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Sex And Recession

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The cash-strapped masses may be spending less on restaurants and entertainment, but not necessarily on the quality of their sex lives--and manufacturers of sexual aids are broadening their lines to meet the demand.

To wit: Trojan now offers a condom that comes with a disposable vibrating ring. Durex, another condom maker, sells a vibrator and a line of lubricants. Even Philips Electronics has joined competitor Hitachi in the vibrator business. "We're much more open now to experimenting sexually," says Louis Friedman, chief executive of Liberator, a maker of sex toys in Atlanta. "We're seeing countless new products being sold to a much larger audience than people realized. Even the more conservative retailers have begun to come around."

Indeed, Wal-Mart, Walgreen and Target now peddle sexual aids, including condoms, lubricants and personal massagers. Walgreen's Web site features a "sexual wellness" tab, behind which are listed not only contraceptives and fertility tests, but also pleasure-enhancing dietary supplements, romance-themed costumes and games, massage oils and lotions, and the "Emotional Bliss Fem Blossom" vibrator. (Representatives from Walgreen's and Target were unavailable for comment; a Wal-Mart communications manager would say only that the chain "has a diverse mix of shoppers who visit our stores each day, and we are committed to providing customers with the selection of products they expect to find in our stores.")

In Pictures: The Mainstreaming of the Sex Industry

Poor as we all may feel lately, it seems there's at least one bright spot in having to hunker down at home. "This industry is shielded in a way," says Katy Zvolerin, director of public relations with Adam & Eve, another sex toy maker. "It does seem people use us even more heavily in bad times." (Not that there's much of a correlation between recessions and birth rates--if people have more sex during a recession, they are being careful about it.)

Chad Braverman, director of product development and licensing at Doc Johnson, takes a more sober approach to the coming months. "I don't know if I'd say our industry was 'recession-proof,'" he says. "We need to be proactive in creating a quality product that's going to sell. And there's a lot more competition than there was 20 years ago."

The sex industry traces back to 500 B.C., when traders from the Greek port of Miletus sold *olisbos*, an early version of the dildo. Today, the business of sex (including pornography) now runs into the tens of billions of dollars. (No official estimates are available; Wall Street analysts don't tend to track this stuff.) And while print and video sales are ebbing, as more free adult content has become available online, sales of un-reproducible sexual aids are still healthy.

"Of course, there's concern about the economy, but right now our sales are growing," says Michael Trygstad, founder of Wet, a lubricant manufacturer in Van Nuys, Calif. "We've grown 30% this year alone. We've had to completely automate our factories to meet the tremendous demand. People are deciding to stay at home and engage in inexpensive entertainment."

Slick marketing--and the ability to shop anonymously online--helps, too. Liberator markets itself as "relationship care," and advertises in mainstream magazines such as *Men's Health*, *Rolling Stone* and *AARP The Magazine*; the brand also has prominent placement on Walgreens.com. Meanwhile, K-Y (which sells its lubricants at Target and Rite-Aid) is playing the intimacy card with a line called Yours+Mine. And Babeland, a retail store in Brooklyn, N.Y., offers instructional sex seminars for new mothers, as well as an in-store diaper-changing station.

"The emphasis has gone from family planning to sexual well-being," says Friedman. "It used to be that you had to go in and give a wink to the pharmacist, who would open a drawer behind the counter, put the condoms in a brown paper bag and slide them over to you without a word. It took AIDS to really bring condoms out into the open with a sense of urgency. And now the fun is coming back."

Subtly packaged fun, that is. "We're seeing a shift to women's products and a change in packaging," says Erica Heathmann, managing editor of *AVN Novelty Business*. "Gone are the porn stars of old. Today's products have a more classic, clean aesthetic."

When it comes to marketing sexual aids, one person's vibrator is another's "personal massager." Says Adam and Eve's Zvolerin: "The same massager we sell in our catalog is available at CVS. It has a different label, which says it's to relieve sore muscles, aches and pains, but that's my massager!"

And just as farmers and grocers are able to charge more for organic apples, so, too, are sex-toy makers grabbing customers with health-conscious pitches, such as sexual aids that are "phthalate-free." (Phthalates, often used in plastics, have been tenuously linked to certain kinds of cancer.)

Who needs fancy packaging and marketing mumbo jumbo when you can get killer product placement? When the Charlotte character on *Sex and the City* waxed on about her Rabbit vibrator, sales of that item went through the roof. But, then, that episode aired 10 years ago, during the raging technology boom--an arguably much sexier era.

"We've weathered storms before," says Ann Semans, director of Babeland, a sex toy retailer. "It's not like we're selling flat-screen TVs and convertibles--almost everything is under \$100." Babeland goes so far as to group certain items under the banner of "Affordable Luxury."

Says Semans: "If that isn't an inalienable freedom, I don't know what is."

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