The King of AIDS Awearness

June 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

Known for saying, “What you stand for is more important than what you stand in,” Cole simultaneously addresses our collective consciousness—and ensures we are well dressed. Cole is funny, smart and dashing. He is driven by a deep sense of social responsibility. A pioneer of social marketing since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, and the chairman of the board of the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), which funds, among other endeavors, the hunt for the cure, he has done a lot of good while doing well.

He has used the messaging of his marketing to encourage the world to face and think about issues that make many people uncomfortable. In doing so, he frequently challenges the status quo. A consummate stirrer-of-the-pot, he believes that respectful controversy is necessary for positive social change. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his empire, we caught up with Cole in NYC and talked with him about being a successful capitalist while caring deeply about important causes such as fighting the global AIDS pandemic.

When did you know you wanted to be a designer?
I didn’t really want to be a designer. Initially, I was going to be a lawyer. That stemmed from my sense of social appropriateness. I always wanted to have a hand in what happened in the world. My father had a shoe factory, and I spent a summer working there. I watched how shoes were made, and I was fascinated by how, with a slight variation to the material or shape of the heel, you could totally change the look of the finished product. So I started designing and bringing products to market.

What led you to create your groundbreaking, socially conscious marketing campaigns?
Over time, what I was doing didn’t feel meaningful enough. 1985 was a time of pervasive consciousness; people were looking to be part of something bigger. There were these initiatives called Live Aid, Hands Across America and We Are the World. Our nation was inspired. I thought it was a time when I should use my marketing dollars and creative resources to elevate my relationship with the customer. And the issue at the time, that clearly needed to be discussed but that not enough people were talking about, was AIDS.

Did you know your customers had a penchant for social responsibility? Or did you worry that your edgy ad campaigns might alienate your customers?
I have always believed that our customers are unique in that they have a very open mind and are

progressive, not just in terms of their clothing or lifestyle choices, but also their perspective on others. They are not [too] judgmental. To the degree they would judge me adversely for taking a position I might take, I don't think it would result in them changing their fashion preferences. I didn't feel that there was a lot of risk there.

Why did you make such controversial campaigns?
My messages are intended to provoke. They are a way of saying, "It's not just important what's on your body but also what's on your mind." They enable us to have a more substantive relationship with our customers. That's what's nice about being in the private sector; you can say what you want. I have sought opportunities that other people might not have thought were appropriate. But you have to be reasonably responsible in how you communicate.

Which is your favorite of your HIV/AIDS campaigns?
I have a favorite line I ran, and a favorite line I didn't. My favorite was [our original] condom ad. When I first got involved with AIDS, and the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), the focus was on safe sex and preventing AIDS. One of the first things amfAR did was initiate a needle exchange program in New York, which was very progressive and controversial at the time because people thought handing out clean needles promoted drug use. And, it was illegal to advertise condoms. So we took a photograph of a condom and airbrushed off all the words. The message underneath the image said: "Our shoes aren't the only thing we encourage you to wear." There was the chance that people might not know what the product was, that they might confuse it with a graduation hat.

Years later, when we were doing a campaign for amfAR, we tried to address AIDS stigma, which was (and is) pervasive. The message we wanted to share was that we're all at risk, [that HIV doesn't only affect] people who live a "questionably appropriate" lifestyle. The idea of the campaign was to ask: What if certain people in your life who you thought were safe were HIV positive? There were several ads. One said, "If your kids had AIDS" in big bold letters, and then, in small letters, "you'd have more to worry about than clean socks." Another said: "If the president had AIDS, he'd have more to worry about than your vote." And then we had one that said: "If the pope had AIDS, he'd need more than your prayers." The people at amfAR said, "You're nuts, you can't run that ad." So, in my reasonable manner, I agreed I wouldn't. But we had a press conference at our annual event at the U.N. on World AIDS Day. And at that press conference, I showed the press the new ad campaign that we were going to be running. And then I said, "And this is the ad we're not going to be running." And I showed them the pope ad. Needless to say, the pope ad appeared all over the tabloids.

Have you always questioned authority?
Yes, but usually in a positive way. I'm typically not rebellious for rebellion's sake. I question the traditional path of how to get somewhere. It's what I do every day while designing fashion. It's about figuring out how to give [my customers] what they want, but maybe not how they expect it.

Have you been able to track the impact of your campaigns?
I judge the effectiveness of our work by the amount of "tough mail" that we get. If you're going to

create a positive emotional connection with some people then invariably you'll make a negative one with others. For an issue to be insightful, it means there are people on both sides of that issue. When we get negative mail, it usually means that there were even more people who appreciated that we were willing and had the courage to talk about the issue we raised.

Do you write the ads?
Many of them, but I'm involved in all of them. They all reflect my personal point of view. Even the really light ones are really important in their timeliness. I was flying out to Utah last January, and when I got off the plane, I heard about the plane that flew right over our building and landed in the Hudson [River]. I communicated a message that night and got [it] posted on our billboard several days later probably a hundred yards from where that plane went down. It said: "In tough times, some people land on their feet, others on the Hudson."

The [presidential] election is a really emotional time, and I knew this [past] one would be more so. We all did. I knew that if the Democratic party won, it would have such a profound impact on this country and the world. The notion that anyone can be president is a big, big change and an inspiring one. I very much wanted to communicate what people were feeling at the moment of transformation. So we created awn ad that said, "Finally, a president we can be proud of. Congratulations, Barack Obama." And people said, "You have to have an alternative." So we created a backup that said, "Out with the old, in with the older." It's still sitting in a warehouse in New Jersey. When we put the Barack Obama billboard up, people said, "Isn't that political? Is that really appropriate for a company like yours?" And my answer was: If that ad ran on Tuesday, it would have been inappropriate because it would have been a political message. On Wednesday, it was a social message; he became everyone's president on Wednesday. Timing is everything. A day earlier it would have been wrong; a week later it would have gone unnoticed.

Many of your ads are playful. Where do you get your sense of humor?
When you look at all of the injustice and all of the crises going on around us every day and you look at the impact and the perspective and context that all of the tabloids, even the mainstream media, share with us, it's very hard to even get into the day in the first place, let alone through it, without some sense of humor.

Talk to me about AIDS stigma…is it better or worse than at the start of the epidemic?
We ran one campaign for amfAR in 2005 that gathered iconic people from around the world in a single photograph. The message was that if anyone has AIDS, we all have it, that if it exists anywhere, it exists everywhere. The concept was to have all these people stand together united in one message. Because typically the AIDS community is not united. There are lots of different messages, and there are walls up between [groups in the AIDS community]. One of the struggles [in our efforts to fight domestic AIDS] is that the community is tripping over each other and competing with each other. In the mid-'80s when I got involved, I think there were 18 AIDS organizations in America. Today, there are more than 1,800. The amfAR campaign was made to address the fact that we needed a singular effort. The idea was that the individuals who participated in the campaign would appear in public wearing a T-shirt that said, "I have AIDS" 48 hours prior to the launch of the campaign on World AIDS Day. So all around the world, these

famous people would appear wearing that T-shirt. And, if they were questioned, they'd say, "I'll get back to you on World AIDS Day," and the answer would be our campaign. But nobody wanted to go first. Nobody wanted to wear that T-shirt and be photographed and give the tabloids that feeding frenzy. Later, I talked to a reporter who asked me whether I would have done it. At first I said, "Sure I would." But then I said, "You know, maybe I wouldn't. I have a family, and why should I impose my belief system on them and make them have to defend and deal with it?" So how could I complain that even some of the most visible and articulate spokespeople for this crisis would not wear that T-shirt? Clearly, stigma is not much better than it ever was.

How do we fight it?
We need to put more faces to the disease. The first campaign I did [for amfAR] was in 1985. Annie Leibovitz photographed it. Then, AIDS was essentially associated with gay men, drug users and Haitians—who were identifiably less than healthy looking. We did our campaign with beautiful women and children. Nobody hates children. The message was: "For the future of our children, support AIDS research." That worked at that time to help destigmatize the disease. Today, we need to see more names and faces of people living with the disease whom we are comfortable with. We have to get more people out front.

If you could change one thing about AIDS in America today, what would it be?
That we would be accepting of people with this virus and focused on getting the funding and devoting the resources we need to find the cure. The cure for AIDS will only come from research, and that's what amfAR does. AmfAR is really focused on a cure right now. The cure for AIDS is not something that many people talk about because they feel it is an unrealistic expectation. But we don't think it is an unrealizable goal. That's why I am at amfAR.

What drives your commitment to social responsibility?
I wrote a book recently called *Awearness* that tells the stories of six individuals who are what we call "change agents." They use their ordinary and extraordinary resources to create an ordinary and extraordinary impact on people's lives. The one common thread between all these people was that they felt they were the biggest beneficiaries of their activism. When you've had the privilege to get involved in things that truly affect people's lives, you realize that you're the biggest beneficiary.

I do what I do because I just like doing it. I get a great sense of fulfillment. You don't get a lot of chances in our lifetime to make a difference, so when those chances come, we're supposed to take them. Our purpose is to seize the moment when we can.

Some of us have the focus and the resources to act upon it, others less so. People used to always ask me, "Is it really appropriate for you, as the head of a public company, to be out there talking about social issues?" I not only think it's appropriate, I think it's my responsibility. All companies will invariably get there. Either their hearts will get them there or their balance sheets will get them there, but they'll realize that it's appropriate and necessary.

Who inspires you?

People who have the courage to honor their belief system and who take chances.

Whom have you met who really impressed you?
I had the privilege of meeting Nelson Mandela on two different occasions. It was inspiring, to say the least, and not just because of who he is and what he's done but because of what he represents. That he came out of 27 years in prison with no sense of bitterness, totally focused on trying to make the world a better place was so uplifting and inspiring to me.

What do you consider your greatest success?
My greatest pride is my three wonderful daughters and wife, who all have an extraordinary sense of social justice and social appropriateness. My wife is absolutely committed to her efforts on behalf of homelessness and making a significant difference in people's lives. [As I've learned from her,] you can give a person a home, but you must also address the underlying social issues that made someone homeless in the first place if you want to get them truly back on their feet.

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