff that people used to whisper about that have come more and more into the open,” says Jim Wisner, president of Libertyville, Ill.-based Wisner Marketing Group. That has created an environment where individuals are more comfortable shopping for these products. “You are seeing them discussed and promoted on mainstream television and other places more often. So, that certainly is helping to grow the category,” he notes. “People are tossing it in their cart just like canned green beans. They aren't thinking twice about it.”

“There doesn't seem to be as much of an embarrassment issue as in the past,” agrees John Beckner, director, pharmacy and health services, Ukrop's Super Markets, Richmond, Va. “There is a fair amount of consumer advertising that makes those products more accepted and mainstream.”

From the health standpoint, it's a product category that any store in the pharmacy business needs to carry. “It's another opportunity — if people have questions, they shouldn't be ashamed to ask their pharmacist about them,” he says.

Everybody's Talking

“It’s as though we know too much,” says Marcia Mogelonsky, senior research analyst at Mintel International Group in Chicago. “There is more on the air about personal lubricants and erectile dysfunction and menopause and everything else than we ever really wanted to know.”

In the past, “we were never really comfortable talking about it, but now, everybody talks about everything,” she adds.

Mogelonsky attributes this in part to baby boomers, who grew up during the “sexual revolution” of the ’60s and ’70s, as well as to a younger generation that has always heard about sexually transmitted diseases. Condom use is now out in the open. “Teens as well as adults know this, and they know that for their own safety, as well as the safety of others, these things can’t be a secret anymore,” she says.

Consumer acceptance of products like condoms has become a part of the culture, notes John Fegan, VP, pharmacy, at Winn-Dixie Stores in Jacksonville, Fla. “Today’s younger generation gets educated about them early in their schooling, and have a better understanding. It’s almost second nature.”

Much more sexual education is needed, and under the new president, it’s likely to happen, says Michael Swartz, associate analyst at SunTrust Robinson Humphrey in Atlanta, which follows Church & Dwight Co. of Princeton, N.J., owner of the category leading brand, Trojan. For example, he says research has shown that the number of 17- and 18-year-olds who haven’t had sexual education is “pretty eye-opening, and I think the Obama administration is going to do some things to bring the education level up to par. This will benefit the condom category,” Swartz observes.

“When you have more education, people won’t find it so embarrassing, or such a sensitive topic. When it is out in the open and people feel free to talk about it, it is going to provide a spark for the industry as a whole,” he continues.

Category Strength

The family planning category in food stores with \$2 million and over in sales (excluding supercenters) is holding its own in the recession, according to The Nielsen Company, based in Schaumburg, Ill. Total family planning products tracked by Nielsen were \$120.9 million for the 52 weeks ending March 21, 2009, which was down 1 percent from the previous reporting period. Contraceptives were up 1.2 percent to \$68 million, while female contraceptives were up 10.6 percent to \$10.1 million, and male contraceptives were down 0.3 percent to \$58 million. Pregnancy and infertility kits declined 3.7 percent to \$52.7 million. Unit sales showed generally declining numbers. Private label is not a factor in this category, where branded products had a 98.6 percent share at the end of last year, according to Nielsen.

“The condoms are still selling. That’s a category that works,” Fegan says.

“The category has become mainstream,” notes Robert Passikoff, president of New York-based Brand Keys. Advertising and promotion by the pharmaceutical companies, including that for erectile dysfunction drugs, has contributed to this, as well as public service announcements about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, he says.

For the future, “I think it is just going to grow. People are always looking for something new. The issue in this category, as well as other categories, is consumer expectations always will increase faster than the

available brands can meet them, so there is always a gap. So, new product providers are always going to come into the marketplace,” Passikoff says.

“The family planning section no longer has to fight to get out from under the pharmacy department; in fact, being too near pharmacy may well be a problem,” says Roy White, VP, sales, at the Food Institute in Elmwood Park, N.J. “The next level for this department is for merchandising to move away from the ‘family planning’ term, and move into something like ‘sexual well-being,’” he suggests.

Products in the category are moving beyond condoms into other areas that are based more on enhancing the experience, such as lubricants. “Also in the future for the category, as seen in a wider view, are outpost displays, and retailers and consumers are likely ready for that,” White says.

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