

BUSINESS DAY

Under Pressure, Feminine Product Makers Disclose Ingredients

By RACHEL ABRAMS OCT. 26, 2015

Dressed as a box of Tampax tampons, Stephanie Phillips, a 30-year-old vegan chef, danced on the sidewalk outside Procter & Gamble's headquarters in Cincinnati.

Ms. Phillips and a small group of demonstrators were protesting the company's use of chemicals in its feminine care products, much to the chagrin of the investors who were filing into the annual shareholder meeting.

"I think it's really messed up that Procter & Gamble's putting chemicals in feminine products and not letting anyone know about it," Ms. Phillips said.

Consumer products companies may have been able to ignore these kinds of displays in the not-so-distant past. Now, however, health advocates can use social media platforms and other tools to galvanize public support — not just from demonstrators like Ms. Phillips, but from customers who can boycott a company's products.

The increased pressure to respond to public concern has yielded some results.

Within the last few weeks, P.&G. and its rival Kimberly-Clark, the maker of Kotex pads and tampons, began posting online the ingredients in their feminine hygiene products. While both companies list tampon ingredients on their packages, neither lists the ingredients for their pads on the packaging. P.&G. expanded the information it offered about the inclusion of synthetic materials, while Kimberly-Clark disclosed ingredients in its tampon applicators.

P.&G. also agreed to meet with Women's Voices for the Earth after the group's protest outside the shareholder meeting on Oct. 13.

The group had come armed with more than just costumes and banners: 35,000 people had signed a petition demanding that P.&G. disclose feminine care ingredients and remove certain chemicals. The group had also created a spoof video as part of its campaign that has garnered more than 60,000 views online, according to its executive director, Erin Switalski.

"We had been trying to get a meeting with the company for a couple of years and they hadn't been responding to our requests," Ms. Switalski said. "If we aren't able to get a dialogue, then we have to use some of these public pressure tactics to get these meetings to take place."

Blogs, Facebook and Twitter have helped advocates like Ms. Switalski spread the word about their concerns. But manufacturers often grumble that public criticism of individual ingredients is not always justified, and forces them to make costly and time-consuming changes.

P.&G. and Kimberly-Clark say that their products are safe, and undergo rigorous scientific testing before they reach store shelves. And both companies say that transparency is a priority.

"Everything we do starts with the consumer," a P.&G. spokesman, Damon Jones, said in an email. "It's a balancing act — sharing enough to be helpful, but not too much that it is confusing."

P.&G. and Kimberly-Clark together account for the largest share of the more than \$3 billion worth of tampons, panty liners and feminine wipes sold in North America last year, according to data from Euromonitor, a market research firm.

While toxic shock syndrome is the best-known illness associated with tampons, advocates like Ms. Switalski are now more concerned with chemicals linked to cancer and allergies. Manufacturers have largely moved away from the ingredients linked to toxic shock syndrome since so-called superabsorbent products created a public health concern in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Food and Drug Administration still receives reports of illness relating to tampons, but says that instances of toxic shock syndrome are “rare.”

Some experts, like Dr. Philip M. Tierno, a professor of microbiology and pathology at New York University School of Medicine, argue that cotton tampons are preferable to those that use viscose rayon in the core. “Rayon” and “rayon fibers” are listed among the ingredients in some products on P.&G. and Kimberly-Clark’s websites.

“Even though viscose was the least of the bad superabsorbent ingredients, it’s still significant to some people,” he said. About four years ago, Dr. Tierno said he testified against a manufacturer in court in the case of a woman who lost all of her limbs because of toxic shock syndrome.

On its website, the F.D.A. says that “tampons made with rayon do not appear to have a higher risk of T.S.S. than cotton tampons of similar absorbency.”

But while the agency monitors certain chemicals linked to toxic shock syndrome and other ingredients, health advocates say that more oversight is needed, in part because companies are not required to disclose all the components that go into their raw materials.

Fragrances can be particularly problematic for consumers seeking more detailed information about their personal care products. Many personal care products companies simply list “fragrance” as an ingredient. (P.&G. describes it as “like those found in other women’s products.”)

Fragrances, however, can be made up of dozens of undisclosed chemicals that worry consumer advocates. Women’s Voices for the Earth says it found chemicals including styrene and chloroform in several of P.&G.’s feminine napkins.

Mr. Jones, the P.&G. spokesman, said the company disputed the group’s testing methodology, and he said that many of the chemicals listed in the report were commonly found in the environment.

Manufacturers say that their use of chemicals always falls well within safe exposure limits. But Ms. Switalski and others say that certain chemicals should not

be included in products at all.

Complicating matters is the fact that companies often source fragrances from third-party suppliers, who guard their formulations closely.

Still, some companies have gone further than others: In June, SC Johnson, the maker of Glade, disclosed some of the most common fragrance ingredients used in more than 200 of its air fresheners, candles and scented oils.

“The new disclosures from Procter & Gamble and Kimberly-Clark are a step in the right direction, and show that the concerns expressed by millions of women are being heard,” Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, a Democrat from New York, said in a statement. “But these disclosures are still very limited.”

For more than a decade, Ms. Maloney has pushed Congress to approve further research on feminine hygiene products. This year, she reintroduced a version of the same bill she introduced in 1997, that would direct the National Institutes of Health to study ingredients in tampons and other products.

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