

Can an American Sex Toy Magnate Persuade Pakistanis to Use a Condom?

Phil Harvey will certainly try, even if it means making people blush.

By Jeremy Stahl



A condom ad from DKT

Advertising screengrab courtesy DKT International

Last month was Ramadan, which made it an especially bad time to launch an advertising campaign for strawberry-flavored condoms in Pakistan. When the contraceptive brand Josh Condoms, did just that with an ad featuring a famous and controversial supermodel, the campaign did not last long. Pakistan's media regulatory agency issued a statement calling the ad "indecent, immoral, and in sheer disregard to our socio-cultural and religious values." After receiving thousands of complaints, the agency took the "unconstitutional" ad off of the air.

Aside from the retrograde and misogynistic overtones—it depicts Pakistani supermodel Mathira waiting on a schmucky-looking new husband because of the sexual prowess afforded to him by Josh Condoms—the ad itself seems relatively banal by American standards. The couple was husband and wife, and there was nothing at all sexually explicit about the ad, except maybe the suggestion that the condoms were being used for sex that was meant to be enjoyable rather than make babies.

ADVERTISING



The idea of flavored condoms and the implication of oral sex, however, was a radical sell in a country where such discussions are heavily censored because of conservative religious norms. But the boldness of running such an ad is typical of the non-profit NGO that produced it, DKT International, and the man behind the group, President Phil Harvey. For another outfit, the Mathira ad might have been a public relations debacle, but to Harvey it was a speed-bump. The publicity generated by censorship cases in Pakistan and elsewhere may even help boost DKT's cause by getting its ads replayed over and over again on national news programs. "Over the short term, sure [it's good], because we got a lot of free airtime," Harvey says. "Advertising is what drives the impact of our programs."

Advertisement

DKT isn't chastened at all; in fact, it is planning to put out another ad starring Mathira, hopefully soon. But the success of the program is about a lot more than supermodels or berry-flavored condoms. In addition to selling condoms, the group has been opening up mini clinics and training midwives in IUD insertion all over the country. These programs are taking long-term contraception methods outside of the cities and into rural Pakistan. The organization is pacing to spend \$1.2 million on its operations in Pakistan this year and sell enough condoms to give **240,000 couples a year's worth of protection.**

DKT's audacious approach to condom advertising belies an intensely pragmatic streak. The company isn't above working with authoritarian governments or self-censoring its message if it succeeds in getting the contraceptives in the hands of the people and educating large swathes of the developing world about family planning and STD prevention.

That pragmatism runs through the core of what DKT does—the idea behind Harvey's program is to sell contraception in the developing world for pennies on the dollar rather than to donate them for free, creating a large distribution network that includes shopkeepers, along with a greater public awareness through advertising. It also makes the products more valuable to customers who would invest in them, because people who spend hard-earned money for something are more likely to actually use that thing, even if the cost is trivial.

The approach has made DKT, which markets subsidized condoms in Pakistan and 18 other countries, the largest private provider of contraception and family planning in the developing world. Last year alone, DKT sold at least 600 million condoms, 76 million cycles of birth control pills, 16 million injectable contraceptives, and 1.5 million IUDs. In 2011, DKT estimated that its services and products prevented 7 million unwanted pregnancies and 11,000 maternal deaths.

Advertisement

One of the biggest individual sources of funding for the group is Harvey's personal fortune, which comes from Harvey's other major venture, Adam & Eve, the largest mail-order distributor of condoms, sex toys, and pornography in the United States. Since he founded the group in 1989, Harvey has donated roughly \$50 million of his personal wealth to DKT.

The organization prides itself, as much as Harvey does, on breaking barriers—DKT's YouTube page has a section titled **"Pushing the Boundaries: Using Sex to Sell Family Planning."** And sex tends to sell when marketing contraception, even more than it does when marketing Coke. "We don't want to be deliberately offensive, on the other hand we do want to be sexy," Harvey says. "Sexual themes work very well with condom advertising."

Take DKT's advertising in Pakistan's more sexually libertine neighbor India. Harvey says his nonprofit airs ads there that would never get by network censors in the United States.

The most-viewed condom ads on DKT's YouTube site, aside from the censored Pakistani ad, were Indian ads for "XXX flavored condoms." Some of these ads would probably seem shockingly sexual for American audiences, with an Indian actress suggestively fondling, biting, and licking a batch of grapes and a spoonful of chocolate before asking, "What's your flavor of the night?" In another one of these ads, an actress lists all of the condom flavors she wants her partner to purchase at the store, before being interrupted by her father who thinks she's reciting a grocery list.

XXX Condoms ad from DKT India-2012



Advertisement

Some of the ads that DKT has run in India are unprecedented anywhere. Harvey cites the organization's advertisements for medical abortion pills, which were the first of their kind when they ran last year. In it, a doctor in training asks for personal medical advice from a colleague about whether or not abortion pills work. She then uses the knowledge to help her own patient. Though it feels kind of stilted and kitschy at points, there's something powerful about the straightforwardness and earnestness of this ad.

A Doctor Tells a Doctor



"We expected considerable public reaction [pushback] to those ads and got absolutely none," Harvey says. "Those ads you could never, ever have run in the United States—wish we could." The ads were run on national networks in India, including the official government network, and they didn't "cause a single bleep."

The more "traditional" campaigns for plain old contraception can get much racier, especially in South America. In Brazil, DKT's ads often feature women in various states of undress, or sexualized in other ways. This ad is slightly more clever, while being equally lascivious—it's a clock of various sexual positions for daylight savings time with the tagline: "Tonight there's an extra hour, are you thinking what we're thinking?"

"Daylight Saving Time" Prudence Retardant ad from DKT Brazil



The Brazilian affiliate of DKT also runs a social media contest each year asking people to submit the craziest locations they've used a condom, with winners getting a two-year supply.

Advertisement

Sub-Saharan Africa can be a trickier market in terms of enforcing stricter cultural mores, but DKT recently has had success breaking into Ghana with campaigns that featured lots of dancing. "They tend to be aimed at youth," Harvey says. This ad for Fiesta Condoms is fairly typical of some of the Ghana campaigns, and it's chock full of innuendo.

Fiesta Condoms ad- DKT Ghana



Despite its envelope pushing ads, DKT will tailor individual campaigns to some of the most culturally restrictive markets. "The most sensitive places tend to be Islamic countries like Egypt and Pakistan, although that does not apply in Indonesia and Bangladesh, so it isn't religion as much as culture," Harvey says. The group operates without any TV advertising in Egypt, where such marketing is outlawed. In Vietnam, where the government prescreened DKT's ads before they aired, the group had to remove a map of Vietnam from the background of an advertisement because censors didn't want an image of the country associated with condoms.

DKT has also run into state censorship in Indonesia and notably in the Philippines, where **Catholic Bishops have asked for condom ads to be banned** and superstar boxer/ legislator Manny Pacquiao has **supported a ban on condoms entirely**. "The authorities and some of the public objected to an ad for a brand of condom called Frenzy, which comes in several flavors," Harvey said of the company's issues in the Philippines. "Flavors suggested that they could be used for oral sex and that, of course, is not on." At least, not yet.