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Not just a pretty face

Avon products may be synonymous with beauty but its campaigns are aimed at helping women cope with the uglier side of life

IN 2009 Avon Ireland, part of Avon Products, a massive international beauty company, produced a gift card depicting the face of a beautiful but badly bruised and disfigured woman sporting the kind of shiner more usually associated with a prize-fighter than a model. The arresting tagline read: "One thing Avon doesn't want you to cover up with make-up".

Not perhaps a message that one might readily associate with a brand synonymous with beauty. Yet this drive to lift the veil of secrecy surrounding domestic violence has become the second strand of an extensive programme of advocacy that is the cornerstone of Avon's campaign to improve the lives of women worldwide; the first is the company's ongoing fight against breast cancer.

The Avon Company traces its origins to the California Perfume Company, founded in 1886 by 28-year-old Irishman David McConnell. From humble beginnings it now operates the world's largest direct sales business, spanning more than 100 countries worldwide.

Avon is also the leading provider of corporate philanthropy to women. The company re-entered the Irish market 15 years ago and designed the disquieting gift card, containing stark statistics relating to the incidence of domestic violence here, to accompany its Woman's Empowerment Necklace (an Empowerment Ring has recently been added), a significant portion of the revenue from which goes directly to Avon's local partner, Woman's Aid.

As is the case for many women of my generation I suspect, my perception of Avon was shaped by memories of a

glamorous neighbour who regularly delivered enticing little packages.

My sisters and I peeped around the living room door into an impossibly alluring adult world, scampering away as she sashayed out the front door, trailing a heady cloud of scent in her wake. All that remained of our Avon lady was a faint trace of her latest perfume and a glossy catalogue that my mum would pore over for days, diligently ticking tiny boxes in eager anticipation of her next delivery of frosted-pink lipstick and royal-blue eye shadow.

When I reached adulthood the Avon brand seemed irrelevant and soon disappeared from my mind entirely. That remained the case for 30 years. Then, earlier this month, I stumbled upon the Clinton Global Initiative website.

The Clinton Global Citizen Awards, established to recognise extraordinary individuals who have demonstrated visionary leadership in solving pressing global challenges, recently honoured Andrea Jung, chairman and chief executive of Avon Products, for showing leadership in the corporate sector and for significantly improving the lives of women worldwide.

There are two distinct strands to the work that Avon “the company for women” undertakes to empower and aid women globally.

Firstly, as part of its core business, the company provides earning opportunities to more than 6.2 million independent Avon sales representatives worldwide. The potential to secure an independently-earned income is thus realised by women who would otherwise sink into poverty.

Allyson Russell, Avon country manager for Ireland, confirms that “the fastest growing markets are those where women don’t have access to traditional retail outlets”. She knows of “lots of individual testimony underlining the fact that Avon empowers its agents and gives them the strength to do more with their lives”.

Secondly, the Avon Foundation, a philanthropic umbrella organisation founded in 1955 and recognised as the leading provider of corporate philanthropy to women globally, has adopted the dual mission of battling breast cancer and tackling domestic violence directed against women.

Last year, in excess of \$725 million

(€540 million) was channelled into grassroots programmes in more than 50 countries.

Funds raised to fight breast cancer are directed towards improving “awareness and education; screening and diagnosis; access to treatment; support services; and scientific research”. The beneficiaries of the Avon Breast Cancer Crusade worldwide “range from leading cancer research and clinical centres to community-based, non-profit breast health education programmes”.

Avon is the single largest corporate supporter of breast cancer eradication globally. Andrea Jung’s grandmother died from breast cancer and her mother is recovering having been diagnosed in 2007, so she is fully committed to this issue.

The Avon Breast Cancer Crusade was launched in Ireland in 1998 and has raised close to €1 million to date. According to Allyson Russell, “the way we raise money is two-fold. We sell specific products via the Avon brochure and donate the money raised to the cause. We also encourage representatives and business developers to engage in their own fundraising events.”

One significant aspect of this is participation in the women’s mini marathon. “We have a stand and hand out goodie bags to people running for Avon . . . and anyone else,” she says.

Judith Wojtowicz, public relations officer of Avon Ireland, confirms that “each country selects its own charity partner. Our primary and long-term partner is ARC Cancer Support.”

Avon funds two specialist breast cancer nurse counsellors. Wojtowicz elaborates: “We have funded Pat Hargadon, who is based in ARC Cancer Support house in Eccles Street in Dublin since 1998 and, more recently, Fiona Moriarty in ARC Cork since 2006.”

These nurses provide invaluable practical advice and emotional support to women from diagnosis through treatment, recovery and aftercare. They also run vital workshops and sessions for the partners, husbands and families of patients.

Avon also funds Europa Donna Ireland, an organisation campaigning to ensure that women have access to the same high standards of care regardless of where they live.

Allyson Russell stresses how important it is that the Irish company operates autonomously from the overall Avon Foundation in order to focus on local issues and meet local needs. This is true also of the “second philanthropic strand that was launched worldwide in 2004 and extended to Ireland in 2008”.

The Avon Foundation launched its *Speak Out Against Domestic Violence* campaign to raise awareness and funds; and to advocate for the more effective implementation of legislation aimed at curbing violence towards

women. Last year, Avon awarded more than \$12 million (€8.9 million) globally to domestic violence organisations. Here in Ireland, Avon works closely with primary partner Women's Aid and is funding the development of that organisation's website.

"The difference their work has made to some women is unbelievable," Russell says, adding that Avon is well placed to spread the message that domestic violence should not remain hidden as representatives work at a very local level within their communities.

Despite the astonishing global reach of Avon, Judith Wojtowicz stresses that the company remains true to the principles and values of its founder David McConnell.

"He believed that we owe something to society and must behave responsibly. This notion of corporate responsibility that is so topical now has always been the ethos of the Avon company," she says.

When McConnell employed the redoubtable Mrs PF Albee as his first sales representative back in 1886, he was keen that she should play an active and compassionate role in her local community. The same is expected of, and indeed demonstrated by, Avon representatives operating today.

Next year marks Avon's 125th anniversary. A series of activities are planned to mark the occasion including Avon Voices, a global online singing and songwriting competition, launching in December.

There's a lot more to this admirable company than mere lipstick, powder and paint.

ELEANOR FITZSIMONS

“ [The founder] believed that we owe something to society and must behave responsibly. This notion of corporate responsibility that is so topical now has always been the ethos of the Avon company

POWERFUL GRAPHICS HELP REALISE THE ENORMITY OF LIVING WITH SOMEONE WHO ABUSES YOU

More than 400 posters highlighting the issue of violence against women, curated by former garda Colm Dempsey, are on show at The Light House Cinema in Smithfield, Dublin. The exhibition is part of Women's Aid "One in Five Women" 16 Days Campaign, which runs until December 10th.

Director of Women's Aid, Margaret Martin, says the exhibition highlights the facts that "every day, every hour, every minute and every second, somewhere in the world, women – irrespective of race, colour or religion – are being subjected to violence and abuse".

"In an era when we are overloaded with images, words and sounds, the powerful graphics in these posters can help us realise the enormity of living with someone who abuses you. For women who are experiencing abuse, they also reach out to show that help is available and they are not alone, that support is available."

The free exhibition is open to the public and runs daily from 2pm-8pm. The Women's Aid national freephone helpline is at 1800-341900. womensaid.ie

– Anthea McTeirnan



Left, Allyson Russell, Avon country manager for Ireland.



Every year, the millions who suffer the pain of political persecution
- a denial of their basic rights - are persecuted, denied freedom
to ignore their crime. Help us to stop violence against women. Give your
support at www.amnesty.ie



A close-up portrait of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and lips. She has long, wavy brown hair. Her eye makeup is dramatic, with dark, smoky eyeshadow and long, dark eyelashes. Her eyes are a striking blue color. She has a small mole on her left cheek. Her lips are painted with a soft, pink lipstick. The background is a plain, light color.

ONE
THING
AVON
DOESN'T
WANT
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COVER UP
WITH
MAKE-UP