Memo From Hell

The planet's positive poor are AIDS Inc.'s next boom market. Emily Carter intercepts an internal affair.

August 1, 2001 By Emily Carter

To: MeFirstCo Global Meds Marketing & Development

From: Minister of Shareholder Happiness

You kids quit whining right now. If I hear one more word about "the changing face of AIDS" as an excuse for a shrinking market base, I'm going to pluck out your nose rings, sandblast your Celtic tribal tattoos and dye your fuschia locks right back to their original Lutheran Beige. With all your boasting about "thinking outside the box," you Gen Xers fail to see the big picture. Sure, the AIDS market has lost its holy grail of gay white male consumers. They either died, got well or got bored. But if you ever bothered to get off Madden Football and read the news, you'd know that brand-new infections are up from Christopher Street to the Castro.

And with the assault on the First Amendment right of AIDS drug companies to advertise to consumers, it doesn't look like MeFirstCo will be in the Health Club for Supermodels and Extreme Sports Enthusiasts for long. But read my lips: The market is expanding all the time. Think about it: Someone is making money on all those Newport billboards and rent-to-own furniture stores. Why not us? Where you see a shifting demographic, I see dollar signs. "The changing face of AIDS" is just the latest buzzword for the poor. Ka-ching!

All we need is a change in marketing strategy. Listen, it's as easy to sell 20 bottles of malt liquor as it is to sell one bottle of Dom Perignon. And with poverty you've got a captive market. What 13-year-old Bombay prostitute has time to go comparison shopping?

This thing has, as they like to say, gone global. AIDS genocide in Africa? AIDS opportunity is more like it. We're talking an entire continent. And I'm sick of hearing about infrastructure problems. They didn't have any problem getting that low-grade baby formula a few years ago out to the sticks, did they? A well-coordinated marketing and distribution campaign was all it took to inform literally millions of women that a conveniently packaged dose was better for baby than mama's milk. And with the spread of HIV and other STDs ascribed to immune systems weakened by poor nutrition, "immune boosting" supplements is an idea whose time has come to the developing world. And need I remind you, nutritional supplements are food—and do not require FDA approval.

Certainly not in Botswana, for example, with its relatively affluent population (we're talking diamond money, kiddies), a 70 percent adult literacy rate (so they could actually read our billboards) and a 40 percent HIV infection rate. And most of these are new infections. We're sitting on a gold mine of ever-renewable new customers.

Even in famine ravaged countries, the notion of eating to keep healthy is still in vogue. Picture this: Every empty trading post and out-of-reach market stall painted with the ironic legend: "AIR. It's what's for dinner. Unless you've got Immuno-Go Nutriments. Just like a milkshake, without all that fattening milk."

And the exploding HIV rates among young IV-drug users in the former Soviet Union? What that tells me is there's a whole new generation of twentysomethings out there on the Swingin' Steppes of the Caucasus literally dying to be cool. Focus on an MTV-style quick-cut montage with a ridiculously pompous apparatchik shoving his microphone into the face of some zero-affect Ukrainian junkie teenager. Nice tight close-up on his puffy, sweaty face. Reporter: "Can you sum up your life in one sentence for us, Mikhail?" Mikhail: "Use once and destroy." Then the tagline, in jittery green letters: "B&D Insulin Syringes: Not your father's works."

Let's not forget our own backyard. With 30 percent of young gay African-American men coming up positive, and many of them deep in the closet, imagine the possibilities for subway ads: "You can go home again. After a day on the down-low, nothing covers your tracks like Cum-B-Gone, the odor-removing gum with the scent of Swisher Sweets and Malt 45. Your Moms might beat your head for chillin' all day with your peeps, but it's like this, homes: The more you chew, the less they know. And when it's time to check out, you can do it in your childhood bed...of pneumonia."

So run with it. Use that dot-com ambition and amoral energy MeFirstCo hired you for. If trends continue, 5 percent of the world's population will be HIV enhanced by 2021. That's 40 million new customers, so don't tell me about market downturns. Work your little tushies off, and everyone gets free stock options in one of my favorite new ventures: www.pinebox.com.

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