



The V Store
Maia Kaufman

Advisor; Megan Fath
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The 'Genius Bar' for Vaginas

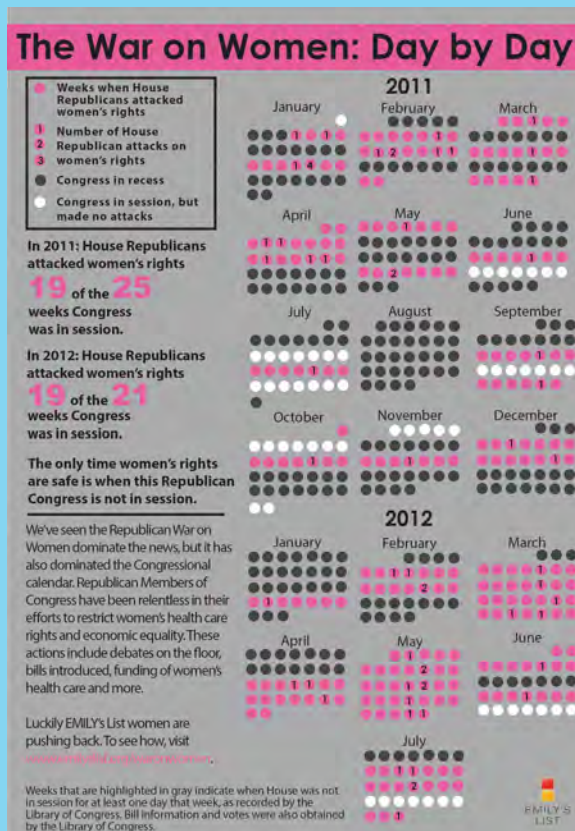
CONTEXT

I get asked these questions a lot. How did you come up with this? It's simultaneously really obvious and completely unique to most people.

I was raised by a single mother, in a house full of women, and the idea that women weren't seen as fully capable adults didn't even occur to me as a school of thought until I was old enough to know how ridiculous that was. My family was living proof.

I began my first serious relationship in my mid-twenties. The kind where you have to have conversations about who's going to pay for birth control and what would happen if a pregnancy were to occur. It felt as if politicians were listening in on my conversations and saying to themselves "let's mess with her." In 2011 and 2012, it seemed like every day someone was introducing new legal barriers to abortion access or contraception coverage. Elected officials actually got into debates about pregnancy and rape, and whether a woman could swallow a camera to get a pelvic exam. 'Shocked' is not the right word. 'Outrage' is close, but overused today. I guess 'motivated' would be best. This was my personal call to action.

The idea that any woman wouldn't be able to make her own decisions was a personal insult to myself and my family. This 'motivation' lasted for the three years before I entered DSI. Luckily, the government felt it its duty to keep providing me with motivating fodder.



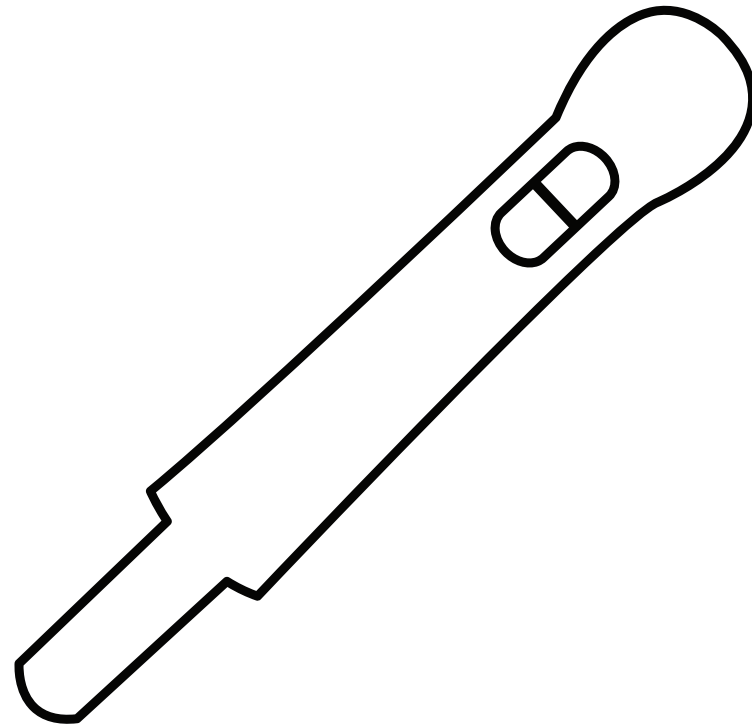
I originally wanted to develop an early detection pregnancy test that would be activated everytime one used the bathroom. One that would help women living in areas where those few weeks might make a world of different. Also, I saw it as something that would alleviate the neuroses of women actively trying to, or not to, get pregnant.

During our Intro to Thesis class, I was encouraged to take a step back from that, and see what other ways to make an impact might exist in this problem area.

I told Maggie Breslin- I just know I want to make a "thing." Not a concept, a framework, a method. I wanted something you could experience or use. This was important to me.

The second was that, whatever I did, I wanted it to be big enough to make a dent. I was so sick of hearing these stories about limited access, and, my personal favorite, 'informed consent laws'.* This particular issue is the most frustrating, as it's under the guise of it being 'for their own good.'

What could I do to combat this, short of buying every billboard in these states and putting the accurate information on them (still something I'm not above doing).



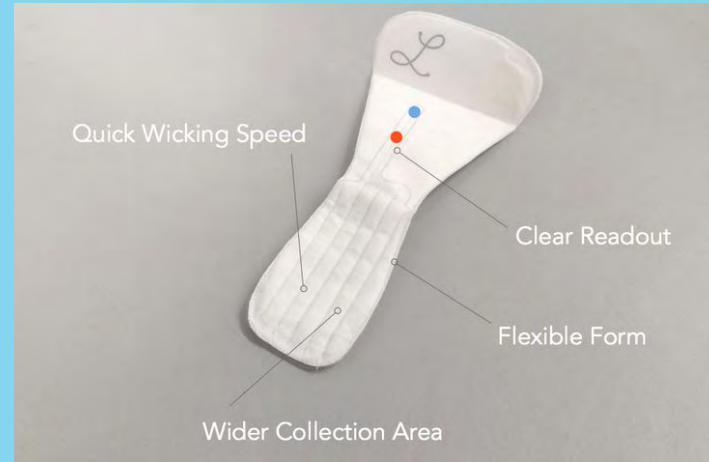
*The laws in certain states that force doctors to provide medically inaccurate information to women seeking abortions in an attempt to convince her to change her mind.

There were some promising things happening too though. Innovations in women's products seemed to be on an uphill climb. Megan Fath introduced me to one of her colleagues who was designing an environmentally- and user-friendly pregnancy test. Thinx was just starting to gain some traction, and I was reading articles about new products for women (and more specifically vagina-related) almost weekly.

There seemed to be this divide between what was happening on a national level, and what was happening on the small scale, start-up level. So I started thinking about how can we close this gap.



THINX Underwear



Lia Diagnostics Pregnancy Test



Lovability Condoms



Stand Up Female Urination Tool

A teacher from last year, Rachel Abrams, gave me a list of questions to ponder, and one of them being: what would a world where corporations ran fertility treatments look like? At first, it started to look like some dystopian future- a 'Brave New World' type of control. But then I thought about the landscape of today's corporations.

This is a country that values its freedoms. Especially, a free market economy. The government really likes things that make the country money and creates jobs. Maybe this is the key. Take these small scale ventures, and turn them into a national brand; something the government wouldn't want to regulate out of existence. But also something that doesn't force anyone to be a part of it or contribute to it. It's self-sustaining, and opt-in.

In order to be the biggest service to women, this store needed to be able to answer all questions and sell all products. I realized that something that hadn't really been done before was to bring medical professionals into the retail world. What if we had registered nurses or specialists on staff to answer any and all questions, and to provide the referrals for any next steps a woman might need after, say, deciding to change birth controls, or start fertility treatments. This was the key: combining health and pleasure. The sexual world and the clinical world.



PROCESS

Initial Approach

Over the summer of 2015, and entering the fall semester, I was focused on the idea of a store, but didn't have a clear picture of what it would look like, besides a place with a wide range of products. I was encouraged to take a step back, and re-evaluate. I decided to dive into some research focusing on women across the country, and specifically in politically conservative areas.

I spoke with women from Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, and North Carolina, in addition to my base group in New York. All in all, I probably spoke to over 30 women, but 10-12 of them more in depth.

I heard a range of stories. In Texas, a woman buying a pregnancy test at a pharmacy was told "it's meant to be if God wants you to have a baby." In North Carolina, one woman only found out about her ob/gyn's anti-women political views when he ran for political office- after he'd been her doctor through a pregnancy.

The women I spoke to were, for the most part, moderate to liberal, educated, but still often feeling misinformed or judged (or both) about their reproductive organs. I realized- this is who I'm designing for. There doesn't need to be a space for "red states" vs. "blue states" because the women who want and need this service, the women who would use this, are the same around the country. They all share a desire to have accurate, unbiased information, and not to feel judged or mis-led by the medical professionals they trust.

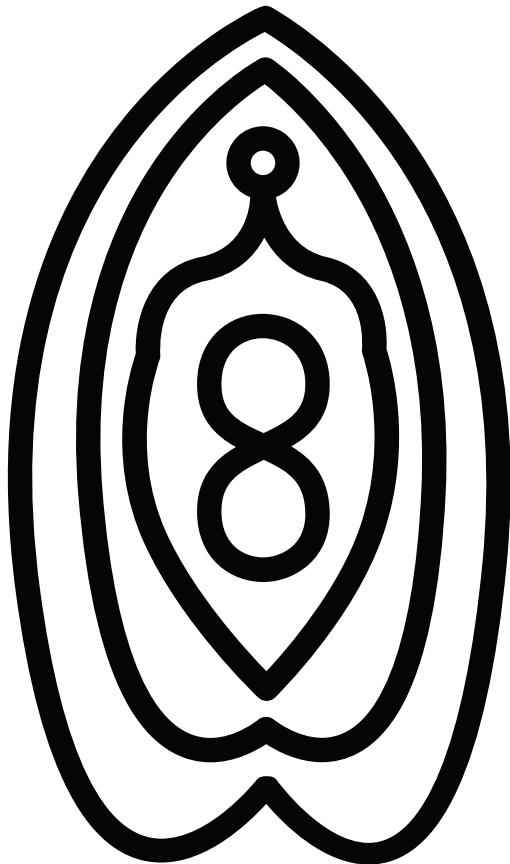
USERS

Of course, this made explaining my “user” extremely difficult. It’s hard to justify “all women, and most men” as a target. But basically, that’s what I wanted to design. A place that literally all women (and most men) could enter, feel comfortable, get what they need- be it information, guidance, or products- and leave with more knowledge than they entered with.

What I narrowed the audience down to was more than the women and men who entered had to be curious, interested in health, and have a desire to move past the taboo of the vagina.

Another takeaway from my research was that while products and staff were necessary- I had to think about why I was designing this space on an individual level- not just for the scale of it.

How do we get a woman to think about her reproductive health holistically and proactively? How can we get her to see the connections between early life decisions, and later in life outcomes? How can we better prepare someone for the things life may throw at her, so that when she encounters a problem, or infertility, or menopause, she isn’t shocked or devastated, but prepared for it.



WHY A STORE?



This was the question that haunted me the first few months of this process. I felt it, and instinctively knew it, but had a hard time articulating why this had to be a retail location as opposed to any other type of intervention. I went back through my research and found a few things that always popped out at me:

The power dynamic when you're at the doctor is skewed. Doctors are people of authority, who you've been told have all the answers and all the info. It takes a lot to challenge them. When people view themselves as consumers, they're much better informed and research their options.

Even if you have a great doctor who you trust, most women see their ob/gyns less than once a year, and when you're there, you may not even know what you can ask them.

Only 29% of doctors routinely ask their patients about sexual pleasure or orientation. You may not even think you can get into this territory with them, even if it's connected to your overall health

It's accessible. You can go anytime you want, no appointment necessary. You can come alone, or bring your partner, or a group of friends.

It's fun! It's not something to dread. You don't sit nervously wondering what's wrong with you when you're in a store.

Women love to talk about sex and vaginas, it's just that it's always in secret. It's in your friend's living room. It's not out in public. This was a way to combine these two worlds- the health info women need, with a fun, comfortable setting.

PROTOTYPING & PARTNERSHIPS

For my first prototypes what I focused on were the interactions and the sense of community that often happens when groups of women come together. I started small: some role playing with my colleagues on what these interaction would look like. I then found two partners who became key to the success of the project. **Liz Pastena**, a nurse practitioner at a women's clinic in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and **Lola Baston**, a sex educator and performance artist with a monthly show called 'Sex Ed A Go-Go.'



2ND PROTOTYPE



My second prototype put Lola and Liz in a room with a group of women, to see what (if any) benefits there were to having the two of them working together. It was such an interesting thing to observe. Often, Liz ended up talking to women one-on-one, about individual health questions and birth control options, and Lola would draw in a group talking about things more related to sex and relationships. The key though was that the participants could experience both in one place. They immediately felt safe enough to talk about very personal stories and issues, and ask a variety of questions.

Liz and Lola both found comfort in having the other one there; back-up for when they got questions that were a little out of their realm of expertise. Occasionally they would call to each other from across the room. The result was a balanced, holistic conversation about women's health and sexuality.

3RD PROTOTYPE

My third prototype was about taking this formula out of the classroom and into a public space. I rented space in arts and crafts store. I also had Lola test out a mini-workshop on choosing the right sex toy. At first, it seemed like no one was coming, so two of my teammates stood outside the store and asked passersby 'who wants to ask a medical professional and a sex educator anything you can think of about sex and vaginas.' This worked! We got about 12 people to come in. They sat and talked, got answers to questions they had never asked their ob/gyns, or in one case, something a woman had asked her ob/gyn about but didn't trust the answer she got.

This prototype confirmed that this is something that can succeed with women who didn't specifically ask for it- that almost all women can benefit from getting some answers to basic questions, or just being told 'there's nothing wrong with you!' Women can be so embarrassed about their vaginas, and understandably so based on what our own government communicate about them (or in what it doesn't say about them).*



*Yes, a politician was once banned from the floor for using the word 'vagina.'

DESIGN CHALLENGE

While this was all going on, I was trying to find the right design for the store. I had inspirations in other places women like to shop- Anthropologie, Lululemon. Places that have a following and a clear idea of what they're about. I also looked at places that get you curious or adventurous. Book stores, beauty salons, places where you may come in for one thing, but end up browsing, trying new things, and exploring. How could the space itself be used as a tool in this process to get women to think differently about their bodies?

What I came up with was twofold. First, the arrangement of the products was placed in order of where they fall in relation to a woman's life cycle. Starting with general health and menstruation, wrapping around through contraception, fertility, pregnancy, and menopause. There were several sections for sex toys as well, because sex doesn't stop once you leave the prime of your twenties and thirties. It felt like this would be a good way for women to start to realize things about their life beyond the stage they're currently in.

Next, I thought about the colors and graphics that would be in the store. It was important for them to feel fun and playful- not like a doctor's office or waiting room, where everything is usually calm and in pastels.

The big thing I wanted women to take away was this idea that you don't need to limit yourself to what you think is expected, and that vaginas and sex have been around since before mankind existed, so don't be ashamed.

I played around with dichotomies- pairing things that are old and new, myth and fact, expected vs unexpected. The tagline became "Getting Beyond..." Beyond Taboo, Beyond Bias, Beyond Healthcare, and Beyond "Blessing vs Curse" or "Science vs. Magic." All of the ways we have limited ourselves as humans in the way we think about reproductive health, sex, fertility, womanhood. This is a new way of thinking about our bodies and our choices.



THE NAME

The hardest part of this entire process, and I am not exaggerating when I say this, was coming up with a name. The project had informally been called “The Vagina Store” since last spring, but I always said that wouldn’t be the actual name. We cycled through so many ideas. At one point, had an entire chalkboard filled with euphemisms for vaginas. If it didn’t say it outright, it felt too poetic, wishy-washy. If it was graphic and blunt, there was the fear of being reductionist and exclusionary (to men, or people who don’t have those specific body parts but identify as female). I bought domain name after domain name, and each name came with it a host of reasons why it wasn’t correct. It wasn’t until a meeting with Cheryl three days before my pop-up that we settled on ‘The V Store.’ Blunt, but abstracted. Clear, unapologetic, and fun.

With the last iteration under my belt, a name, and a plan for the design of the store, I felt confident that the time was right for the pilot. A physical store with products, staff and workshops out in the public. Terrifying but exciting.

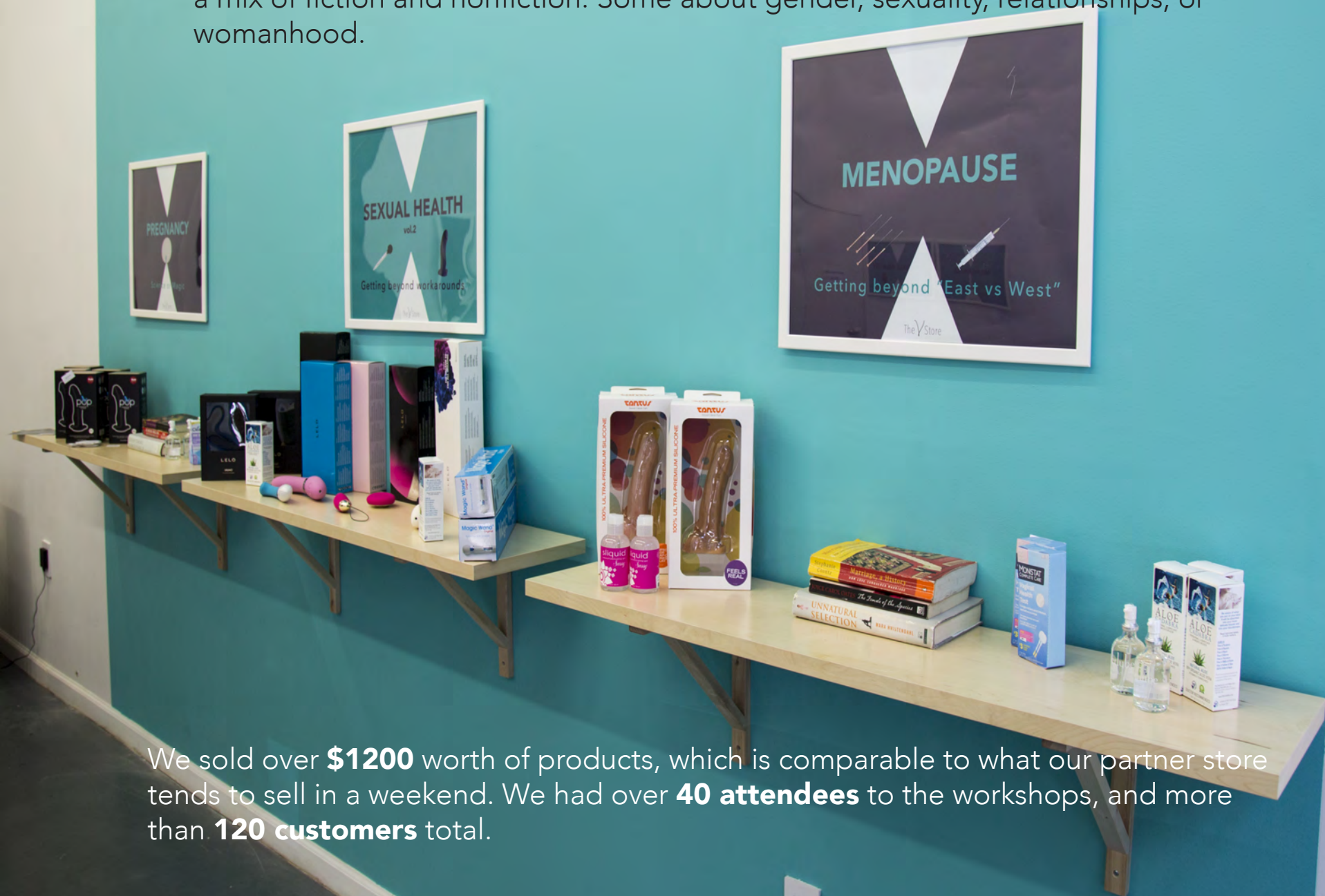
THE PILOT

The V Store: A 'Genius Bar' for Vaginas.

A place as comfortable as your living room with the knowledge base of your doctor.



The V store was open for 3 days: March 11, 12, and 13. We had mostly products related to sexual pleasure, due to my partnership with a store in Brooklyn called Shag, but I was able to obtain some sample health products such as LunaPads and Diva Cups. I also brought along books of mine that were related to the topic- a mix of fiction and nonfiction. Some about gender, sexuality, relationships, or womanhood.



We sold over **\$1200** worth of products, which is comparable to what our partner store tends to sell in a weekend. We had over **40 attendees** to the workshops, and more than **120 customers** total.



Kegels and Pelvic Floor Exercises with Haylin Belay

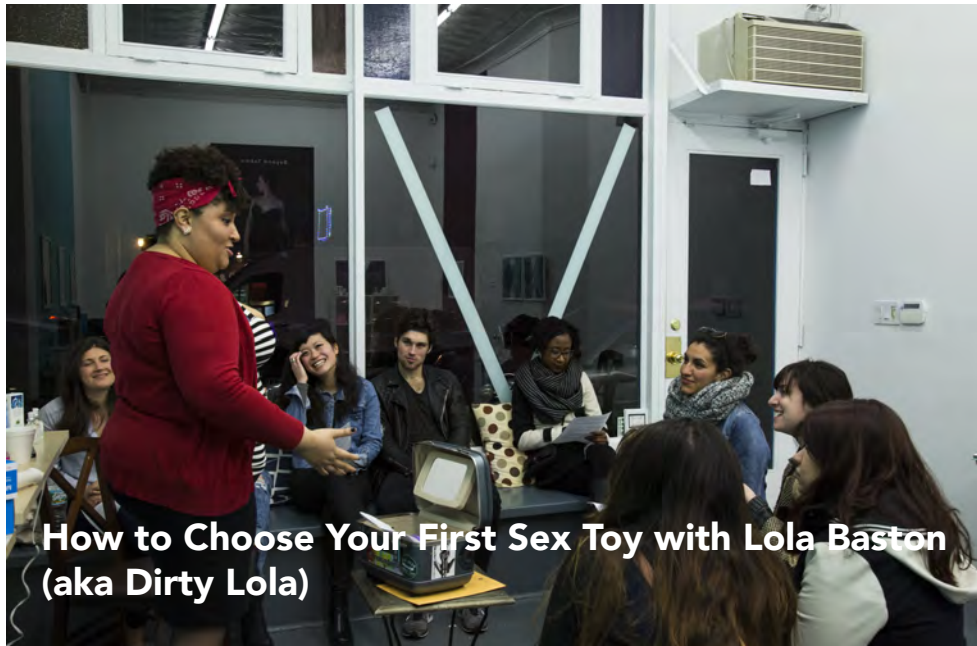


A Conversation on the History of Women's Health with Virginia Reath, R.P.A, MPH

We had four different workshops. The topics were chosen first, in order to appeal to a range of audiences, and second to touch on the range of issues and products that the store offered.



Things your Gyno Never Tells You with Liz Pastena, N.P.



How to Choose Your First Sex Toy with Lola Baston (aka Dirty Lola)

One of the main reasons the workshops were so important was for women to be able to use this as a conversation starter- either with staff, other customers in the store, or with friends and family after she left. They were successful in starting conversations with the staff and for buying products, but they were less successful in starting in-store conversations among customers. The community aspect that had formed in my earlier prototypes didn't come together as naturally in this store setting.

I have some theories about this, that I will use in future pop-up shops or prototyping sessions. In the second prototype, everyone who was there was connected- even if they were strangers to each other, they all knew someone there, and that made it easier for them to feel safer and open up.

FEEDBACK

“Over the past 20 years I've watched our society fall back into a less progressive sexual health minded attitude. coming to the V store gave me hope that there might be a return to a progressive mindset toward sex and health.”

“[This store] makes me rethink different options for my health care that I wasn't aware of before hand. Seems like the more times you will enter into a store like yours, the more educated you will become of your own health and alternative health care.”

“I went to the shop with my mom and it was great hearing her interactions with everyone in the space, she's so proud to be a woman! I'm not sure I would have seen that side of her had I not visited the shop with her. It was definitely a welcoming & comfortable environment.”

“My 15 minutes at the V store really encouraged me to have discussions with my friends and my partner about the things I discovered there. I found myself thinking about the V store a lot. very encouraging. I hope it continues and expands.”

TAKEAWAYS

The one thing most of the customers had feedback on in terms of what needs the most work was the design inside the store. The graphics may have been too subtle, and didn't quite have the impact I had hoped it would. They were the kind of thing that may take some time to sit with and think about. When you're trying to grab someone's attention, it may need to be bolder and blunter than my "getting beyond" concept.

I also learned that the books I brought in may have been too subtly placed as well. One woman wrote:

"I would've loved to see books as well. Books about anything! Sexual health, instructional books, photo books, children's sex and gender education books, erotica, etc."

This made it clear that I would need to incorporate the books into the design better, and perhaps work more on the seating area, to make it clear one can just sit and rifle through any books, magazines, or other readings we can have to offer as part of the experience there, if they prefer that to talking to someone in person.

One very valuable lesson I learned throughout this whole process was also about how to take feedback and suggestions, but still keep the project my own. There were many times when one piece of new information or suggestion from someone I admire would send me down a completely different path, so it was important to recognize those moments and not lose sight of the ultimate goal.



I learned that I hit a nerve with women with this store. Many of the women who came in work in public health, or some facet of women's health or sexual education, and they all wanted to get involved in future steps. They saw this as a missing piece and immediately understood the larger context for a space such as this. I felt like my assumptions had been validated, and the key going forward is sitting with my feedback, and pinpointing the best way to take this further.

NEXT STEPS

Going forward, I plan to use the next few months to work on building more partnerships, especially in regards to the healthcare fields. While the space itself is a retail outlet, it can be a resource of knowledge and referrals for any issues or questions a woman may have that can't be addressed with what we have to offer.

I plan on having another pop-up location- either stand alone, or in some kind of venue (such as what Somargasburg does for food). There are sexual health expos, and retail pop-up markets that I want to explore.

In the next rounds, I also want to try different ways to help a group conversation start organically. I want to try utilizing meet-up groups, invitation-only hours, or dedicated group chat times ala "adult swim" settings. Another aspect is to start the business in a model like a tupperware party- where you have a host who invites everyone they know, who then invite others they know. Testing out new ways to engage women, and make them more comfortable talking to each other (as well as trusting the service we provide) will be paramount to the store's success.

I will also be pursuing financial partners to make the corporate dream a reality. I do see this as something that can exist around the country. Finally a way to make women's health not feel like a secondary issue, and to take it out of the hands of politicians. Women have the knowledge and the desire to be in control of their lives and their futures. This is the tool that will help to make that happen for everyone in the country.

THANK YOU