

New York Times, February 15, 2006

To Market a City Condom, Make It Catchy but Tasteful

By ANDY NEWMAN

It is probably safe to say that the marketing challenges posed by what may be the world's first municipal condom are a bit daunting.

But they are challenges that may soon have to be met. The city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene announced plans on Monday to release an official city condom "with unique packaging" in the coming months, the idea being both to promote safe sex and to allow the department to track more easily who uses the million condoms it gives away each month.

The specifics of the unique packaging have not yet been worked out. But it seems officials cannot start thinking this all through soon enough, if only to avoid the seemingly endless possible pitfalls. Thus, opinions were sought from some of the brightest minds in advertising, marketing, branding and design. How would they handle this assignment?

Keep in mind: A private company already markets a condom with an Empire State Building design.

The task, as the informal panel saw it, was twofold: come up with a catchy design that somehow says "New York City," and do it within the extreme constraints of taste, politics and municipal decorum that a client like the health department must contend with. It would also have to be in tune with the serious public health issues involved, and with the sensitivities of religious groups that may object.

Alan Siegel, chairman and chief executive of Siegel & Gale, a strategic branding firm, was asked what the condom might be called.

"City Planner," Mr. Siegel said.

Very nice. Tasteful, actually.

And what might the city condom look like?

Paula Scher, designer of graphic icons like the Citibank logo, took a crack at it.

"Maybe something black or checkered," she said. "It should have a very distinct form, so that when you recognize it in the street you know it's a New York City one. Maybe black with yellow overtones, a taxi graphic. Something simple, powerful, loud. Tough, powerful urban graphics."

Davin Wedel, owner of Global Protection Corporation, makers of the Empire State Building condom as well as a wide range of custom condom packages for individual clients, was thinking a cityscapes series.

"I would take landmarks and things that people in New York relate to," he said. "I'd take the Statue of Liberty and I'd say 'A Beacon for Safety.' And you'd have to do one for the Brooklyn Bridge."

No, you wouldn't, said Allen Adamson, a managing director at Landor Associates, who worked on the NYC2012 Olympic bid and other campaigns.

"I would stay away from the Brooklyn Bridge, the overused icons, and try to get more of the nitty-gritty," he said. "Cobblestone streets, the narrow buildings -- that sort of urban gritty. It's got to have a 'Rent' feel, not a '42nd Street' feel. Or even an uptown urban look. Black and grays and narrow streets."

The trick to reaching today's savvy youth consumer, Mr. Adamson said, was to say New York without screaming it.

"You'd need to be in the know that it was N.Y.C.," he said. "If it becomes cliché, who'd want to be caught dead wearing it?"

Seniors in the packaging design program at Fashion Institute of Technology were also consulted. The department chairwoman, Marianne Klimchuk, reported the results.

They saw the outside packaging as "a design like a manhole cover, with peepholes in the manhole covers so you can see the colors of the products inside."

How about a slogan? Tucker Viemeister, a designer and vice president of Studio Red at Rockwell Group in Union Square, suggested this one: "If you see something, do something." Nice. Manages to convey both responsibility and wantonness.

The client was consulted. A spokeswoman for the health department declined to comment on the slogan.

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