Vertex Vortex

Drug ads steal activist thunder

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A small-fry drug company, Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc., had folks scratching their heads last spring with the launch of a new ad campaign. With ads that screamed “Selling Hope Is Easy in an Epidemic,” was Vertex slamming its own industry or exploiting AIDS activism?

The posters, wheatpasted nationwide alongside pitches for Levi’s and Lilith Fair, looked more like the guerrilla activist art of yesteryear than glossy, corporate drug-company slicks. (One even featured ACT UP’s “Silence=Death” symbol, and another appropriated the NAMES quilt.) Bart Henderson, Vertex’s director of marketing, said they “are meant to get people talking about issues in the epidemic, such as the need to push beyond the status quo to develop better drugs.”

“It’s inappropriate [for drug companies] to corrupt activist symbols,” countered ACT UP/New York’s John Riley. While the ads may appear activist-driven, he said, “they make activism look like a con job. [Vertex] is playing both sides of the fence.”

But Spencer Cox, of the Treatment Action Group, an ACT UP offspring, doesn’t see the beef: “The ads are snappy. They establish personal connections which contradict faceless conglomerates.” Vincent Gagliostro, co-creator of ACT UP/NY demo and street graphics in the ’80s, said, “ACT UP images don’t belong to anybody. Vertex probably thinks they’re doing something worthwhile with them.”

And the company does. “Using symbols from the community is, in a sense, a gift to the public,” Vertex’s Henderson said. “They express the depth of the epidemic.” As for the slogan “Ambition Will Cure AIDS Before Compassion,” Gagliostro said: “I agree. How many people do we need running around with red ribbons? Wouldn’t you rather have money-hungry drug companies working for a cure?”

Although Vertex modestly announced in its print ads, “We do not have a cure,” the company is “working feverishly” with Glaxo Wellcome on a new protease inhibitor, amprenavir (141W94), currently in Phase III trials.

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