

New technique in marketing: using the Web to spread lies about your competition.

Tampon terrorism

By MICHAEL FUMENTO

FEAR IS A SALES PITCH that has been used for decades to flog everything from alarm systems to underarm deodorant. But just think how it can be used on the Internet to whip up paranoia—and get people to open their wallets.

The Net myth is the computer age's version of the urban legend, like the one about alligators prowling the sewers of Manhattan. Sent out as e-mail, posted in newsgroups or on Web pages, Net myths can reach thousands of people a day—and multiply like viruses.

As stock touts and shorts have managed to both lure and spook investors on the Web, a little Toronto-based outfit called Bio Business International has already become quite adept at spreading myths through its Web site. Bio Business markets only one product—100% cotton, nonchlorine bleached tampons under the brand name Terra Femme. Among other things, the site encourages women to spread a terrifying message that tampons made by U.S. competitors may be horribly dangerous.

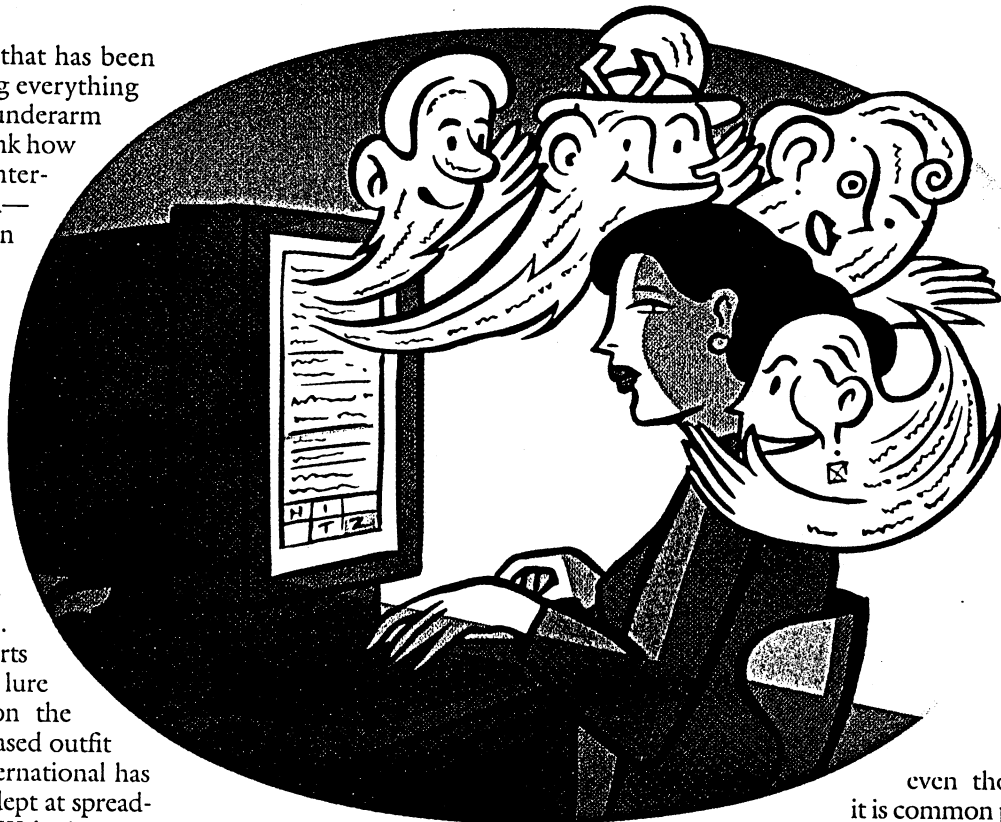
Specifically, the site warns that tampons made with rayon or that contain dioxin—a by-product of some bleaching processes—can be harmful. "Dioxin is now PROVEN to cause many kinds of cancer in women and men, along with birth defects, and to disrupt the natural hormones in our bodies," the Terra Femme site says.

Bio Business also invokes repeatedly the horror of toxic shock syndrome, a potentially fatal bacterial

infection. The claim: 100% cotton tampons are safer than rayon or rayon blends when it comes to protecting women from toxic shock.

Wilhelmina (Willi) Nolan, a 40-ish, longtime environmental and social activist, is Bio Business' founder and president. She has an ally in Representative Carolyn B. Maloney (D-N.Y.). Maloney has introduced legislation that would require the federal government to test menstrual pads and tampons,

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even though it is common practice for companies to test their own products, whether they be drugs, medical devices or cars.

Maloney, in her press releases and on her own Web site, asks if tampons are "the equivalent of a ticking time bomb, capable of increasing women's risks for several life-threatening or fertility-threatening diseases." She had Nolan at one of her press conferences announcing the bill.

The problem is that very little of this bleating is accurate. Animal testing of dioxin has shown an incredible range of toxicity. For example, it knocks over guinea pigs like tenpins, but it takes 500 times as much to have the same effect on hamsters. No dramatic health effects have been shown in human studies, including those of Vietnam vets who sprayed Agent Orange, a dioxin-containing defoliant. A continuing study of these men finds them as healthy as the general population.

"Every year the case becomes weaker and weaker that dioxin causes cancer in human beings," says Michael Gough, a scientist with the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. who has studied dioxin for decades. He adds that evidence dioxin causes other noncancerous problems in humans (other than a form of acne) ranges from speculative to nonexistent.

Never mind that, according to the Food & Drug Administration, no U.S. tamponmaker uses a bleaching method that creates dioxin as a by-product. No matter either that in tests ordered up by Kimberly-Clark, a leading tamponmaker, even Nolan's tampons were found to have trace amounts of dioxin. In a survey of contamination rates, Terra Femme came out somewhere in the middle of a range from 0.2 parts per trillion to 10 parts per trillion.

Explanation? Dioxin is a combustion by-product of many materials. It goes into the air and lands on everything. Accurate-enough testing will find it on everything.

What about the toxic shock scare? According to the March-April 1999 issue of *FDA Consumer*: "There is no evidence [that] rayon fibers in tampons cause toxic shock syndrome."

Nolan wants to hear none of this. She told *FORBES* that a Swedish firm has done dioxin testing on Terra Femme tampons. Bio Business' marketing head, Roni Bregman, said the results can't be released because they are "proprietary information." Yet earlier Nolan had promised to deliver them.

Of course, the Terra Femme Net myths continue, enabling Bio Business to sell a box of 20 tampons for \$5.49, \$2 more than Kimberly's Kotex or Procter & Gamble's Tampax. The Terra Femme brand is hard to find in stores, but you can order it directly from the company if you are willing to pay shipping and handling.

Given the distribution problems for its product, Bio Business probably isn't about to siphon away a large part of P&G's and Kimberly's market, but it can do a fair amount of damage to

their reputations. P&G spokeswoman Elaine Plummer says her company has been getting up to 550 complaints a month through letters, e-mails and phone calls. "I am horrified to learn via e-mail that the tampons I have been using for 33 years contain dioxin," reads one message.

Still, if the Internet provides weapons to people like the Terra Femme tampon terrorists, it can help expose them as well. The ability of anybody to read messages posted in a newsgroup allowed this author to discover that Roni Bregman provided aid to feminists preparing a petition to form a boycott of Terra Femme's U.S. competitors. One was signed, "In health, Roni, who believes more and more that the best way to deal with environmental problems is to directly attack the products that create them." Especially when the attacks are good for her business? ■

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