

There are reasons to look askance at Komen for the Cure, though they have nothing to do with the imagined abortions of the lunatic fringe or the cause-based sponsors at Cheyenne Frontier Days. Thinkbeforeyoupink.org and buylesscrap.org show that, though perhaps genuine once, many “hypercharities” have long ceased to be thus.

Mara Einstein’s 2012 “Compassion, Inc.” examines how corporate sponsors rake in the bucks via association with hypercharities like Komen. The latest marketing wrinkle, “cause marketing,” gets consumers to believe that, by spending a little extra on this or that purchase, we help a good cause. In reality, we mostly help line corporate coffers.

The author defines hypercharity as “structured and promoted to appeal to large corporations looking to tie in with a charity partner for maximum marketing exposure.” Inasmuch as such ties allow corporate partners to write off advertising expenses as “donations,” they will often spend “dollars for pennies,” investing millions in advertisements that give the perfunctory nod to a charity of choice.

Komen has become crassly capitalist and market-oriented, writes the author. Its “for the cure” logo and pink ribbon may not be “misused” by the likes of Breast Cancer Research Foundation. She cites a marketer who attended the 2010 Cause Marketing Forum at which a Komen spokesperson ranted that other breast cancer groups were “getting credit” for Komen’s efforts, saying: “. . . breast cancer, that’s our market. We need to brand it. We need to make sure we keep control of it.” A 2010 Boston Globe article, “Sick of Pink,” highlights the abuse of cancer-survivor stories by corporations that “claim philanthropy when what these companies are most concerned about is profits.” Einstein calls it “commodifying cancer.”

The commodifying is promoted by celebrities and supercelebrities. In a chapter titled “The Birth of Hypercharity and the Rise of Charitainment,” Einstein directs her ire toward Oprah Winfrey’s promotion of U2 lead-singer Bono’s (RED), which helps fund AIDS medication in Africa:

“Oprah is all over this one. A short clip about dying children in Africa is shown, but this doesn’t make for good television . . . (RED) is about shopping.”

Surrounded by fans, Oprah and Bono amble down “one of the ritziest shopping districts in the world.” The supercelebrities enter a GAP store, where Oprah’s cameras survey the displays, “providing GAP with millions of dollars in free airtime” while Oprah buys “dozens of (RED) items.” They proceed to an Apple store where she picks up ten (RED) iPods. After that, hip-hop superstar Kanye West lures Oprah into buying ten ultra-light Motorola cell phones. From there it’s to the Amani store, where Oprah picks up ten pairs of sunglasses that are “similar to Bono’s trademark” shades.

What effect do these publicly-displayed profligate practices have on us? We are led to believe that involving ourselves with problems from AIDS to cancer is effortless and undemanding: shop till you drop; bingo, crisis solved.

Another hyped-up campaign, the National Wear Red Dress Day, promotes “The Heart Truth” by way of the fashion industry and the American Heart Association’s “Go Red for Women.”

The red-dress logo have appeared on all sorts of consumer products, including Coca-Cola cans. “Compassion, Inc” highlights medical consternation over the marketing gimmick. In 2010, the Center for Science in the Public Interest protested to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute that “overweight and obesity are prime risk factors for heart disease, and the agency shouldn’t be bolstering the dismal reputation of the Coca-Cola company, the world’s biggest manufacturer of obesigenic soft drinks.” While acknowledging that the logo appeared on cans of Diet Coke only, SCPI says that “the entire Coca-Cola product line” stands to gain from the “credibility conferred by a government heart-health agency.”

Similar reactions came to Komen when its marketing strategy included KFC (formerly Kentucky Fried Chicken). “In April and May 2010, pink buckets of chicken selling for five dollars led to 50 cent donations to Komen . . . When someone somewhere does not take a minute to evaluate the duplicity of this type of partnership—connecting women’s health to a product that leads to obesity, which is a prime contributing factor to breast cancer—we know we have reached the pinnacle of commercialism and consumption.” Breast Cancer Action, which founded thinkbeforeyoupink derides a “corporate responsibility” that is little more than a marketing gimmick.

There’s no such thing as “sustainable consumption.” A subheading in Compassion, Inc., reiterates that “Shopping is Not Philanthropy. Period.” Hence, “Buying, walking, or running for charity is moral robbery.”

Buying sprees have enslaved Americans for some time, and the dangerous impacts of advertising have been analyzed in tandem. Vance Packard’s 1957 “The Hidden Persuaders,” a study of advertising’s insidious effects, was followed by “The Waste Makers,” a scathing critique of the consumer-product industry’s “planned obsolescence.” Sut Jhally, who succeeded these investigators, is quoted as saying: “Simply stated, our survival as a species is dependent upon minimizing the threat of advertising and the commercial culture it has spawned.”

We have become “victims of a systematic misdirection” that causes compassion fatigue. Cause-related marketing makes us unlikely to personally and generously act toward less fortunate fellow creatures. “Under the glaring lights of supermarkets brimming with 30,000 products or more, it is easy to avoid thinking about hunger and want and homelessness.”

Worse, the intertwining of compassion with consumption places the burden of solving environmental and social ills “on the backs of consumers” instead of on the guilty parties, industries that cause or perpetuate these ills. Low-flow showerheads are great, but such individual actions tend to detract from industrial wastefulness that vastly outweighs individual practices. Consumer-based solutions are not enough when we “consider that carbon emissions need to be reduced by 75 percent worldwide.” Government must step in with decisive action.

Take plastic bags. “Americans use an estimated 100 billion plastic bags annually,” which is “catastrophic for the environment.” When San Francisco lawmakers banned the use of these bags, an anticipated consumer backlash never happened: people started bringing their own

reusable bags, as shoppers in Europe have done all along. Specific laws can indeed rein in mindless consumption.

Let's think "Compassion, Inc." as we ogle CFD cause-based merchandise, fatty foods, and obesigenic drinks.