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## WHAT WOMEN WANT

**Gender-based marketing is a risky business, but it's a risk companies can't afford not to take**

1955: The United States and Panama sign the canal treaty, James Dean dies in a car crash, and Scrabble makes a dramatic entrance into the board game market. With 20 million American women now licensed to drive, Chrysler rolls out the Dodge La Femme and hails it as the first and only car designed for "your majesty, the modern American woman." A hardtop custom coupe version of the Royal Lancer, the Dodge La Femme features "Heather Rose" exterior, upholstery and trim, and an eyebrow-raising set of accessories that includes a raincoat, umbrella, purse, lipstick and compact. But it's not, apparently, what the 1950s modern American woman had in mind; the Dodge La Femme bombs and is pulled off the market the following year.

Today, almost half a century later, the Dodge La Femme lives on as a vintage car - a collector's item that offers both sentimental value and the intriguing appeal of a somewhat tainted past. To marketers, however, the Dodge La Femme is highly valuable for a very different reason: it's a shining example of what companies shouldn't do when trying to create and market products that they hope will appeal to women.

"Marketing to women should be transparent, not pink," says Martha Barletta, president of The TrendSight Group in Chicago and author of *Marketing to Women: How to Understand, Reach and Increase Your Share of the World's Largest Market Segment*. "Companies who want to reach women need to really show that they're sensitive to the needs of this market and that they're taking it seriously. Because if they think that it's all about decor and all they need to do is paint their brand pink, that will backfire on them 99 out of a hundred times."

### Know Your Customer

Even with the lessons learned from the Dodge La Femme fiasco, and the supposed evolution of marketing principles and techniques over the last five decades, gender-based marketing - a term that almost always applies to marketing that is directed to women - remains a risky undertaking for most companies. Get it wrong and you're certain to offend. Miss the mark and your targeted audience will ignore you. Either way, you're looking at a very costly mistake.

But as marketing experts like Barletta will tell you, gender-based marketing is a risk that companies simply can't afford not to take. Consider these numbers: women account for more than half the population in North America - 15.4 million women versus 15.1 million men in Canada. They make up almost half the workforce in Canada and are responsible for more than half of business trips taken each year. Women are also leading the entrepreneurial charge in the country; according to Industry Canada, four out of five businesses are started by women.

Most significantly, research has shown that women control 80% of consumer dollars spent in North America.

"Marketing to women represents opportunities for all companies and is imperative for companies in key industries like automotive, computers, consumer electronics and financial services," says Barletta. "Women represent the largest market in the world. By not talking to women, you're leaving a lot of money on the table."

So how does one talk to the largest, most powerful market in the world? Doreen Menaker, national manager of corporate and marketing research at Sears Canada Inc., where women account for up to 70 per cent of customers, says it really all boils down to a basic marketing tenet: understanding your customer.

"Gender marketing is not about male versus female," she says. "What it's about is understanding how your customer wants to use your product, how they shop your store, the level of service they expect, the style they want and the price level they're comfortable with."

By taking this approach, says Menaker, Sears has avoided the assumptions and generalizations normally tied to gender. Instead, the company focuses on actual findings from customer research. For instance, Sears learned from its studies that the quality and level of service in fitting rooms is very important to its primary buyer. Unlike male customers, whose sole purpose in trying on clothing is to ensure it fits, Sears' female buyers try on clothes to scrutinize how the colour looks against their skin, how the waist fits and whether the neckline is cut in a way that is flattering to them.

"Women have more demands and, when they're trying on clothes, they often need to have someone assisting them to get another size or another colour," says Menaker. "We recognized this fact and employed a different service strategy for our female customers."

### **Beyond Focus Groups**

Joanne Thomas Yaccato, president of the Toronto-based consulting firm The Thomas Yaccato Group, and author of *The 80% Minority: Reaching the Real World of Women Consumers*, says companies that want to reach women need to start looking at the world from a woman's point of view - in essence putting on what Yaccato calls a "gender lens" and filtering everything through it.

Some marketers have successfully gained insights into what women want by conducting market research in "girlfriend groups" - where all participants know each other and belong to the same social circle - or Oprah-style talks. Unlike the artificial and contrived atmosphere often produced by focus groups, these settings encourage candid exchanges and often yield surprising gems of information.

While this type of research is valuable, Yaccato thinks companies need to go even further. More precisely, they need to locate their gender lens closer to home - right in their own management team.

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"The vast majority of decision makers in companies - from human resources, advertising and sales training - are predominantly male executives," she says. "Well, you need to have a balance of what I call x and y chromosomes in the company by having women in every one of these departments. And I'm talking about having women in roles as decision makers."

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Yaccato cites Bank of Montreal as an example of a company that understood that the best way to promote its services to women was to create an equitable working environment. In the early 1990s, Tony Comper, BMO Financial Group's chairman and CEO, formed the Task Force on the Advancement of Women. The task force's mandate was to remove the barriers that had, for many years, prevented female employees from moving up the ranks. It obviously succeeded; today, women comprise 35% of executives at BMO, compared to just 9% in 1991. Women also run three of the company's five Canadian divisions.

And just as Comper had predicted - that women would respond positively to a corporate culture that values equity, respect and dignity - BMO's female customers have overwhelmingly expressed their approval. Ongoing customer tracking reveals that female customers are more loyal to the bank than their male counterparts and have placed a larger share of their assets - 5% more than men - with BMO.

"The bank must 'get it right' with employees," Comper is quoted in Yaccato's book, "who in turn will get it right with customers, who in turn will reward the bank with more business, which in turn enables the organization as a whole to get it right with shareholders."

### **What Men Want Too**

One of the most common arguments against gender-based marketing is that it might alienate the male market. The tact is, what women want often turns out to be what men also wanted but just never bothered to ask for. Take Home Depot, for example. The bigbox hardware retailer had known for some time that, while women accounted for 50% of the company's sales, their influence on overall purchases was even higher. Recognizing that women focused more on projects and outcomes and less on products and their features, Home Depot installed design showrooms that presented "room vignettes." It also trained its sales associates to double-check that customers had everything they need for a project, and made its stores brighter, cleaner and less cluttered.

"We have more of a decor focus than ever before," says Pat Wilkinson, director of marketing for Home Depot Canada. "But while the improvements we've made may appeal particularly to women, they also benefit our male customers and increase their satisfaction with the shopping experience. Because in home improvements, the motivations are the same whether you're a man or a woman. It's about pride of home."

Over the years, Home Depot has built a reputation as a company sensitive to the needs of women. Last year, it launched "do-it-herself" workshops - ongoing women-only clinics that aim to demystify the power tool.

"We've had a huge response," says Wilkinson. "In the U.S., some stores had turnouts of 700 people. One of the things we did in Canada is we limited the number of people who can participate to 25 people. But one store in Quebec had sign-up sheets with almost 200 people, so they split that up and did five workshops instead."

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Like Yaccato, Wilkinson believes that the companies that succeed in marketing to women are those whose own cultures are based on diversity and inclusion, and whose executive ranks welcome women.

"One of the things people ask us all the time is 'how did Home Depot get to be this kind of company?' Part of it is having a female leader," says Wilkinson. "And 40% of our senior management is made up of women."

In spite of the sound rationale behind a marketing strategy that includes - if not specifically targets - women, many companies today are reluctant to acknowledge that, yes, they've noticed women as a distinct segment within their market and are talking to them directly for the first time. Coors Beer recently released an ad that showed a collage of real "empowered" women, including a firefighter, a professional dirt biker, surfer, cowhand and black belt karate instructor. The TV spot, which rolls out to the tune of Tom Jones' She's a Lady, is conspicuously devoid of that one constant in beer advertising: the elicited babe in a bikini.

Hillary Martin, Coors' manager of external communication, insists that the ad is simply part of a "tapestry" approach to addressing different demographics. "It's not intended to be solely a commercial directed towards women," says Martin. "We don't want to alienate; our goal is to have broad acceptability with our market."

Whether or not Coors was targeting women with its new ad, Barletta at The TrendSight Group says the beer company is on to a good thing. "All the other beer companies are focusing on their male customers and ignoring women," she says. "Well guess what's going to happen to the one company that actually starts talking to women the way they want to be talked to? Even if you increased your share of the women's market by only 1% with that one ad, you're still looking at a lot of dollars. And the dollars are incontrovertible proof that marketing to women is well worth the effort."