



Guilty Secrets

Reframing social taboos as design opportunities

Social taboos suppress discussion of many details about life: bodily functions, sexual problems, and other socially stigmatizing conditions. Discomfort with these topics compromises our health and short-circuits our quality of life by keeping important information in the dark.

Taboos also create social isolation. When forced to navigate forbidden areas, people often find that they have little information and are reluctant to

experiment or explore. From a business perspective, this may translate into untapped opportunities — “ugly ducklings” that aren’t sexy on the outside, but are extremely rewarding if tapped in the right way.

How might your business acknowledge taboos affecting your industry, and turn these constraints into opportunities?

TAKE ACTION – *designing for Guilty Secrets*

1.

Know the taboos

By listening carefully, you can be early to discover subjects that carry social stigma in your particular business domain. What topics are discussed only behind closed doors?

2.

Respect embarrassment

Create brands that initiate discussion, build trust, and share information. Design activities, forums, or tools that engage the full emotional range.

3.

Reframe social stigmas

Break with social convention and give people permission to engage taboo topics in new and invigorating ways. Supply them with new language to name their needs.

4.

Allow for avoidance

Not everyone is yearning to be liberated from a taboo. Give people alternatives that accommodate the distance they’d like to maintain.



Gut feelings

People can fail to recognize that they're living with a minor, but ongoing problem. Emma, for instance, considered herself healthy; she worked out regularly and made conscious food choices. She also suffered from chronic constipation, but considered it normal — until her mother found out and suggested she seek help.

Although Henry suffers from chronic heartburn, it's rarely the subject of his conversation. He says this is partially out of embarrassment and partially because it never seemed relevant. He also hinted that it wasn't very masculine to complain about minor ailments like heartburn. As a result, when Henry shopped for over-the-counter heartburn solutions, he habitually reached for antacids, which were only marginally effective. He had no idea that entire classes of products existed one shelf away that could really help him.

How might we reach people who don't even realize there's a solution to their problem?

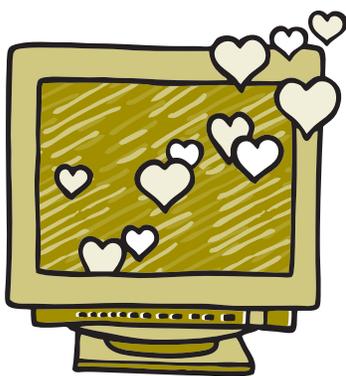
Befriending a new normal

When Jackie came across people she knew on match.com, she treated it as a shared secret: "I didn't discuss it." The first time people asked her where she and her boyfriend met, there was an awkward pause. Eventually, she became more comfortable. "Now," says Jackie, "we are a story that other people tell."

Jill, a researcher who studies behaviors around online dating, notes that women have an easier time with a site like JDate: "It is easier to admit that you simply want to find a Jewish man, rather than that you can't find a man at all." And match.com's slogan, "It's okay to look," sends a reassuring message that online dating falls into the realm of normal behavior.

In contrast, True.com emphasizes "dating safety," screening members against a US criminal database. The implication? To Jill, it says "This is not normal, and we have to screen for all the crazies we attract." Not exactly reassuring.

What can be done to remove stigma and reassure people that an offering or activity is "normal"?



Dysfunctional vocabulary

Since its approval in 1998, Viagra has become a household name, but erectile dysfunction is still not something Peter talks to his friends about. Ever. Peter compares Viagra's 'Viva Viagra' campaign to ads from competitive products: "Viagra comes across as a drug you would use for fun rather than a fix for an embarrassing problem. It features dancing and partying, not gray hair and messaging about 'renewing your connection.'"

As with many taboos, a key part of the embarrassment is simply not having the right words to discuss it. These taboos pose a challenge worldwide. For Shefali Vasudev, editor of *Marie Claire* in India, "In public discourse, sexuality is either lewd jokes or giggling." Even doctors do not always have the vocabulary to address sexual issues. "Gynecologists would tell women after childbirth or surgeries, 'Don't have a relationship with your husband,' instead of, 'Don't have intercourse.'"

How might design serve to reframe context and dialogue in tackling potentially embarrassing topics?

IKO Toilet: dignity for all

David Kuria knew that by addressing toilet sanitation, a taboo issue in Kenya, he would positively affect the physical, emotional, and social well being of people living in dehumanizing conditions. So he founded IKO Toilet, a socially and financially sustainable venture that equips informal communities with the tools and skills to manage their sanitation and retain their dignity. The sanitation blocks are managed by the community and serve as a hub for entrepreneurs and community-owned businesses.

Playing with sex

Masturbation has long been a contentious topic, but times are changing. LELO, JimmyJane, and others have pioneered sleek, designer versions of toys once found only in seedy shops on the wrong side of town. Recognizing the potential of the female market, these companies have created fun, friendly, and stylish forms quite different from the traditional sex toy. National chains like Good Vibrations and Toys in Babeland offer a safe, comfortable retail experience directed toward women.

Fat acceptance

Positive portrayals of larger people are almost completely absent from mainstream media, which is why the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign, featuring non-skinny models, made such a splash. *More to Love* is a bachelor-style reality show with a twist: the stars are plus-size. *Newsweek* author Joshua Alston says, "Unlike *The Biggest Loser* and *Dance Your Ass Off*, *Ruby, More to Love* is a show about overweight people that doesn't relentlessly focus on their efforts to lose the weight."

Secretly normal

Menstrual management products are generally hidden, especially from men. Many recall that day at school when the boys were sent out to play kickball, while girls were given a lesson about feminine supplies. A series of video shorts by Tampax chronicles the adventures of Zack, a high school boy who wakes up one day and discovers he has "female parts" and a period. For the first time, boys are being openly invited to join the conversation in a way that's playful and even cool.

PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

Be a pattern spotter: Now that you've been exposed to a few different examples, don't be surprised if you start seeing *Guilty Secrets* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it's the next new pattern.

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Contact: Get in touch with us for all that is pattern related at patterns@ideo.com or visit us at <http://patterns.ideo.com>.