

“The whole idea might seem a little strange to you”: Selling the Menstrual Cup

Kelly O'Donnell

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In 1971, Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman were handing out plastic specula for cervical self-exams and presenting their Del-Em menstrual extraction device as a radical menstrual alternative at the Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles.¹ Their story is often cited by historians as an example of women using new technological approaches and coming to new understandings about their bodies during the 1970s.² Less known is the story of the executives meeting across town in Beverly Hills, who at the same time were contemplating the results of the California test marketing for their new Tassaway disposable menstrual cup and expanding sales into a nationwide campaign.³ While small groups of women's liberation activists could have their consciousness raised, their menstrual blood removed, and their cervix shown to them with a mirror in a single sitting at a feminist health workshop, thousands of women

Copyright 2017 Kelly O'Donnell. Dr. Kelly O'Donnell is a historian of women's health with a special interest in consumer culture, activism, and memory studies. She holds a doctorate in History of Science and Medicine from Yale University and teaches at Jefferson University.

¹ See Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 22. For a firsthand account, see Ellen Frankfort, *Vaginal Politics* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972), ix-xvii.

² See, for example, Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

³ John W. Waldron, "The History of Tassaway and the Market for Feminine Hygiene Products," Jan. 15, 1982, in Autumn Stanley Papers, MS 659, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library.

across the country were inserting small plastic cups into their vaginas to collect their menstrual blood in their own bathrooms.

This menstrual cup was a striking departure from other products. It collected blood instead of absorbing it. Stranger still, using the cup required manual manipulation inside the vagina. Much bigger than a tampon, it had to be folded over twice during insertion. An uncooperative cup could be induced to open into a circle again and form a seal against the vaginal walls by maneuvering a finger or two around it. Once in place, it could fill up for half a day or longer, as opposed to tampons, which soaked up blood quickly and required more frequent changes. Removing the cup required further dexterity - a squeeze to break the seal and a careful angling while pulling it out of the vagina. Squeeze too hard and the blood could overflow; tip too far and it might spill, leaving bloodstained hands and tiled floors. Although women were instructed to *toss away* their Tassaways, some did reuse their cups, wiping them clean before reinsertion.⁴ Using a Tassaway was dramatically different from using a tampon, whose cardboard applicator and external string assured minimal direct contact with the vagina. Indeed, this new product required women to confront their bodies and menstrual periods directly with a very hands-on approach.

Tassaway was not a creation of women's health activists, nor was it a feminist response to the feminine hygiene industry. It was not an entirely new invention either – its immediate predecessor, the Tassette, had been sold a decade earlier. The menstrual cup was a corporate invention, advertised and sold to a mainstream American audience. However, the cup's unassuming origin does not change its radical nature. To use Tassaway, women were required to touch their internal genitalia, just as they might have when using a self-exam speculum. And although some women may have already been comfortable with inserting a contraceptive diaphragm, here they would also encounter their unabsorbed menstrual blood. Tassaway was a paradox – a radical alternative, sold as a conventional product.

⁴ For an account of reusing a Tassaway, see Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, 2nd ed., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 140.

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The concept of an internal cup that collects menstrual blood dates back to at least the 1880s, predating the commercialization of tampons.⁵ The story of the modern menstrual cup, however, begins in 1937 – only shortly after the appearance of Tampax, the first commercialized tampon – with a patent owned by Leona Watson Chalmers of Stamford, Connecticut.⁶ Chalmers wrote two books on feminine hygiene and offered her Tass-ette cup as a hygienic ideal in the quest for clean female bodies.

A 1937 advertisement for Tass-ette explains, “It took a woman to ease women’s most trying ordeal.” As in similar, contemporary advertisements for the new tampon, the internal Tass-ette was better than older “bulky devices for sanitary protection” for it used “no belts, no pins, no pads.” Unlike tampons, the cup was reusable and could last

⁵ On the commercialization and advertising of tampons in the 1930s, see Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, 126-130. An 1884 advertisement features several products patented by a Dr. H.G. Farr, including a belted “ladies’ menstrual receptacle,” an early variant of the menstrual cup. See Farr’s Patent ad in *The Medical Bulletin: A Monthly Journal of Medicine and Surgery* vol. 6, 1884, 1. There are many U.S. patents for “catamenial sacks” from the late nineteenth century, several of which look like predecessors to the modern menstrual cup. See George E. Johnston, Catamenial sacks, U.S. Patent 182,024, filed February 15, 1876, and issued September 12, 1876; Hiram G. Farr, Menstrual receptacle, U.S. Patent 300,770, filed September 11, 1883, and issued June 24, 1884; Julius J. Vernier, Catamenial Sack, U.S. Patent 476,963, filed April 7, 1891, and issued February 2, 1892. These early devices, however, connected the internal cup or tube to an external receptacle. Mallalieu and Coke’s 1903 catamenial sack appears to be the first cup-like design, which was to be removed for emptying. See Lee H. Mallalieu and Mildred Coke, Catamenial Sack, U.S. Patent 737,268, filed November 28, 1902, and issued August 25, 1903.

⁶ In the 1930s, the same decade in which tampons were first commercially sold, there appears to have been a rush to patent menstrual cups. In seven years, there were five separate applications for very similar designs. See Lester J. Goddard, Vaginal receptacle, U.S. Patent 1,891,761, filed October 6, 1932, and issued December 20, 1932; Gladys R. Cubbon, Sanitary cup, U.S. Patent 1,986,504, filed April 17, 1933, and issued January 1, 1935; Arthur F. Hagedorn, Catamenial receptacle, U.S. Patent 1,996,242, filed March 11, 1933, and issued April 2, 1935; John Robert Manegold, Catamenial receptacle, U.S. Patent 2,061,384, filed October 30, 1935, and issued November 17, 1936; Leona W. Chalmers, Catamenial appliance, U.S. Patent 2,089,113, filed July 11, 1935, and issued August 3, 1937. Out of these five designs, three appear to have actually been manufactured. Out of those three, just one is more than ephemeral – Leona Chalmers’ Tassette.

“month after month.” By the late 1950s, Chalmers had worked for over twenty years on the development of Tass-ette with very limited success. Women who had abandoned sanitary pads chose tampons as their internal product of choice, not the menstrual cup.⁷

In 1958, however, Chalmers read a notice in the *Wall Street Journal* classifieds section that she hoped would change the fate of the Tass-ette. The advertisement, placed by a newly retired businessman, solicited ideas for a new product for his three sons to develop. When Chalmers called and pitched the menstrual cup concept, the business-savvy family was initially appalled. One son, Robert Oreck, recalled, “Getting involved with such an intimate matter as a woman’s menstruation was really beyond our imagination.” While the brothers and their father were mulling over the idea, Robert’s wife Shirley tried the Tass-ette for herself. According to family lore, she instantly approved and it was primarily on the strength of her evaluation that they acquired the rights to the menstrual cup from Chalmers.⁸ Robert Oreck took the lead, becoming president Tassette, Inc.⁹ It was a family affair, with his brothers and wife on the board and his father providing startup money. But soon, the company was in a financial bind. Its profits were simply too small to cover costs. Tassette abruptly ceased all advertising and manufacturing by 1963.¹⁰ Robert Oreck and his colleagues realized that the product’s reusability gave it a lifespan of many years and there were no repeat sales. The answer to their conundrum became a disposable version of the menstrual cup – the Tassaway. After several years in development, the company moved to Beverly Hills to try again.¹¹

⁷ For more on the gradual acceptance of tampons by women and the medical establishment, see chapter five of Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*.

⁸ Robert Oreck, interview by author, April 13, 2010.

⁹ Harry Finley has described Tassette, Inc. as a “family affair,” pointing out that Robert’s wife Shirley was Tassette’s vice president for education and his brothers David and Marshall were on the board of directors. See <http://www.mum.org/CupTaset.htm>.

¹⁰ Waldron, “The History of Tassaway and the Market for Feminine Hygiene Products.”

¹¹ Ibid.

The reinvigorated Tassette, Inc. began selling its disposable Tassaway cup in California in late 1969. After a year of encouraging test-marketing results, Tassette management agreed that the product was ready for wider distribution.¹² The J Walter Thompson admen they hired were impressed with the Tassaway. Robert Oreck recalled, “They absolutely loved the product. They thought it would sweep the market. They thought it would replace tampons and napkins, and they were crazy about it.”¹³ Upon hearing this optimistic prediction, Tassette officials began developing a manufacturing site in Florida to serve the eastern U.S. market and launched a \$3 million nationwide advertising campaign in 1971, which included full-page ads in major women’s magazines.¹⁴ Tassaway ads appeared in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, *Ms.*, *Ebony* and *McCall’s*, among others.¹⁵ The company also established distribution agreements with many major pharmacies and food chains, including Walgreen’s, Caldor, Sav-on, and Giant.¹⁶ By that spring, Tassaways were sold across the country and by the fall, the company began international marketing.¹⁷ Oreck secured distribution agreements with European manufacturers, who were enthusiastic about the potential of this new product.¹⁸ With the new, disposable cup gaining name recognition in media outlets, the company changed its name to Tassaway, Inc.¹⁹

The Tassaway ads were starting to capture women’s attention. The only pictures featured in them were either of the boxes in which the cups were purchased or the cup

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert Oreck, interview by author, April 13, 2010.

¹⁴ Waldron, “The History of Tassaway and The Market for Feminine Hygiene Products.”

¹⁵ Tassaway advertisements, *McCall’s*, August, 1970; *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1972, 58; *Cosmopolitan*, November, 1971, 118.

¹⁶ Walgreens sponsored Tassaway advertisement, *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1971, A21

Caldor advertisement, *The Hartford Courant*, Oct 15, 1971, 5

Sav-on sponsored Tassaway advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 20, 1972, G12

Giant advertisement, *The Washington Post*, *Times Herald*, Mar 8, 1972, A7.

¹⁷ Philip H. Dougherty, “Campaign for War Prisoners Hits a Snag,” *New York Times*, Oct 8, 1971, 70.

¹⁸ Robert Oreck, interview by author, April 13, 2010.

¹⁹ Waldron, “The History of Tassaway and The Market for Feminine Hygiene Products.”

itself, held between manicured thumb and index finger, and sometimes folded. A contemporary feminist observer commented that Tassaway advertisements were “factual and appeal[ed] to the intelligence.” The author noted approvingly that their sentences and vocabulary were more complex than other products’ advertisements and showed “a respect for women’s minds,” pointing to “a direction in which ads for menstrual products might go.”²⁰ The language used to persuade women to buy was frank and concerned primarily with convenience. Tag lines from these advertisements range from the blunt, “Not a tampon, not a napkin” and “Better than napkins, better than tampons” to the utilitarian “Change only 6 times a period” and “The new menstrual product you change only once or twice a day.”²¹ The Tassaway advertisements took advantage of the product’s strangeness to explain its function and sell its novelty. One advertisement proposes gently, “It’s so new and different that the whole idea might seem a little strange to you. But if it works better than what you’ve been using all these years, and we give you your money back if you don’t think it does, isn’t it worth a try?”²² Some ads offered women a free refund by mail for their first pack.²³ Tassaway even attempted to advertise on television, running some of the very first feminine hygiene commercials in 1971 during daytime women’s programs and late-night movies.

Women reading the May 1971 issue of *Cosmopolitan* might have noticed the Tassaway advertisement on page 114, immediately above the scoring guide for a memory quiz.²⁴ It proclaimed, “Introducing the first menstrual product that doesn’t absorb anything.” This advertisement contained the typically straightforward Tassaway language and displayed the cup, folded and unfolded, along with its packaging. The pictures were black and white here, but on the shelves of a local supermarket the real-life Tassaway box was a cheery bright yellow. Women could purchase an 8-pack box of

²⁰ Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 133.

²¹ Tassaway advertisements, *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1970, N48; *Cosmopolitan*, May 1971, 239; *Cosmopolitan*, October 1971, 140; *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1971, I14.

²² Tassaway advertisement, *Cosmopolitan*, July 1971, 92.

²³ Tassaway advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1970, D13.

²⁴ Tassaway advertisement, *Cosmopolitan*, May 1971, 114.

Tassaways for just over a dollar, depending on the individual store's pricing. Sitting nearby, a 40-count box of Tampax would have sold for approximately \$2.00. Although this option offered more product per dollar, the box of Tassaways promised "a new way of life."²⁵

The instructions inside the box went to great lengths to convey the message that using a Tassaway was not at all like using a tampon. In particular, "Insertion and removal require[d] learning new techniques." These techniques were so new that the company strongly encouraged users to "read the instructions carefully and become familiar with Tassaway *in advance* of your period." The manual was equally attentive to the pitfalls of both insertion and removal. Amid instructions to fold the cup in a particular way, the manual directed users to reconsider the positioning of internal products inside the vagina. It explained: "Tampon users are accustomed to inserting the entire tampon past the muscle at the vaginal entrance – THIS IS WRONG WITH TASSAWAY." Once the cup was inserted and positioned correctly, its removal hours later could prove just as challenging. Although the Tassaway had a tab at its end to help guide women, it was not analogous to a tampon string. It served primarily as a grip for women to keep a slippery cup level while removing it, not as a pulling device. The instructions noted, "First you must release the light vacuum that forms the leak-proof Tassaway seal. So, *do not pull Tassaway straight out.*" As the instructions claimed and women discovered, this experience was nothing like using a tampon.²⁶

Successful use of a Tassaway clearly required a thorough reading of the instructions and a willingness to modify behaviors that may have come as second-nature to tampon users. Some women were successful; others were not. While one woman could find it "very comfortable and user friendly," another found it to be "a

²⁵ Tassaway advertisements, *Hartford Courant*, October 15, 1971, 5; *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1970, A31. In May, 1971, a box of 40 Tampax tampons sold for a regular price of \$1.93. See advertisement for Shop-Rite drug store, *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1971, WS5; Tassaway box, Tassaway account files, folder 2, Food and Drug Administration Archives, Rockville, Maryland.

²⁶ Tassaway instruction manual, Tassaway account files, folder 2, Food and Drug Administration Archives, Rockville, Maryland.

disaster! Not once was I ever able to insert this thing correctly.”²⁷ Some women wrote angry letters of complaint to the company about their difficulties in using Tassaway. The authors of these letters describe an inability to remove the cup, but it is clear from their retellings that they had attempted to do so incorrectly. They mention the pain experienced when they attempted to pull the cup out by its tab. In several instances, the tab broke and the women panicked, visiting a doctor to have the cup removed with medical instruments. The company concluded, “investigation of the causes have indicated that these women had problems because they did not follow the instructions for removal.”²⁸ These women approached the Tassaway as if they could remove it solely through external means, despite warnings in the instructions that the stem was not like a tampon string. This may have been due to their familiarity with tampons and expectations that the cup would work similarly, but might also have been related to discomfort with the intimate act of reaching into the vagina to remove the cup.

In their section on menstruation, the authors of the iconic 1970s health text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* recognized that some women may be dissatisfied with their pads and tampons and tentatively offered two alternatives. One was “period extraction,” Downer and Rothman’s Del-Em device, described as “experimental” by the authors and not recommended to anyone “unfamiliar with the proper instruments, her own anatomy, and without sterile conditions.” In other words, it was not recommended to anyone outside of the small feminist health activist circle where it was being used. The other option suggested was “a plastic cup (Tassaway), sold in drugstores, which sits just inside the vaginal sphincter muscles and collects the fluid. It has the holding capacity of about four tampons or napkins.” Tassaway was the only viable alternative to pads and tampons for the majority of readers. But unfortunately for those for interested in such an alternative,

²⁷ Nana25, comment on “DivaCup fit problems after birth – any advice?” Green Moms, comment posted November 28, 2009,

<http://indianapolis.momslikeme.com/members/JournalActions.aspx?g=892227&m=8767688> (accessed February 3, 2010); Anonymous, email to author, January 20, 2010.

²⁸ Letters to Tassaway; Les Estrin to Food and Drug Administration, August 12, 1971, Tassaway account files, folder 2, Food and Drug Administration Archives, Rockville, Maryland.

Tassaway was already on its way out when the book reached women's shelves. Women who were intrigued by the menstrual cup concept in the pages of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* would find a only dwindling supply of Tassaways, if any, at their pharmacy.

Tassaway, Inc. simply could not make a profit. They owed millions of dollars to J. Walter Thompson, which had credited the company money, expecting the cup to catch on quickly and generate massive profits for both parties. Looking back, Tassaway President Robert Oreck regrets moving so quickly and being too trusting of the admen's utopian visions. He remembers himself as "a neophyte in that area," and claimed, "Quite frankly, I was being led." In 2010, Oreck still "[couldn't] imagine... why all women aren't using the product... I just thought it had to work," he lamented.²⁹

Loyal Tassaway users were not happy about losing their preferred product. Writing in 1981, a former company official estimated that more than 20,000 women wrote letters to the company in the years following the cup's demise.³⁰ Some were desperate, and even sometimes quite angry and demanding. One woman pleaded, "Help! I have run out of your product and cannot find it on the shelf of any store, anywhere! ... If you have taken your product off the market," she urges, "please send me a two years' supply of what you have left, until your company starts selling Tassaway again." She was clearly distraught: "I am tired of flooding, soiling, and itching. PLEASE RESPOND SOON!" As late as June 1977, another woman begged, "You have just got to sell me some or refer me to someone who carries your product. I can't live without it and there is just nothing that even comes close to compare with it. Help!!!"³¹ But these women received no replies. The remaining stock of Tassaways bought in bulk by large chains and local pharmacies dwindled as loyal customers hoarded the last cups. The last 100,000 boxes of Tassaways were sold in case lots directly to individual women. In the few years that Tassaway was on the market, the company had sold over

²⁹ Robert Oreck, interview by author, April 13, 2010.

³⁰ Waldron, "The History of Tassaway and the Market for Feminine Hygiene Products."

³¹ Letters from Tassaway users, Autumn Stanley Papers, MS 659, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library.

five million boxes – totaling over 40 million individual, disposable cups.³² But in early 1973, they ceased operations for a second and final time.³³ A two-time failure, Tassaway Inc. faded from memory along with its menstrual cup.

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The original, reusable cup design, however, lived on. Throughout the 1980s, the tampon industry experienced a crisis; a number of tampon users developed Toxic Shock Syndrome, leading to dozens of deaths and the recall of Procter and Gamble's super-absorbent Rely brand.³⁴ Entrepreneur and former Tassette user Lou Crawford introduced a latex rubber version of Leona Chalmers' menstrual cup to the market in the late 1980s, capitalizing on this scandal along with the increasing environmental consciousness of the day.³⁵ This cup, known as The Keeper, remained in production through the present day, celebrated as a natural, healthy alternative to tampons. It has been joined in recent years by a number of reusable other cups, made of silicone.

Since the rise of e-commerce in the 2000s, there has been a menstrual cup renaissance. Dozens of upstart cup manufacturers around the world are able to reach a much wider, global audience. Companies also take advantage of social networking technologies and their product's now cult-like status among Internet based devotees, who eagerly share their experiences. While at first blush the cup may still seem a little strange, thousands of Internet cup evangelists are prepared to convince you otherwise, with all the enthusiasm of a 1970s speculum-wielding feminist health activist.

³² Waldron, "The History of Tassaway and the Market for Feminine Hygiene Products," 6.

³³ Ibid, 10.

³⁴ Sharra L. Vostral, "Toxic Shock Syndrome, Tampon Absorbency, and Feminist Science," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* (2017) 3:1, 1-30.

³⁵ Donald McNeil, "Menstrual Cups, at Age 66, Begin to Make up for Lost Time," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2003).

Suggested Readings

Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)

Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).