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Going with the flow

For menstrual mogul Vinnie D'Angelo, it's always that time of the month.

By Libby Ellis

Dec. 20, 2001 | Former freelance illustrator Vinnie D'Angelo got the idea for his tampon cases from watching female friends struggle to discreetly transport tampons to public restrooms. He listened to their complaints about bent and tattered tampons at the bottoms of their purses. He saw an opportunity and he made a plan.

Nowadays, Vinnie's grinning face looks up from custom tampon cases and seems to say, "There's no shame in menstruating! Flaunt it, babe!" (What the cases actually say is "One size fits all." And on the back: "I break for cycles.") His inventions -- done in durable canvas -- are designed to carry tampons *and* empower the holder. No more carrying the whole purse to the bathroom to get at one measly tampon. No more walking to the bathroom with a pad shoved into the waistband of your pants. [Vinnie's Tampon Cases](#) are like a neon sign that says, "I have my period and I'm one cool girl."

The thing is, D'Angelo, who is one cool guy, is not very empowered about selling things. In fact, he began his hugely successful business by giving tampon cases away. Since that time, however, he has accepted his inner salesman and branched out. At this point, it is safe to say that Vinnie D'Angelo is a menstruation magnate, a guy with a corner on a market he created himself.

Just this month, D'Angelo unveiled "Vinnie's Cramp Relieving Bubble Bath and CD." He really tried to wrap his mind around what women want in the tub, and what he came up with isn't about Calgon and Kenny G. The blue suds are infused with olive oil and chamomile, and D'Angelo describes the music on the "X-tra Bubbles Soothing Bubble Beats

CD" as "cramp-relieving without being sappy or serious." Sample the tunes [here](#).

The music tie-in is a natural for D'Angelo, who is no stranger to show biz. "I used to play my songs about tampon cases in subway stations with my friend, but he moved and I don't know how to tune the guitar," he explains. "I want to get back to doing that."

In the spring, D'Angelo is set to release his first book: "Vinnie's Giant Roller Coaster Period Chart and Journal Sticker Book." All that is left is a clothing line. And step back, P. Diddy, it turns out there is one in the marketing plan: Vinnie's Tampon Case clothes.

D'Angelo reports that he has been wearing at least one article of homemade Vinnie's Tampon Cases clothing every day since 1996. At first he felt a little funny about it -- five years later he's uncomfortable if he doesn't have a Vinnie's Tampon Case logo someplace on his body. (A year into his self-promoting fashion revolution, D'Angelo's girlfriend, Sarah, made a request. "She asked me if I would wear some non-red shirts," said Vinnie, "so I started making things in other colors. I mean, she does have to look at me every day.")

D'Angelo learned to sew in the fifth grade, when he made Abe Lincoln's beard out of yarn and manila paper. Since then he has used his sewing skills, enhanced by his design skills, to get his project off the ground.

"I started with great advice from women, and I took it upon myself to create a tampon case that worked for them," he says. "I went around to hardware stores and bought different cases and took them home and decorated them. It was trial and error, and friends let me know what they thought. At first they weren't sure about the canvas, but it works really well."

His friends loved the cases. They told their friends, who told their friends, and pretty soon Vinnie was the most well known tampon case distributor in New York.

His goal was, and still is, to outfit every man, woman and child with a free tampon case. In the beginning, D'Angelo's mom helped him sew and his 94-year-old grandma Joya stuffed period charts inside of the cases while watching "All My Children" or pro wrestling.

"I tried to make as many of them as I could, but I didn't have the ability. My mom and my grandmother helped out and were really supportive, but it was taking more time than I thought it would," he recalls.

He gave away hundreds of freebies and his friends repaid the favor. They flashed their tampon cases in Manhattan boutiques and talked D'Angelo up to friends in retail. When local stores expressed interest in a piece of D'Angelo's action, his hobby became a full-time job.

Even though he was reluctant to sell the cases, he tried making and selling them out of a store in Manhattan's Lower East Side -- for a while. "It's a cool neighborhood, and I painted "Vinnie's Tampon Cases" on the window. Even though people came in all the time, and some did buy things, most of the time I just gave tampon cases out for free," he says. "I've never been really good at selling." He closed the store a year and a half ago.

He took a crack at the e-commerce craze, but found that Web sales were not worth the management effort. Finally, D'Angelo handed off manufacturing and distribution duties to Massachusetts-based Blue Q, the company that produces Dirty Girl and Wash Away Your Sins bath products. "They're a great company, and they kind of have a like-minded sensibility -- they like challenging the consumer," says D'Angelo.

These days, the tampon cases can be found in university bookstores and small kitschy shops like Uncle Fun in Chicago. The currently defunct feminist magazine, Bust, sold Vinnie's Tampon Cases in its Boobtique. And D'Angelo is still

giving them away. ["Blue Q doesn't mind," says D'Angelo. "They like the project for what it is, and they support what I'm all about. I could never give away enough to really cut into sales -- they have me too busy working on other projects."

And answering fan mail. D'Angelo gets glowing letters and e-mails every day, thanking him for his contribution to the demystification of "female trouble." He had worried at first about what women would think of his staking a claim in the feminine hygiene business. "I was braced from the beginning, being a man, that there would be backlash from women like, 'What's a man doing trying to co-opt this part of our lives?' I was ready for that." But it never came. "I am very happy about that," he says. "I have never tried to condescend to it or make fun of it or do the old tampon jokes."

These days D'Angelo rides the L train around 10 o'clock, every morning, dividing his time between reading the sports section and passing out tampon cases. He offers them up at Knicks games and at his local Laundromat.

He's still more of an artist than businessman. He's in it, he says, for the love of his product. "I've tried to maintain my original goal: that I want to give these out for free," says D'Angelo. "That's the number one agenda I have, and I have been able to do that. Everything else I have gotten to do has been gravy. The Vinnie's Cramp Relieving Bubble Bath and the book and the T-shirts -- these have all been great, but my goal is to continue to get tampon cases out there for whoever wants one."

About the writer

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