



How to keep the breast cancer fight real

By Sly Tang

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It is November. The leaves have fallen, the pumpkin pies have been baked and the pink ribbons put away - not to mention the pink trench coats, pink T-shirts, and all the other pink paraphernalia fashion produces for Breast Cancer Awareness month.

It sounds so ideal - shopping for a cause - that it is tempting to ignore the question of where all the money goes?

"I see something is pink and I buy it, but we have to step back and get the facts. Do research, take two minutes!" says Lynn Trachtman, a programme manager in grant marketing and an ex-executive director for the American Cancer Society.

If a designer says they are raising money during October for breast cancer, what percentage actually goes to charity, and how does the charity spend that money? Does it go towards flyers to ask you for more money, or actual research, or care?

It depends on the product.

Since starting the Key to the Cure shopping weekend in 1999, for example, Saks Fifth Avenue has been able to donate more than \$16m (£9m) to women's cancer research and treatment organisations.

One of the items sold during the campaign, a shirt designed by Diane von Furstenberg, turns over \$33 of its \$35 retail price to the Entertainment Industry Foundation. Subtracting EIF's relatively low administration overhead of 13 per cent, this results in \$29 a shirt going towards the funding of six institutions of 16 scientists.

Also benefiting an EIF - the Expedition Inspiration Fund for Breast Cancer Research - is celebrity hair stylist Laurent D, who has teamed up with actress Téa Leoni to raise money for the cause with sales of his Privé Styling Brilliance. However, though it is being marketed as donating to cancer research, it turns out that only \$1 of the \$23 product cost is donated. That is 4 per cent of each sale. Expedition Inspiration Fund's administration costs come in at 23 per cent, so for each \$23 bottle bought, \$0.77 went to fighting cancer (the company did not respond to calls about the figure).

By contrast, designer Dyanne Bell's partnership with the Butterfly Studio saw 50 per cent of proceeds of her Butterfly necklace benefiting www.SHAREcancersupport.org, a peer-to-peer non-profit organisation which runs on a budget of just \$1m a year and without government funding.

SHARE is able to spend 80 per cent of its money on programmes, so for each necklace that sells, \$26 goes to patient care.

Meanwhile, Oilily, maker of the posh Belgian clothing line, said "100 per cent proceeds" from their dedicated Cancer Awareness red and pink \$118 elastane top would go to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. Except, Oilily USA has defined proceeds as "margin of profit". Margin of profit? It turns out that only 20 per cent of the sale of each shirt went to charity.

Though it is hard to be sure whether this kind of confusion is accidental, it does raise the question of whether cause-related marketing is just another fashion opportunity for retailers.

Oilily was able to say that their minimum donation to the Susan G. Komen Foundation would be \$5,000 - not much more than the cost of a month's public relations retainer for the \$35m company. What is a drop in the bucket for a company like Oilily would be more than a start-up designer could afford to give, so beyond the percentage, shoppers should look at who is doing the fundraising.

Designer V'ta gave 10 per cent of all sales through her website during October to the Expedition Inspiration Fund for Breast Cancer Research. That may not seem like a lot, until you consider that it costs her about 75 per cent of the retail price to make each high-end piece, and that for each piece that sells, she is donating an average of \$40.

Besides, it is not only about the numbers. A new line called The Original Healing Threads gives just 5 per cent to the American Cancer Society - but its entire product line is tailored to women fighting cancer.

Founded by a breast cancer survivor and her sister who is dying of terminal colon cancer, the line replaces hospital "johnnies" with warm garments which can be worn to chemotreatments or radiation treatment.

Judi Ketcik at Expedition Inspiration Fund points out that sometimes the number that matters is distribution. Shoppers at Philosophy's website donate more money by buying Shower for the Cure from the beauty line directly than through QVC.

However, through channels such as QVC, retailers reach much wider audiences. And ultimately, is it not better for shoppers to buy fashionable fundraising items if even only a small percentage goes to breast cancer, as long as it means the battle stays in the public eye?

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