Clearblue Pregnancy Tests:

Using Cultural Innovation in Technology-Driven Categories

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Cultural strategy can unearth significant opportunities in categories that have been dominated by technological innovation. Companies doing business in such categories tend to act just as the better-mousetraps model recommends: they constantly push for the next big technological breakthrough that will create novel functionality in order to provide their brand with a substantial
advantage over competitors. The problem is that breakthrough technologies are hard to come by, and, when a technology is introduced that really improves performance on an important category benefit, it is quickly copied by competitors. So, while incumbents imagine themselves to be innovation focused, in reality brand competition in these categories is dominated by benefits slugfests. Competing brands duel it out in red oceans using mindshare branding, often commodifying the category in the process. Many packaged goods categories unfold in this fashion. These categories are dominated by big marketing companies (what we will come to term brand bureaucracies in Part Three)—such as Procter & Gamble, Pfizer, L’Oréal, and Henkel—that are dedicated to technological innovation and swear by the mindshare marketing model.

Technology-driven categories offer excellent opportunities for cultural strategy, for two reasons. Because incumbents are so focused on developing new product technologies, they are usually blind to the social and cultural value that the brand is capable of delivering. That blindness creates opportunities for a brand to outflank the benefits battle with an innovative cultural expression. In addition, developing a cultural innovation is an effective tool to forge a durable claim to an innovative technology. When companies compete using the same bland mindshare approach to make technological claims, consumers rarely pay attention. Despite huge marketing expenditures, none of the brands owns the innovation from the consumer’s perspective. Cultural innovation makes technological claims much more sticky and persuasive, as we demonstrate in this case.
Pregnancy tests provide a constructive example. Since its inception, category competition has been structured around four technological innovations: a new immunoassay isolated the presence of the pregnancy hormone (hCG) in urine, without cross-reaction from other hormones, allowed for accurate home testing; a new paper strip coated with monoclonal antibodies led to simplified, one-step, testing, and spared women from the messy chore of trying to pee into a cup and then trying to mix her urine into a test tube; more sensitive hCG detectors enabled testing earlier after a missed period; and, most recently, digital readouts made test results much easier for women to interpret. Each time, the innovator brand enjoyed a short period during which it led the market with a demonstrably better value proposition. But competitors, including store brands, quickly mimicked the innovation, and the category soon returned to conventional mindshare competition, in which brands competed by exaggerating slight differences in product benefits.

For decades, the major pregnancy test brands tried to convince consumers that their product was superior in delivering one or more of three benefits: “accurate,” “early,” “easy.” In the summer of 2003, Clearblue launched the first digital readout for its test—a major technological innovation that made the test much easier to use than the prior analog versions. The breakthrough lasted four months. Then e.p.t., Clearblue’s top competitor, launched its own digital test, and within a year the private labels followed suit. So the category quickly returned to benefits-as-usual mindshare warfare: accurate, early, easy.
Given the dominance of mindshare marketing, we were not surprised when our research told us that women treated pregnancy tests as a low involvement purchase. From a cultural perspective, however, pregnancy tests are anything but boring. They are intimately related to woman’s efforts to reproduce, or to keep from reproducing. One would be hard pressed to find a more culturally charged topic. We soon discovered a major ideological opportunity that incumbents had missed because they were so focused on technological advances. We restaged Clearblue as champion of body-positive feminist ideology, and the immediate result was huge sales gains, gains of the sort that are rarely seen in packaged goods.

**Benefits Slugfest Creates Red Ocean**

In the early 1970s, research sponsored by the National Institutes of Health led to the development of the home pregnancy test—a paper strip coated with antiserum that identified the presence of the “pregnancy hormone” human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) in urine. In 1978, four home pregnancy test brands were launched in the American market, allowing women to test before or instead of visiting a doctor. The tests were virtually identical: they used the same technology and performed to the same 99 percent level of accuracy. Despite the product parity, these brands tried to convince consumers that they were different, each making benefit claims in an attempt to outmaneuver the other brands.¹

- Warner-Chilcott’s e.p.t. (a.k.a. Early Pregnancy Test) claimed in its brand name the benefit of early knowledge, while its advertising touted the product’s accuracy (“its high accuracy rate has been verified here in
America by doctors”) and ease of use (“that means you can confidently do this easy pregnancy test yourself”). An end line summarized things by cramming in all three benefits together: “At last early knowledge of pregnancy belongs easily and accurately to us all.”

• A second brand, ACU-TEST, claimed accuracy in its brand name, while its advertising claimed early knowledge of result (“the sooner you know you’re pregnant, the sooner you can take proper care of yourself”), and its ease of use (“simple urine test that requires no internal examination”). To personalize the message, ACU-TEST added an image of a woman biting her fingernail and looking pensively off-camera, playing up the drama of the wait for results.

• Ads for the ANSWER claimed earliness and accuracy, but focused on the “confidence” that comes from its results.

• Predictor, the fourth brand, pursued a “best of all benefits” strategy, proclaiming to be the most proven (“the only test used in 3000 hospitals and nine million laboratory tests”), the most accurate (“tests confirmed a 98.9% accuracy”), easy (“as easy as A.B.C.”), safe (“only a urine specimen is required”), and early (“early detection is important”).

When one brand introduced a technological advance, competitors quickly copied it, and used the new technology as additional ammunition in the ongoing benefits war. With the new digital technology, all of the brands promoted that their digital product delivered some combination of accurate, early, easy, and (now) clear. Some branding also sought to add “emotional benefits” by dramatizing the wait in a vein similar to ACU-TEST’s nail-biting ad.
Companies wanted to convey “confidence” as well, and all did so using the same cultural codes in their branding: alluding to doctors’ expertise, clinical testing, or a technological advance.

When the management of Clearblue came to us in 2006, sales were a distant third place in the USA. While Clearblue was the number-one brand in most European markets, it was rapidly losing share to private labels. Recent brand communications had focused on the benefit of “clarity.” Clearblue’s ads sought to elicit emotion through the conventional nail-biting imagery. It used the director David Lynch to ratchet up suspense, and it claimed that “When you’re waiting to find out if you’re pregnant or not, nothing else matters in the world... only Clearblue gives you a clear yes or no in one minute.” Other ads relied on metaphors to dramatize clarity. For instance, Clearblue’s unambiguous results were compared to clear car directions and unambiguous furniture building directions. In another spot, a man gives increasingly confusing directions to a woman traveler, until the ad helpfully explains how clarity is a good thing, especially when it comes to pregnancy tests.

Fortunately for us, Clearblue was at the time owned by Inverness Medical Innovations, a small, entrepreneurial, healthcare-products company that had purchased the business from Unilever in 2001. As a result, Clearblue’s management team was much leaner and more independent in its thinking than the typical brand bureaucracy. The global marketing and innovation team consisted of three women, all of whom had little patience or temperament for brand bureaucratic logic. In their first meeting with us, they projected the word
vagina on a PowerPoint screen, explaining that they were a women’s health company, and if we were to work with them, then we would have to get used to using the word in business meetings. In their brief to us, they stressed that the most important part of the assignment would be to move beyond the benefits game. They knew that the slugfest had commoditized the category, leading consumers to believe that all of the tests were pretty much the same. Private labels had replicated category benefit claims on their lower-priced packages and, as a result, reaped a 33 percent share of the market.

By 2006, they had become utterly frustrated by the branding process that they had inherited from Unilever. It had been lengthy and expensive: first a segmentation study, followed by idea-generation sessions let by management consultants, then months of concept testing and concept optimization, and, finally, the reduction of all key findings into the eight text boxes of a brand strategy diagram, in a shape they called the “brand key.” The process was similar to the standard brand strategy process used by all of the blue-chip consumer marketing companies, as we describe in our analysis of the brand bureaucracy in Chapter 13. With headings like “benefits,” “reasons to believe,” and “consumer discriminator,” the brand key’s text boxes ensured that managers built the strategy around category benefits. Like the brand houses, brand pyramids, and brand onions used by other elite brand bureaucracies, the brand key forced managers to distill all component benefits and insights into an abstract “essence” located in a privileged text box—in this case, the keyhole at the center of the diagram.
After conducting an elaborate survey, listening to numerous focus groups, testing a variety of concepts, optimizing a final concept, and diligently filling in the brand key, the Clearblue team had ended up with a brief singling out early knowledge of result ("test 5 days sooner"), accuracy ("over 99% digital accuracy"), ease of use ("one step," "easy to grip"), and clarity ("easy to read the results"). The elaborate process had led them to replicate the laundry list of category benefits used by all competitors for the previous twenty-five years! This was precisely the type of strategy they had hoped to avoid: "the best of all benefits." The consumer insight was said to be, "I feel nervous and I need to know right now if I am pregnant or not," the old nail-biting story. The brand essence distilled all this into the emotional benefit of "confidence," just what other pregnancy tests had been championing for decades. Rather than uncovering an opportunity to innovate, the process had led Clearblue back into the red ocean of the benefits slugfest.

Clearblue's managers were intrigued by the possibility that our cultural strategy model could uncover opportunities for innovative branding, and sidestep the processes that continually forced them toward category clichés. They challenged us to use our framework to develop an innovative concept for Clearblue. So we started by conducting cultural research that would reveal the best ideological opportunity for the brand to leapfrog the category’s cultural orthodoxy.
Cultural Orthodoxy: Patriarchal Medicine

We first mapped the category’s cultural orthodoxy, which had served as the tacit foundation for twenty-five years of benefits wars. We discovered that the two leading pregnancy test brands, e.p.t. and First Response, consistently relied upon the rhetoric of what we termed patriarchal medicine.

Their branding addressed women in a superior and condescending voice, leaning on pseudo-scientific language. The ads portrayed the idealized customers of pregnancy tests as prim-and-proper mothers of the Leave it to Beaver era. The branding implied that these women were embarrassed by talking about their bodies and bodily functions in public. Reproductive health is an indelicate subject that should remain private, and so public forums like an ad must revert to polite ‘ladylike’ euphemisms.

One e.p.t. ad featured a woman waiting nervously to check the results of her pregnancy test. Her husband sits next to her and comments in a somewhat patronizing tone. In one version, he says, “Better luck next time.” In another, he simply shrugs when the test proves negative. The men and women all looked as though they came straight out of Family Circle or Good Housekeeping. The ads seem purposefully to avoid any hint that the need for the product is a direct consequence of having sex. Rather, the ads present the “good” woman’s desire to get pregnant and realize her dreams of family with her husband, projecting
1950s-era ideals of stable motherhood and nuclear family. e.p.t. women typically tear up with happiness when they discover they are pregnant, or stiffen with anxiety when they discover they are not. The idea that the tests would be used to avoid pregnancy, their predominant use, is studiously ignored.

Similarly, the First Response advertising relied upon narrators speaking in the voice of “doctor knows best.” Announcers, often wearing lab coats, speak with medical authority: “Imagine! Knowing you’re pregnant the moment it happens. Science is getting close!” The message is driven home with graphics that evoke a similar pseudo-scientific aura, albeit pinked-up. In one, a dot labeled with the word pregnant appears on a Cartesian plane. A line then travels to a second dot that is labeled “pregnancy hormone variant.” We then see the profile of a woman silhouetted against a rising line-graph, this time the line connects from the woman’s vagina to a bar that reads ‘Missed Period.’ The movement of the line on the graph is punctuated by vibraphonic chimes and other sound effects that would not be out of place in a documentary about the wonders of science.
Both brands unknowingly championed the ideology of *patriarchal medicine*: women are passive and married. Their primary role is procreation. Only male professionals ordained by the medical profession have the proper expertise to make health decisions about women’s bodies. So women are expected to defer control of their bodies and responsibility for their health to the mostly male medical establishment. These bodily issues are to be kept private and treated in a clinical manner, free of any taint of sexuality.

**Source Material: Body-Positive Feminism**

Next in our research we looked for a subculture that has effectively challenged the patriarchal medicine ideology. We also examined whether the subculture had been picked up by the mass media and turned into a media myth. We found that a powerful movement that had long challenged patriarchal medicine, and that its alternative gender ideology had recently bled into popular culture and become very influential amongst our target of 16–40-year-old women. The research involved the examination of academic research on feminist social movements that have challenged patriarchal medicine, a discourse analysis of the third-wave feminist subculture, and a discourse analysis of mass media that have drawn upon this movement.

**Second-Wave Feminism’s Alternative Health Movement**

Patriarchal medicine was first challenged in the United States by a book published in 1971 by the Boston Women’s Collective called *Our Bodies Ourselves*. The book urged women to take control of their bodies and their health, and advocated complete openness and honesty when it came to talking
about women’s sexual health and reproductive issues. The book was hugely influential in the feminist movement of the era, often referred to as the second wave.

This health movement was part of a broader “personal is political” call to reclaim women’s bodies from the dominant misogynist patriarchal ideology found throughout society. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin’s crusade against pornography is indicative of how second-wave feminists often dealt with issues of sexuality. Wherever patriarchal relations were promulgated, such as in the objectification of women in pornography, second-wavers made stark criticisms and sought out institutional change. They raised these issues in the courtrooms and in the universities, launching a new women’s studies curriculum.

The Third Wave’s Body-Positive Feminism

Beginning in the early 1990s, a “third-wave” feminist ideology began to emerge in younger women’s subcultures, distinguished from the second wave primarily around issues of sexuality. Rather than taking women’s bodies out of the bedroom and making them political objects in the classroom and courts, third-wavers found it much more empowering to reclaim sexuality. Third-wave feminism directly challenged the second wave’s approach to heterosexuality. Instead of seeking to isolate women from men’s imposition of sexual relationships, the third wave celebrated sexuality as a means of female empowerment. For women to overcome patriarchal oppression, then they must be able to enjoy their sexuality freely rather than build a wall around it.
Third-wave feminists called out the label “slut” as a double standard: why should women be disparaged for being promiscuous if men were applauded for it? Behaviors and speech that were traditionally thought unladylike or unfeminine were suddenly embraced as empowering—from sexual aggressiveness to locker room-style lewdness. Women began to take pride in using the same openness in discussing their bodily functions, genitalia, sexual desires, and sexual conquests as had been accorded to men.

Further, the third wave rejected as dictatorial their predecessors’ orthodox ideas of what it meant to be a feminist. Instead, they encouraged women to make use of whatever identities empowered their own sexuality and confidence in rebutting patriarchal incursions—whether girly girl or bitch or sex symbol or tomboy or stripper or sweetheart or lipstick lesbian. Many of these identities were taboo to the women’s lib generation, but third-wave feminism was all about shattering taboos.

The emergence of this ideology was driven by a generational shift. The women who identified with third-wave feminism tended to be the children of baby boomers. Unlike their baby-boom parents, whose generation fought tough political battles for basic rights, many third-wavers grew up believing that institutional equality had been for the most part achieved. Third-wavers were part of a generation in which women were better represented in elite schools of medicine and law than were men. This younger generation waited longer and longer before getting married and increasingly chose to pursue competitive
careers. Being more media savvy than their parents, they enjoyed a playful relationship with popular culture, often taking ironic pleasure in female stereotypes in the media, ranging from Paris Hilton to America’s Next Top Model. They preferred to approach gender issues with a sense of humor, eschewing what they saw as the humorless feminism of their parents’ generation.

This body-positive feminism was promoted by several influential subcultural magazines and websites. Bust, the “magazine for women with something to get off their chests,” advertised itself as “the Voice of the New Girl Order,” and, with its sections on careers, pop culture, and sex files—including sex toys and porn guides—offered an edgy alternative to the likes of Cosmopolitan and Vogue. The magazine spoke with extreme openness about sexuality and reproductive issues and took on an emphatically anti-prudish tone. The magazine ran an online shop called the Boobtique. Bitch, published out of Portland, Oregon (the home of third wave’s riot girrrl subculture), described itself as “a feminist response to pop culture” and provided a third-wave commentary on everything from fashion to music to sex to the color pink. The magazine celebrated the likes of burlesque and lesbian sex scenes in films. It offered the
view that pornography could be empowering to female actors. Some of the
magazine’s more popular articles include Jennifer Maher’s “Hot for Teacher” on
the “erotics of pedagogy,” Julia Scheeres’s “Vulva Goldmine” on the new culture
of vaginal reconstruction, and Lee Shoemaker’s “Standing Up to Pee” on gender
“urinalysis.”

The website Nerve.com attracted hundreds of thousands of young professional
women through its mixture of erotica, graphically sexual photos, daring

Internet dating, and notable literary

contributors such as Naomi Wolf,

Joyce Carol Oates, and Norman Mailer.

The site described itself as “a smart,
honest magazine on sex, with
cuntsure (and cocksure) prose and

fiction” and encouraged its members to go out and have sexual encounters.

**Ideological Opportunity**

Finally, we conducted identity interviews with a group of women who were
representative of the most opportune target for Clearblue: 16–40-year-olds in
professional and managerial jobs. We learned that, while few of them were
activists in the feminist movement, many had come to embrace the third-wave
ideology when it came to being open about their own bodies, celebrating
sexuality, and pursuing femininity in whatever identity fit best. They very
much embraced the body empowerment message of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, but
were much less comfortable with second-wave feminism’s take on sexuality.
Growing up in an age of sexual frankness and promiscuity, second-wave views came across to many women as strident and even prudish.

We found triangulating evidence that the third-wave ideology had permeated some segments of the mass media. A small off-Broadway play called *The Vagina Monologues* opened in 1996. The play comprises a series of monologues, each of which relates somehow to the vagina, whether through sex, menstruation, masturbation, pregnancy, or tools used by OB/GYNs. The play sought provocatively to dramatize that the female body and women’s reproductive health are nothing to be ashamed of and should be talked about freely and forthrightly without stigma. It treaded exactly upon the second-wave versus third-wave fault line, championing the latter. As a result, it quickly garnered a cult following and in the early 2000s grew to become a national and then international cultural phenomenon. The play was performed by Whoopi Goldberg at Madison Square Garden and televised on HBO. Numerous touring companies performed the play worldwide in more than 120 countries. We learned that the play continued to be extremely popular in our key markets, especially the United Kingdom, where it was in constant rotation across more than fifty cities.
The most powerful popular expression of body-positive feminism was the television show *Sex and the City*. The show put forth a provocative model of womanhood that women in Europe and the USA had never before experienced on the television screen. Arguably, it was the single most influential work of mass culture that shaped feminine ideals for the post-baby-boomer generation of women. The show dramatized the everyday lives of four women in their mid-thirties living professional lives in New York City. These women openly pursued and took pride in their sexual adventures, and frankly discussed such issues as sexually transmitted diseases, birth control, promiscuity, “fuck buddies,” erectile dysfunction, and gynecological disorders. The show was venerated for its candid discussions about sex and womanhood. Young professional women emulated the four friends on the show in the way they dressed, spoke, and socialized with one another, while members of the religious right skewered the show for its lewdness and impropriety.

Launched in 1998, the show evolved from an HBO hit in the USA to become an international phenomenon. Channel 4 in the UK picked it up in 1999, and soon
the show was syndicated around the world, from Germany to South Korea to Brazil. The DVD box set became a best-seller, and Sex and the City: The Movie was an international hit, the top-grossing romantic comedy of all time.

We also found a number of innovative commercial endeavors that were responding to the growing demand for body-positive feminism. For instance, national gym franchises in the USA such as Crunch began to offer striptease classes, where women could trade in their workplace identities as lawyers or public-relations executives for the sexually empowering identity of a stripper.

Our interviews and discourse analysis revealed that, by 2006, when we took over Clearblue branding, body-positive feminism had diffused from the third-wave feminist subcultures to become the dominant gender ideology of our target. The women we studied treated sexuality in a very frank and often sassy and ironic manner that was completely alien to most older women. And body-positive feminism had a direct impact on how these women pursued motherhood, and how they avoided it, and what they expected for reproductive health. Like the feminists of the era of Our Bodies, Ourselves, they insisted upon having complete charge over their bodies; but they had their own expectations about how their bodies were to be talked about in public discourse. Bodily pleasures and problems were now part of everyday life, something to talk about, laugh about, deal with, never to hide.

We viewed this generational embrace of body-positive feminism as a substantial ideological opportunity for Clearblue. For simple biological reasons,
this younger generation of women were the most frequent buyers of pregnancy tests. So the two leading brands in the category, First Response and e.p.t., were upholding an ideology that had become anachronistic, appealing only to older women who each year were becoming less important consumers in the category. Through our analysis, the ideological opportunity became obvious—Clearblue should champion body-positive feminism in women's reproductive health.

**Designing the Cultural Innovation: Using Body-Positive Feminism to Provoke an Ideological Flashpoint**

Clearblue's managers were excited about this opportunity, even though their initial briefing document had prohibited any cultural expressions that might be understood as feminist. Clearblue’s managers shrugged off the breach. They recognized that the issue was semantic. As one of them put it, "That brief was talking about angry, hairy armpit feminism." They urged us to write up the strategy in a way that the rest of their organization would understand. So we created a manifesto that included:

*Clearblue champions a body-positive feminist view of reproduction and women’s health.* Clearblue celebrates women’s bodies. We are not embarrassed by them. We see reproductive health as playful and fun, not “sinful” or “unladylike.” We talk about reproductive issues directly; we have no secrets and we do not hide behind euphemistic language. We view gender issues with humor, not with earnestness. We see women who are dealing with reproduction issues as strong and empowered, not
deferential to men or nervously awaiting test results. We celebrate what’s natural, we don’t hide it. We will have fun pointing out patriarchal medicine’s double standards in its treatment of women’s sexuality and sexual health. We will be reflexive and ironic about the taboos around women’s bodies.

After writing this manifesto, we began work on how to bring this ideology to life in as provocative a way as possible. What myth should we dramatize? What cultural codes should we repurpose? The challenge was that we were branding a category few women paid attention to. We also had a very small media budget. So we had little margin for error in designing cultural expressions that would resonate with our target. We had to incorporate just the right body-positive feminist codes in just the right way to provide our target with the knowing wink that told them that we shared their views. All in 30 seconds, or on an 8½ x 11 piece of paper.

This situation was a natural for applying our “provoking an ideological flashpoint” tactic, which we had developed through our analysis of Ben & Jerry’s (in Chapter 4 of the book). The body-positive feminist ideology was still highly contested in both European and American society. Flashpoints abounded. And, if we hit the right flashpoint with provocative creative, we could get our target enthused even with a minimal media spend. We researched what was the most contentious issue championed by body-positive feminism? We first identified the overt blunt talk of sexuality, but sexualized chatter had
become widespread in the social media age and so was quickly losing its edge and feminist meaning.

We moved on to consider celebrating frank public conversation about women’s bodily functions. Because other women’s health companies were so prudish when it came to portraying bodily functions, often using abstract blue fluids to represent urine, or pouring beakers to represent urination, we recognized that puncturing this taboo would be particularly provocative. And this flashpoint was equally contentious in both the USA and Europe, our two key markets. Also, this cultural strategy fit organically with how Clearblue products were actually used. As Clearblue’s managers were fond of pointing out, we were in the business of marketing “pee-sticks.” For a pregnancy test to indicate if you are pregnant, you have to pee on it.

**Pregnancy Test: Pee Ship**

Our first assignment was to brand the digital technology on the Clearblue pregnancy test. While all competitors including the retailer brands offered digital technology, their mindshare branding had been so perfunctory that many women had not paid attention. So, despite that this innovation had been on the market for several years, we felt there was an opportunity to establish Clearblue as the leader in digital pregnancy testing by using cultural strategy. To mock our competitors’ patriarchal medicine ideology, we made a film that bluntly and dramatically visualized what women do when they check to see if they are pregnant. Because we wanted to announce in as loudly and proudly a way as possible that women’s bodily functions are nothing to be ashamed of,
we decided to give our lead television spot an anthemic quality. We set the spot in outer space, with a dramatic build-up using a soundtrack and visual of an enormous approaching “spaceship” that paid homage to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

A baritone-voiced narrator speaks with more than a little hyperbole to heighten the satire of the category’s scientific ads: “It has arrived... the next generation of pregnancy test. Its design... breathtakingly simple. Its circuitry... incredibly accurate.” The soundtrack hisses theatrically as the pregnancy test’s cap begins to float away, as though disengaging from a docking station.

The narrator continues, speaking slowly, loudly, and emphatically: “It is without a doubt the most sophisticated piece of technology...”. And now, just as the ad is about to climax, a clear fluid pours down from the top of the frame, descending toward the tip of the pregnancy test. The narrator finishes: “... that you will ever pee on. Introducing the Clearblue digital pregnancy test. It’s so advanced, it’s easy.”

The unexpected stream of pee splashing all over the digital pregnancy test powerfully expressed, as words could never do, that Clearblue championed body-positive feminism over the antiquated patriarchal medical view of women’s reproduction. In thirty seconds, we made the category leaders e.p.t. and First Response seem antiquated because they treated women’s bodies with embarrassment and modesty, hiding them behind euphemisms.
Ovulation Test: Innuendo

We also applied the body-positive feminist cultural strategy to restage Clearblue’s secondary product line of ovulation tests. While the pregnancy tests were by far the company’s best-selling product line, the ovulation test represented a major growth opportunity, since Clearblue was the category leader. Clearblue’s managers focused on the US market because Americans, compared to their counterparts in other countries, are not very knowledgeable about reproduction issues. The majority of American women are unaware that they have only a few days every month in which they can conceive. Their odds of getting pregnant are very low during most days of their menstrual cycle, but then go up dramatically during the two days when they ovulate most heavily. Many fertility problems in the USA stem from lack of knowledge about the ovulation cycle.

Not only was knowledge limited; testing for ovulation was highly stigmatized. The dominant discourse in the USA painted ovulation tests as a procreative crutch for women who had physical fertility problems. Women in our research reported being extremely embarrassed about either inquiring into ovulation testing or making purchases in the store. They did not want to talk publicly about ovulation testing, since they felt that it was associated with women who were desperate to get pregnant. The sense of taboo surrounding ovulation
testing made it a perfect fit for our “provoking ideological flashpoints” tactic. We decided Clearblue should work to shatter this taboo, and open up the conversation about ovulation in American culture.

Furthermore, we discovered that there was an interesting sexual angle that allowed us to use the third wave’s take on sexuality in a manner that was fresh and provocative. Because the best way to get pregnant was to have sex as many times as possible during the two high-ovulation days, the product offered an organic opportunity to champion women’s sexual dominance.

For the ovulation tests, we had an even smaller budget than we did with the pregnancy test. So we chose to work with radio and print. The radio creative set an aggressively sexual woman protagonist in direct conflict with an absurdist male voice of prudishness. The radio spot, titled “Sexual Innuendo,” begins with a woman educating the listener on the Clearblue Digital Ovulation Test: “You see, every woman has just a few days each month for conceiving and Clearblue can help you figure out exactly when it’s baby-making time.” Suddenly, her voice shifts into a sexy tone as she repeats “Sweet, sweet, baby-making time.” A soundtrack of slow funk suggestively starts up, playing off of the codes of 1970s pornography.
No sooner has the music started, than it comes to a grinding halt when the prudish male intrudes: “Ahem. I’m worried this is going somewhere dirty.” The woman responds: “What?! I can’t say baby-making in an ovulation ad?! Oh, I’m sorry. Clearblue’s Digital Ovulation Test will tell you when it’s time to . . .” We then hear a loud, sexy, exhaling sound. The prudish male voice interrupts again, “Come on . . . stop that.” The woman responds, “Stop what? That was just a woman lifting a piano.” She continues mischievously, “She’s getting in shape, because she knows in advance her best days for . . .”. We now hear the sound of bedsprings squeaking suggestively. The prudish male voice interrupts, exasperatedly, “Hey! Quit it! That’s offensive.” The woman responds, “What’s so offensive about a border collie prancing on a rusty trampoline?” The man responds, “That doesn’t even make sense for an ovulation ad.” The woman explains, “Of course it does. It makes you smile. Like the smiley face that appears on the Clearblue Digital Ovulation Test to let you know your most fertile days.”

Unconvinced, the prudish male mutters, “I don’t know. Something’s up here.” The woman responds suggestively, “Something is up. And just in time, too!” The prudish male voice protests, “Hey, that’s sexual innuendo!” The woman retorts in conclusion, “I didn’t say it, you did.”

**Results**

Our restaging of Clearblue’s pregnancy test provided a near perfect field experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of our cultural strategy. The digital
pregnancy test had been launched in 2003 with considerable promotion spending to support the rollout. Product sales had quickly leveled out and no additional promotion spending was planned. So the only change in Clearblue marketing was the broadcast of our television advertisement. We could measure weekly sales impact at the chain store level in each market. In the first weeks when the spot aired in the United Kingdom, sales shot up 74 percent, reversing nine months of decline. Weekly sales in Germany shot up 364 percent in the month that our campaign ran, reversing nearly a year of decline. In the United States, in the month following the ad’s launch, sales of Clearblue’s digital pregnancy test increased 80 percent. Clearblue achieved record sales at Wal-Mart—with sales up 53 percent versus the same period in the previous year—despite taking a 9 percent price increase, and following a year and a half of declining sales. Needless to say, it is exceedingly rare for a stand-alone ad campaign to achieve this level of incremental sales in a mature category.

**Conclusion**

We applied our cultural strategy model to make a provocative ideological statement in what had long been a technology-driven category. Competitors had long relied upon mindshare branding to promote product benefits, and so had advanced an increasingly dated ideology without knowing it. We crafted the body-positive feminist strategy using cultural research that cost much less than the traditional research that Clearblue managers had been using, and took only a month to execute. We had only a small budget for research, strategy, and creative development and we had to get it right the first time.
The key in applying cultural strategy to a technology-driven category is to understand that benefits and symbolism are deeply intertwined. One of the most dysfunctional aspects of the mindshare branding model is that it treats the product’s functional aspects and the product’s image and emotional qualities as separate and independent components of the brand’s value. This faulty logic leads to the conclusion that, if the product incorporates a new technology that really enhances functionality, then, to capture the value of this enhancement, the branding should make a direct rational claim to consumers, embedded in creative that provides a nice emotional feel. In the pregnancy test category, this is what the incumbents did for twenty-five years, and the result was to hand the category over to private labels.

Our research has revealed over and over again that this assumption is dead wrong. Innovative cultural expressions work as a prism to reshape consumer perceptions of the product’s features and benefits. This prismatic effect is particularly powerful in establishing the brand’s dominion over a new technology. This is precisely what we were able to accomplish with Clearblue. Because Clearblue persuasively dramatized body-positive feminism, consumers perceived that Clearblue was the digital technology leader, that it was the most reliable pregnancy test available, that it provided earlier results than the others, and that it was easier to use.