

CONVERSATIONS WITH MAKERS OF VEGAN SEX TOYS

By Christine Ro

It's a brave new world for sexually adventurous vegans. Principles no longer have to be a barrier to good times, as many companies have realised that marketing erotic products to vegans can be good for the environment, animal welfare, and profits.

Here are just three examples of sex-based entrepreneurs leading the way. They're united by a commitment to ethics that extends beyond vegan manufacturing, from working with nonprofits to using recycled materials. In other ways, they're very diverse, from a one-woman band to a multinational organisation. They're also varied in their own personal dietary habits: one is a devoted vegan, one is mostly vegetarian, and one is an omnivore. This diversity shows that allies of veganism can come in many shapes.

The public health guru

Clive Woodworth is the managing director of GLYDE Health. He started the company in Sydney, Australia in 1990 after spotting a gap in the market for high-quality products. He spent six months researching manufacturing locations among the rubber plantations of East Asia, before settling on one in Malaysia. GLYDE Health's product range now includes 13 condom styles, oral dams, and lubricant.

Why vegan?

GLYDE products weren't initially vegan. The decision to make them animal-friendly came after Clive was approached by a vegan group that was disappointed by the lack of suitable condoms. Like most condom manufacturers, GLYDE had been using casein, a derivative of cow's milk, as a binding agent. The reason for using casein, as Clive explains, is that it's "inexpensive in powder form as a coagulant to bring the liquid latex to the required viscosity".

The company wanted to respond to customer needs. So in response to the vegan group's advocacy, GLYDE decided to replace the casein with a vegetable protein, and to confirm that none of its products would be tested on animals. GLYDE's products are annually certified as vegan by the Vegan Society.

How are the products made?

GLYDE's natural latex is purchased from government-registered plantations in Malaysia. These contract with locally trained "tappers" to collect the raw latex from rubber plantation trees. At the processing plant, condoms undergo machine-based and electronic testing, for instance to make sure that they're free from holes and won't burst under air pressure.



What other kinds of ethics are important?

GLYDE produces Red Ribbon condoms, which it distributes free of charge to nonprofit organisations. These condoms can then be used for fundraising activities.

Why are they called "oral dams" and not "dental dams"?

GLYDE's products evolved in response to not just vegan needs, but also those of the queer community. At a sexual health conference in 1995, Clive was berated by two lesbian participants, who complained "there is so much stuff for men, but we have to make do with cut down condoms or cling wrap kitchen film – or even worse, bloody dental dams." Clive was taken aback, but asked for more information. The two women proceeded to give him explicit details about what they wanted.

At a trade fair a few months later, Clive began talking to a manufacturer of dental dams for use in dentistry (to prevent patients from swallowing things). With his encounter at the sexual health conference in his mind, Clive talked through plans to make the dental dams larger and much more sheer – and thus more pleasant to use. GLYDE is eager to differentiate its oral dams from conventional dental dams.

What's the deal with female condoms?

Unlike many other condom manufacturers, GLYDE produces female (internal) as well as male condoms. It has a number of NGO clients, including family planning organisations and health clinics. The demand there is for contraceptives that allow women more control over their own sexual health. An internal condom isn't made of latex. It can be inserted eight hours before sexual activity and doesn't need to be removed immediately afterward.

The bondage gear craftsman

Kinky Vegan is based in Dresden, Germany and sells artificial leather bondage gear. It's the brainchild of Martin Gottschlich, who was a physics student when the idea came to him. Sitting around a campfire at an animal liberation conference, Martin was talking to a friend who made vegan wooden dildos. (Most wooden dildos aren't vegan as they use glue derived from bones.) This conversation inspired him to research suitable materials, begin working on designs, and eventually trade in physics for sex products. Kinky Vegan is clearly a labour of love for Martin, who deliberately keeps prices low in order to be accessible to as many people as possible.

Why vegan?

Martin has been vegetarian since the age of 15 and vegan from a few years after that. He links his veganism to his emotional ties to non-human animals. And his beliefs and lifestyle are closely intertwined with his business: "Kinky Vegan as a business certainly wouldn't exist, if I hadn't gone vegan. Going vegan has been a major shift for me not only in my diet, but also in that I started to think more critically. For example, this led me to question traditional work lifestyles and set the ground for working on my own terms and being self-employed."

How are the products made?

Martin notes that vegans aren't well catered for in mainstream sex shops. The products that do exist – such as cheap pleather cuffs – generally aren't of good quality. Martin decided to work with a special artificial leather called Lorica, which has several advantages: "I would actually say that Lorica is superior to leather as the look and feel is really fantastic, while it is also really sturdy and easy-care (you can wash it with your laundry). It's also relatively easy to work with: I use an old Pfaff sewing machine, which is probably somewhat stronger than today's average domestic sewing machines, but you don't need an industrial sewing machine when you want to work with Lorica."

What's the connection between bike parts and BDSM products?

Kinky Vegan uses recycled materials in innovative ways, such as used bicycle inner tubes for neck corsets. Martin also teaches workshops on making sex toys from used bike parts. As he notes, "That is always such a delightful picture to have a room full of strangers gathered around a large table making sex toys."

The entrepreneur of edibles

Eat Me! Intimates is an Etsy shop based in Washington State that has already gotten quite a bit of attention, with write-ups in Cosmopolitan and BuzzFeed. It stands out for its dizzying array of edible massage oils, many of them with unusual flavors (butterbeer or cucumber coconut, anyone?).

The founder and proprietor of, Eat Me! Intimates, Alice Adams, takes a lighthearted approach to her business. She calls herself "The Lubricator", has adopted "Go Fornicate Yourself!" as the shop's tagline, and says the company started on "a dark and horny night..."

Why vegan?

Ethical business principles are important to Alice, an on-and-off vegetarian. She decided to run a vegan business in order to minimise her environmental impact, and considers it a business responsibility to reduce harm in other ways as well. Eat Me! uses Fairtrade cocoa (such as in its warming chocolate body paint), cuts down on packaging (such as eliminating packing slips), keeps waste to a minimum (and recycles what waste is produced), and supports other

ethical small businesses (such as suppliers). As Alice says, "I want Eat Me! to leave a small footprint, but a large ripple."

How are the products made?

It's easier to make massage oils vegan than the condoms and BDSM harnesses mentioned above. But the Eat Me! process does involve careful research to ensure that no animal products, such as dairy and animal fats, make it into the products. Alice's favorite part of the process isn't the production line, but the formulation and naming of new products. ("Hot Flogged Buns" is a particularly fun one.) With 450 items and counting, this shows no signs of slowing down.

And what does Alice's mother think?

As Alice says, "I've always thought it amusing that my mommy designed my logo. I love it so much I put it on everything. Eat Me! hats, Eat Me! water bottles, Eat Me! flamethrower..."

It can be hard work committing to a vegan lifestyle, given the many animal products hiding out in even the most intimate of places. And as Alice points out, "there are a lot of products out there that are vegan but not directly marketed as such. I've also found products that *are* marketed as vegan, but the ingredients told a different story."

The good news is that companies like Kinky Vegan, Eat Me! Intimates and GLYDE Health are making it easier to avoid animal products on, and in, your sensitive spaces. **BV**

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