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All may not be in the pink

■ A pink-powered campaign has raised breast cancer awareness, but has commercialization of it had a healthy effect?

By **MELANIE AVE**
Times Staff Writer

If pink is your color, October is your month.

Pinking up store shelves near you: Eyebrow tweezers. Tic Tacs. Kitchen knives. KitchenAid mixers (and blenders). Post-It Notes. Everlast boxing gloves. Coach key chains.

And don't forget pink M&Ms, plain or peanut.

It's National Breast Cancer Awareness Month and consumers are packing their shopping baskets with pink products made by companies that pledge a portion of proceeds to fight breast cancer.

But behind the corporate goodwill and fundraising, like today's Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure at St. Petersburg's Vinoy Park, ripples of dissent are growing about the commercialization of breast cancer.

Some survivors and cancer groups say they are pleased the campaign has placed the disease in the forefront of women's minds.

But they believe the crusade against cancer should be less about shopping and more about preventing and finding the cause of the disease that kills about 40,000 each year, said Breast Cancer Action based in San Francisco.

While death rates have fallen in recent years, a woman's odds of getting diagnosed has tripled in the past 50 years. In the 1960s, it was one in 20. Today, it is one in seven. The advocacy group has called for more coordinated research aimed at prevention rather than treatment.

"Let's face it," said the group's Rebecca Farmer, "if shopping could cure breast cancer, we'd be set."

Maximum marketing power

Experts say no other disease has attracted as much marketing power as breast cancer, it dwarfs that of other campaigns, such as AIDS and heart disease.

Pasco County School Board member and breast cancer survivor Marge Whaley, 65, appreciates pink items but doesn't buy them for herself.

She wonders where the money goes. "I don't fault the pink," said Whaley. "But they are putting it on a lot of items."

Breast Cancer Action has renamed October Breast Cancer Industry Month.

Two years ago it launched a "think before you pink campaign," urging shoppers to make sure they know how much and where their money is going before buying pink goods.

Hundreds of products are available, ranging from pink Panera bagels, shaped like ribbons, to Wilson Sporting Goods pink golf clubs.

Some companies commit to a specific contribution while others only say a "portion" of sales goes to breast cancer groups.

Even the federal government has joined the pink bazaar. More than 900-million breast cancer research stamps raised more than \$55-million for breast cancer research.

Lost in all the commerce, said Breast Cancer Action's executive director Barbara Brenner, is the answer to this nagging question: What is making so many so sick?

"We're 24 years out from the original breast cancer awareness month," Brenner said. "We're drowning in a sea of pink."

"We have awareness. The question is, what do we do now? We want people to move from awareness to action."

Partners carefully chosen

The Susan G. Komen Foundation, based in Dallas and one of the largest charities, points to the positive side of corporate involvement.

The foundation said last year its corporate ties raised more than \$30-mil-

lion that advanced research, screening, treatment and education.

"I don't think it's been overcommercialized at all," said Carrie Hodges, Komen's cause-related marketing manager.

The foundation provides five questions consumers should ask on its Web site, komensuncoast.com, to help them decide whether products really benefit the breast cancer battle. She said it applies the same standards to its corporate partners.

"We don't partner with companies who just want a buck," Hodges said. "We only partner with companies who are committed to the cause."

Pink products aside, Jan Luongo, a board member of the foundation's local affiliate, said no one should discount the awareness campaign's role in saving lives.

"Twenty years ago you couldn't say breast cancer on TV," she said. "It wasn't a common thing people talked about it."

"We want people to know about it. Now, just because you get a diagnosis, doesn't necessarily mean a death sentence like it used to."

Two-time breast cancer survivor Sue Lang, a 49-year-old hair stylist from Treasure Island, views some pink products with skepticism.

But she said local Komen fundraising efforts paid for a mammography and biopsy for her after she could not get insurance.

"It's a lot of commercialization but if that gets one more person to get that mammography, it's worth it," Lang said. "When you're touched by something you look at things differently."

A more dangerous effect

One result of the pink movement is that many women have an undue fear of breast cancer, said Samantha King, an associate professor of kinesiology and health studies at Queen's University in Ontario.

They often underestimate heart disease, the No. 1 cause of death among women with 400,000 a year, 11 times as many as breast cancer. Lung cancer also surpasses breast cancer deaths.

TODAY

Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure

5K walk/run, 1 mile walk/run and children's walk to raise funds for breast cancer research.

WHERE: Vinoy Park, Bayshore Drive and Seventh Avenue NE, St. Petersburg

WHEN: 8 a.m. today

COST: \$25 registration

MORE INFO: 727-734-7832 or komensuncoast.com



King examined the breast cancer awareness campaign in her book, *Pink Ribbons Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*.

She said most research dollars go toward treatment and screening instead of "research that might actually make a difference."

Some of the biggest sponsors of breast cancer awareness month are companies with an "interest in women continuing to be diagnosed with the disease," King said, because they make the drugs to treat it and equipment used in mammography.

AstraZeneca, which manufactures the breast cancer drug Arimidex, is one of the awareness month's main sponsors and helped start the campaign to encourage early detection.

A company official said its motive is not financial.

"The company truly has a dedication to patient education and patient awareness," said AstraZeneca's Kate McKenzie, senior manager for National Breast Cancer Month. "You just can't make a product ... without informing people about the disease."

King concludes in her book that the breast cancer awareness movement has given supporters a false sense of progress.

"In spite of all the attention that's been paid to breast cancer and the money raised by pink ribbon products, very little has changed," King said.

"I don't think there's a big conspiracy, but clearly breast cancer among corporations is related to marketing potential.

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