

Right: Younger generations are far more comfortable talking about menstruation and didn't see what the fuss was about when Aisle showed bloody underwear on Instagram. **Below:** The Knix "Period Underwear Changes Everything," campaign looked to "normalize leaks" and start an honest dialogue. **Opposite Page:** Aisle has built its brand around inclusivity, reflecting women of every size and shape in its advertising.



The feminist evolution of menstrual

How marketers went from helping women "keep their secret" to mainstreaming a reusable product that's



In a popular Netflix special, stand-up comedian Michelle Wolf makes a hilarious and excellent point about menstruation. "‘Period’ isn’t the right name for it," she tells the audience. "We’re too cute about it. A period should be called ‘bloody-tissue-falling-out-of-a-hole.’ If you went into work and you were like, ‘Hey, I got bloody-tissue-falling-out-of-a-hole.’ They’d be like, ‘Yeah, take the week!’" Her blunt perspective on the oft-taboo subject is not common in society, let alone the advertising industry. Menstrual discharge is perfectly natural, and yet, brands tend to use euphemisms or blue dye to portray it. But that isn’t helping anyone – least of all the intended consumer. "The good news is that we are seeing progress,"

counters Amanda Laird, principal strategist at Toronto-based feminist marketing firm Slow & Steady Studio. "About six years ago, I began to feel drastic changes were being made culturally when it came to our attitudes towards menstruation. But it wasn’t that long ago that advertising for menstrual products didn’t even talk about periods – a tampon commercial would show somebody playing tennis or horseback riding." Marketing around menstrual products was, effectively, all about keeping your period a secret.

When you look at the history of menstrual stigma and the idea that menstruation is "dirty," Laird explains, a lot of those generational attitudes were fueled by marketing. "Back in the pre-Industrial Revolution, in the 1800s, we were using rags and cloths and it didn’t matter, you just washed them and that was the end of it. It was just a reality," she adds. "But then once we started getting into disposable products that you have to purchase at a store, you needed marketing

to sell those products. And because our traditional marketing approach has been to feed on fear, that's when we started to see these narratives around 'Be clean, be fresh, be discreet.'"

This persistent, wide-spread portrayal of periods made it particularly challenging for brands in the reusable category to sell products like period panties. Vancouver-based Aisle (formerly known as Luna Pads) was the first brand to sell leak-proof menstruation underwear after fashion designer Madeleine Shaw came up with the idea to sew cloth pads into her underwear in the '90s. But even a decade later, when Aisle CEO Suzanne Siemens arrived at the company, she says "it was really hard to market products like these because people didn't want to talk about periods, and marketing messages were very sanitized."

In fact, the first time the word "period" was used in a North American television commercial was in 1985 when Courtney Cox appeared in a Procter & Gamble Tampax spot explaining how this brand of tampons "can actually change the way you feel about your period." And it wasn't until 2011 that the first advertising campaign, by P&G's Always, featured a pad with red dye instead of the customary blue to represent menstruation. Even so, the category continued to innovate products that fed into period stigma. In 2020, for example, Tampax rolled out tampons with silent wrappers. An X (formerly Twitter) user criticized the product with a post that amassed thousands of likes, stating: "Silent wrappers?! I'm on my period, not an MI5 mission."

underwear advertising

part of a \$150 million USD market. BY SHEIMA BENEMBAK

Over the years Aisle has learned that, to succeed, it doesn't need to focus on converting people. Instead, the brand caters to a group of consumers that share the same values around sustainability and women's empowerment. "Advertising for reusable period products is often about education and reassurance," Siemens explains, "and what we are most proud of is having created this category and community so that the next generations don't have to experience that shame."

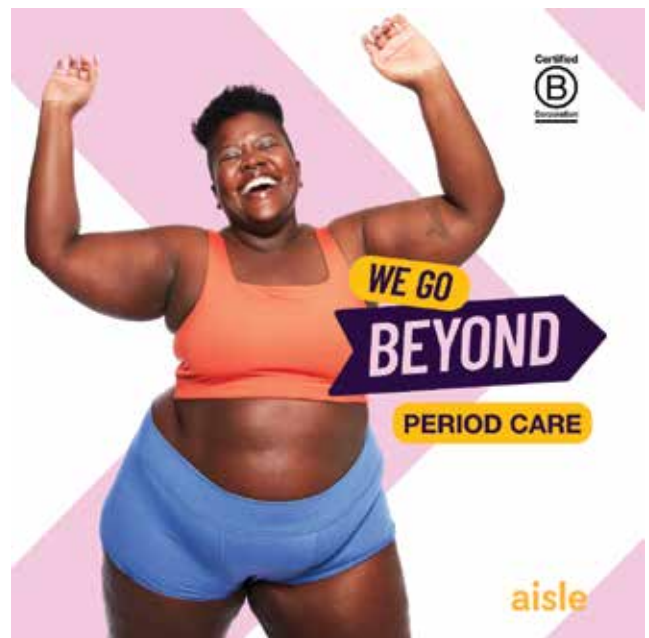
As consumer awareness of the category has increased, so too has acceptance. In the last several years period panties have become recognized as an alternative solution to traditional pads and tampons – they're sustainable, environmental and convenient. Others, beyond Aisle, have looked to capture the market (which, according to Market.US, is steadily growing with a revenue estimation of US\$148.8 million last year and a projection of US\$901.9 million by 2032). Knix is one of them.

Founded by Joanna Griffins in 2013 as a direct-to-consumer intimate apparel brand (and recently purchased hygiene and health company Essity) Knix has been creating innovative period

products for a highly-engaged community that – similar to Aisle's own audience – share its values around authenticity and sustainability. Over the last decade, it has built its brand around inclusivity, reflecting women of every size and shape in its advertising. Emily Scarlett, director of communications at Knix told *strategy* earlier this year that its "Period Underwear Changes Everything" summer campaign looked to "normalize leaks" and that the best way to do that was to "talk about it."

A similar unapologetic acceptance of oneself is also at the core of Aisle's marketing. "Our values are conveyed in our models, messaging and how we show up in social media – namely that our products are ethically produced and designed to be size and gender inclusive for any person with a period," says Siemens. One of the brand's most successful social campaigns is its annual holiday giving campaign called "Boxers Under the Tree," where a portion of its sales are set aside in order to send free period underwear to trans and gender non-conforming youth in need.

Aisle mostly relies on online advertising and influencer marketing, "because we don't have the budget for expensive campaigns that involve TV or billboards. We leverage our online



community to share their love for our products and boost our message of period positivity." The challenge, however, with online advertising is that there is a risk of being rejected for sexual impropriety. Ads featuring blood specifically are frequently banned. "This is frustrating since we are advertising a functionally specific type of underwear; meanwhile, sexually explicit ads for other products don't face the same scrutiny," says Siemens.

Social media, as of late, has been lessening its restrictions on the topic, albeit slowly and mostly only after public backlash. A report published by the Center for Intimacy Justice – a San-Francisco based non-profit civic organization that's committed to equity and

wellbeing in people's intimate lives – revealed in January of 2022 that, of the 60 women's health businesses that they surveyed, 100% had experienced Facebook or Instagram rejecting an ad and 50% reported Facebook suspending their ad accounts altogether. The categories the ads covered included postpartum care, sexual wellness and menstrual health, and were labeled by Meta as "adult content." In October of the same year, Meta made changes to its sexual health advertising policies, stating that "advertisers can run ads that promote sexual health, wellness and reproductive products and services."

Siemens is cognizant that a balance still needs to be struck between being authentic and unnecessarily blatant. "A couple of weeks ago, our social media manager said, 'I'm posting a photo of some bloody underwear and I said, 'Oh, I'm not sure if people are gonna like that,'" she says, "But it was within the right

context, and if you look at that post, it got a ton of engagement, which was the whole goal."

Laird explains that positive cultural changes have not only been propelled by social media, but also by a younger generation that doesn't really understand what all the fuss is about. "Younger people are much more open and comfortable talking about menstruation.

It's just a fact of life. We get it and we need products to manage it." It's like having a runny nose, she explains, you blow it, and sure, it's a little gross, but you're definitely not ashamed of it. As attitudes changed and the dialogue surrounding periods became less strained in the public sphere, brands are having a much easier time marketing reusable feminine products. "As those companies – like Diva Cup and Aisle – began challenging those standards of advertising and period stigma in general, people became more interested in what used to be alternative products," says Laird. And brands have begun changing their marketing approach to be more focused on eco standards and social inclusion.

"Our current systems of business and marketing are often about scaling our businesses for more money," Laird says. "To contrast that with a feminist approach to marketing would be about really centering the consumer and their humanness, their needs and their desires." And that means continuously challenging and unlearning internalized stigma. 🗑️



Above: Aisle's "Boxers Under the Tree" campaign sends period underwear to trans and gender non-conforming youth.

Forbidden femcare fruit

HUSHED BY SOCIETY AND MEDIA, SOME BRANDS CONTINUE TO FACE CRITICISM FOR HOW THEY TALK ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH AND PLEASURE.

Sexual pleasure

In 2019, Lovehoney Group (formerly WOW Tech Group), a global company that designs, manufactures and markets intimate pleasure products, collaborated with PinkCherry and agency The Garden to promote a new vibrator called the Womanizer. Placed on a billboard along the QEW near Hwy 427 in Toronto, the copy read: "Scream your own name." While many Torontonians applauded the sex positive message, others criticized it for making them uncomfortable. "Just saw a huge-ass billboard advertising a vibrator... why is Canada like this?" one X user asked.



"Shoutout to the vibrator ad billboard on the expressway that never fails to make me uncomfortable in the car with my parents," another added. Despite criticism, Lovehoney Group reported a roughly 200% uptick in Canadian sales between 2019 and mid-2020.

Postpartum care

In 2020, a Frida Mom ad campaign was rejected at the Oscars for being "too graphic." The commercial featured a new mother in the first days after giving birth, facing the realities of her changed body and new role as a parent. You can see her postpartum belly as she struggles to go to the bathroom while her newborn is crying in the background. Frida Mom, instead, posted the ad on its Instagram feed as a rebuttal and wrote, "The ad you're about to watch was rejected by ABC & the Oscars from airing during this year's award show. It's not violent, political or sexual in nature. Our ad is not religious or lewd and does not portray guns or ammunition. It's just a new mom, home with her



baby and her new body for the first time. Yet it was rejected. And we wonder why new moms feel unprepared." A year later, the global postpartum products market was valued at US\$2.22 billion and is only expected to grow.

Vaginal health

Olly Canada, a brand that focuses on health supplements and other wellness products for women – a market projected to grow to \$4.649 billion in Canada by 2030 – released a new vitamins range this year called the Modern Woman's line. The supporting

campaign revolved around empowering women and addressing some of their unmet health needs – like having a healthy vaginal microflora and microbiome. Marketing the product line, which includes capsule supplements called Lovin' Libido, Beat the Bloat and Happy Hoo-Ha, however, proved challenging. Parent company Unilever said in a release that it was "given the side-eye" when it tried to book ads featuring the word "vagina." It also said that ads using the Happy Hoo-Ha product name were sometimes outright rejected for being "too suggestive." The marketing team had to rethink some of its advertising concepts and find ways around the issue, managing to launch a successful campaign in the end.

