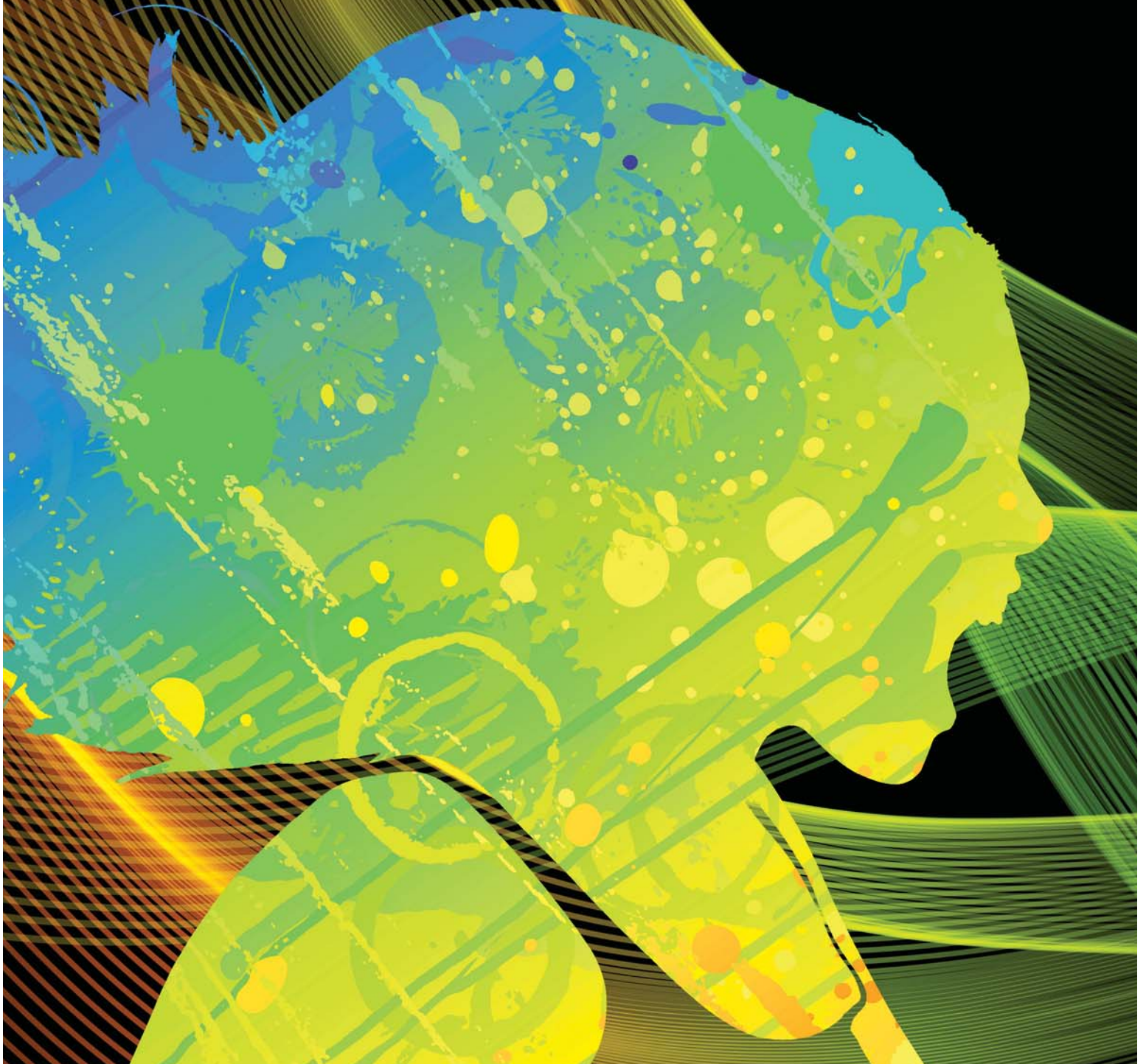
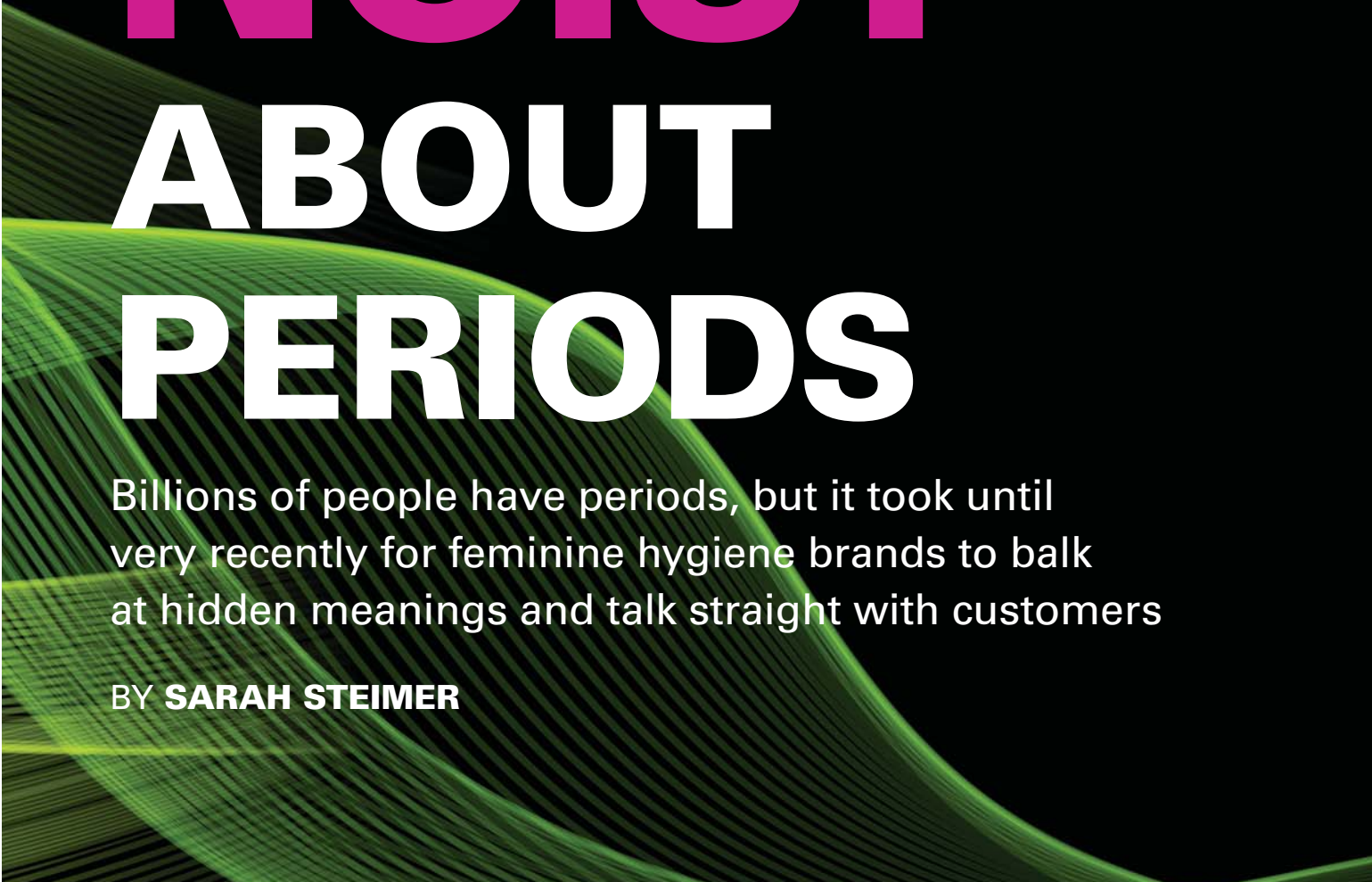


*After a Century  
of Whispers,*







# **KOTEX** **GETS** **NOISY** **ABOUT** **PERIODS**

Billions of people have periods, but it took until very recently for feminine hygiene brands to balk at hidden meanings and talk straight with customers

BY **SARAH STEIMER**

**T**he feminine hygiene aisle is a sea of monotony. It's awash with light blues, purples and pinks, repeating choruses of "light, regular, heavy." Consumers don't browse or linger here, they grab and go.

Kimberly-Clark decided to change that experience seven years ago when it launched its U by Kotex brand. Not only has the packaging itself changed, creating a ripple on store shelves, but the way the brand talks to consumers has shifted. As in, it actually acknowledges and openly speaks to its customers about their periods. It's no longer about absorbency demos and carefree women leaping in white pants; U by Kotex launched with a call to "Break the Cycle" and end period stereotypes in advertising and elsewhere. The release of the new products came with a statement from Kimberly-Clark in which the brand said advertisers "have been perpetuating this cultural stigma by emphasizing that the best menstrual period is one that is ignored."

Kimberly-Clark has a pretty decent grasp on advertising period products, having been in the feminine hygiene market since 1920. The first magazine ad series for Kotex appeared in 1921 and was created by Kotex marketing head Wallace Meyer. The first draft actually featured mostly men and one woman, but was changed to include only one man and three women, with copy that nodded to science and World War I, where nurses began using wound dressings as sanitary napkins. The text never actually used the phrase "sanitary napkins," and readers were left to guess what the "new use" of the product meant, thus ushering in the era of vague references to the menstrual



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cycle in advertising.

It took almost a century, but Kotex was finally ready for some straight talk with consumers. It started with a getting-to-know-you session.

"For a brand that has that rich history and legacy, it's also important to be listening to the consumer, connecting with our audience and ... putting her at the center of everything that we do," says Melissa Jacobs, senior brand manager for U by Kotex. "We took a look at the brand and how we were connecting with consumers. The consumer had changed quite significantly over the years and the category really hadn't. To connect with the consumer, in particular teens and younger women, it was important to reflect more of [their] reality and more of what was important to [them]. That's

why we made the decision to go in such a unique direction with the launch of U by Kotex."

The change in the audience Jacobs identified was that consumers were now talking openly about periods, and they expected their brands to do the same. As a Newsweek cover story exclaimed in April 2016, "The Fight to End Period Shaming is Going Mainstream." These consumers wanted brands to acknowledge the reality of their experiences and cater to them, not hide it and communicate in whispers.

"It fits with the evolution of fourth-wave feminism, which has seen feminism go from somewhat of an on-the-edge [movement] that brands wouldn't necessarily engage with, to [a movement] that is part of mainstream culture and part of popular culture discourse," says Lucie Greene, worldwide director of The Innovation Group, the in-house creative think tank at J. Walter Thompson Worldwide. "You see more open, frank dialogue around previously taboo aspects of femininity from sex to body hair to body image to menstruation, and [consumers are] demanding to be talked to on a different level by brands. It's about female empowerment and ... rejecting messaging that is lazy or not nuanced. [It should be] all-inclusive. That has reached a critical mass."

**I**f the consumer wanted to be spoken to directly, the brand would need to first get their attention, so U by Kotex made

a splash in the feminine hygiene aisle. Rather than producing yet another muted-tones box, the brand got loud: Its packaging now typically has a black background with neon details. Even the language has changed a bit. The products have names that could double as iPhone descriptors: Sleek, Click and Security, for example. Greene says the design appears to be in line with the popular athleisure trend—categorized as something designed for workouts and other athletic activities while also worn in other settings—among millennials, which made for an easy transition into U by Kotex's

latest fitness product line.

“The bright colors and the packaging were intended to make a statement, certainly within the category,” Jacobs says. “That all came from consumer insights. The category was treating women and periods in a certain way. We had been a part of that as well in our history. For us to reflect our consumer and do what was right for her [we needed] to say, “The way that periods have been treated—trying to hide them, have them be super traditionally girly—that’s not what our consumer is about. We’re about making sure that a period never gets in the way of what a woman wants to accomplish. We wanted the entire branding to reflect that. She doesn’t have to be about pastels or traditional girly stereotypes. She can be bold and have packaging and products that better fit her lifestyle and are more reflective of the attitudes that she carries forward.”

The brand’s website and social channels echo this with bright colors and menstrual cycle missives. The website is broken into pages that include product descriptions and reviews; info and advice (for periods, not just products); a period calculator; a fitness section with workouts, recipes and tips; and an entertainment section with social feeds and a web series, both of which are a big part of the brand’s content marketing push. U by Kotex is the executive producer of the web series “Carmilla,” which follows college roommates who fall for one another as they try to uncover a disappearance. Plus, one of the roommates is a vampire (IMDb gives the show an 8.6/10 rating).

The products themselves also received an upgrade. For example, the U by Kotex Fitness tampons include a FitPak, a small carrying case to alleviate the common nuisance of tampons getting jumbled out of their packaging when tossed into the consumer’s bag. Many of the brand’s tampons have a compact applicator, taking the product down to about half of its original size. The Fitness products are also specifically designed to stay in place for those consumers who don’t plan to stay seated for the duration of their

period (a concept so baked into culture that some yoga practices even suggest women withhold from doing inversions while menstruating, despite zero evidence of negative effects). Products that can make the user’s activities easier or more care-free are a big part of the brand’s fight against shame and stereotypes.

**R**educing taboos on behalf of and in conjunction with its audience has been a major piece of the U by Kotex brand’s work since its inception. Most recently, the brand

has been partnering with social media influencers to promote the Fitness products. It could be argued that Kotex was a bit of a pioneer in the influencer arena, as its advertisements in the 1920s encouraged readers of the Ladies’ Home Journal to call upon Kimberly-Clark staff nurse Ellen J. Buckland, also a brand ambassador, for advice and comments on the product.

The brand’s recent fight against stigmas is what drew Jessamyn Stanley, a yoga instructor and U by Kotex Fitness spokesperson, to the brand.

“I have always admired the brand’s

courage to tackle hard conversations and act as a champion for those experiencing a period,” Stanley says. “The intent of the U by Kotex Fitness program is to open an honest dialogue about working out on your period and break stigma around that conversation. I am no stranger to honest conversations, which is why I was excited to team up with the brand to help launch the new product line.”

Stanley, who is also a body positivity advocate and writer, has spoken out against stereotypes herself and found an ally in U by Kotex and the brand’s messaging.

“I am excited about this partnership because of the parallels it has to the work that I’m already doing,” Stanley says. “If we’re not able to talk about sensitive issues like size or periods, we cannot remove the stigma. I believe that honest dialogue is the only way to move forward and am ready to open the conversation around periods and activity in partnership with U by Kotex Fitness.”

As it turns out, you don’t have to be an internationally recognized yoga teacher to partner with the brand. U by Kotex actively listens to its community online, Jacobs says, and it’s learning how



Jessamyn Stanley, a yoga instructor and U by Kotex Fitness spokesperson, was drawn to the brand’s fight against stigmas.





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normal it is for consumers to expect the brand to talk comfortably about periods. She points to other brands getting in on the conversation (which U by Kotex frequently retweets), including the likes of Teen Vogue.

In listening to its audience, U by Kotex started “The Period Projects,” a project series inspired and led by women that improves period experiences. The first project was The Period Shop, a pop-up store in New York City that was inspired by one woman’s Tumblr post. The author of the post, college student Sarah Michaelson, bemoaned the dearth of stores specifically catering to periods (despite the existence of stores dedicated to things like containers or shaving needs). She went on to describe her ideal period shop and challenged someone to make it happen. U by Kotex reached out to make the idea a reality, and the first-ever Period Shop went up for three days in May 2016, featuring comfortable clothing, accessories, home goods, beauty products, food and U by Kotex products.

“With the pop-up store, they’re tapping into the fact that fourth-wave feminism has become a lifestyle, a dialogue, a way of talking,” Greene says. “Talking about this stuff has become a political imperative.”

All proceeds from the pop-up were donated to New York homeless women’s shelter Susan’s Place. As with Stanley,

Michaelson was particularly appreciative of the brand’s willingness to confront period taboos.

“When U by Kotex told me they wanted to bring my idea to life, how could I say ‘no?’” Michaelson says. “I knew the period store would be important not just for me but for the thousands of women that get their periods but feel like they can’t talk about it. Ending the stigma that surrounds periods is so important to me. Like a lot of girls, I was uncomfortable with it for a time, but that has to stop if we’re going to make progress for women in other areas.”

Crystal Boersma, lead creative director on the project from Organic, the agency behind the shop, told Ad Week that consumers should have the same excitement in running out to buy new tampons or pads as they do when it’s time to replace a lipstick, for example. More than 5,800 people experienced the shop in person and almost 40,000 samples were requested over the weekend between the launch of “The Period Projects” and the opening of The Period Shop. The U by Kotex brand also gained nearly 1,400 new followers to its social platforms.

Next up for “The Period Projects” was “Power to the Period,” a campaign, which ran July 14 to Sept. 30, 2016, and was the first-ever national period products drive, this time inspired by a tweet from Holly

Sanchez and executed in partnership with DoSomething.org. The drive encouraged people to buy and donate an extra pack of period products to a homeless shelter. The event sparked 50,257 drives and collected 585,965 period products to donate to shelters all over the U.S.

Greene says the female consumer, particularly the millennial female consumer, expects her brands to participate in causes and purpose-driven efforts. U by Kotex wants just such a relationship with its customers.

“Certainly we’re hoping to make a connection with the consumer so that they build an affinity with our brand because they believe in and share the passions of the brand to continue to make those period experiences better,” Jacobs says. “For us, that’s a pretty good example of blending those two things: We want to do good, we want to help our consumer do good, but we want to build a relationship with them at the same time.”

In another effort to take its product to platforms other than the drugstore or grocery store aisle, the brand has partnered with HelloFlo to include its products in the company’s mail-order period kits. The placement allows U by Kotex to put its product within a story (the two companies even worked on some video content) and learn even more about its customers’ habits.

**U by Kotex wants to be a part of the customer’s full period experience, but it may only be**

**partway there.** For one, the products themselves haven’t changed much. The brand continues to offer only the basics: pads, tampons and panty liners. Granted, these items have seen plenty of tweaks since their introductions, and the market for these products is worth \$3.1 billion, according to Euromonitor. Despite the fact that these products likely won’t lose their places in bathrooms across the U.S., some consumers are opting for something different: menstrual cups (DivaCup or Luna Cup), period underwear (Thinx) or even an organic or natural pads and

tampons (Lola or Conscious Period).

Jacobs says she is unable to comment on any innovation plans, but that the company is paying attention to the consumer's needs and preferences. Greene suggests the tipping point for companies like Kimberly-Clark or Procter & Gamble would come if alternative brands create a new behavior that hits mass market. Instead, Greene argues that the U by Kotex brand could be doing more in terms of its packaging.

"When you look at a brand like Lola, they don't obviously communicate being tampons at all, they're very understated and very luxuriously designed," Greene says. "You would think they were products that you could buy on the shelves of Sephora or in a boutique hotel, and you wouldn't be ashamed to have them out in your bathroom. The cliché is you keep your tampons discreetly in a box in your bathroom, in a cabinet, but these new-wave brands have really redefined the visual language."

Regardless of how the product looks and how present the brand may be on social media, consumers can't send out a tweet if they're stuck on the job, in the classroom or in any public restroom without a tampon or pad. In fact, this is the exact period experience most never forget and is often the most distressing.

"We've created this social norm where women are expected to have a tampon and a pad or something on them at any given point in time," says Nancy Kramer, chief evangelist of IBM iX, and founder of Resource/Ammirati. "The truth is that all of us have had unexpected starts to periods or flow that's heavier than we anticipated and we've run out of whatever."

Kramer founded Free the Tampon, an organization that advocates with business owners and in the public policy arena for freely accessible menstrual support in restrooms out of the home. In other words, she believes tampons and pads should be provided in public restrooms in the same way toilet paper is expected to be. She clarifies that the product makers are not the ones expected to provide the items free of charge, but rather the same

people who ensure toilet paper or seat covers are available in bathrooms.

Kramer has done her homework on social causes and chosen not to engage Free the Tampon with companies that make feminine hygiene products. She notes it could be a bit too self-serving for such brands. U by Kotex seems aware of this conflict of interest and acknowledges that access to products is an issue for many people.

"In terms of directly encouraging institutions to provide product to women, this can often be viewed with skepticism when coming from the company producing the product," Jacobs says. "So, U by Kotex's focus continues to be on delivering products that meet the needs of our consumer and supporting tremendous efforts like 'Power to the Period.'"

The fact remains, however, that it's a major part of the period experience. The impact of having free access to menstrual products has been documented: In New York City, one school piloted a program where it offered the products for free in bathrooms, and the school saw a 2.4% increase in attendance. New York City now funds the provision of menstrual

supplies in all city public schools, prisons and homeless shelters.

"It's going to take time for this to take hold, especially when people realize that these products are there and [aren't stolen] in the same way people don't steal toilet paper," Kramer says. "You have an expectation that when you go into the bathroom there's going to be toilet paper, you get frustrated when there's not."

Somewhat ironically, a video from U by Kotex about the Period Shop actually begins with a woman saying, "It's what I wish every single public bathroom looked like." Jacobs says the brand is focused on the conversations it has on its social platforms and with influencer partnerships to highlight positive change in the category, and to promote dialogue on key issues. Perhaps it will take more of its customers speaking out about being stuck without the menstrual products they need before an important meeting, or being sent to the nurse at school for a healthy bodily function before the brand finds a conflict-free way to get involved.

Until then, U by Kotex will be part of the period experience, so long as consumers remember to toss the products in their bag. **m**



Inspired by a Tumblr post, The Period Shop in New York City drew more than 5,800 visitors.