

The Power of Women As An Economic Force

Evidence shows women are a global economic force that has been neglected for far too long. Forward thinking world industry leaders are finally waking up and leveraging gender differences, **not** out of fairness, but because of the **business case**:

- *Women represent the world's largest market opportunity, bigger than China and India combined;*
- *Women worldwide control the majority of consumer spending (about \$20 trillion), whether its electronics, houses, home furnishings, travel, financial services or automobiles - a figure that may grow as much as 40% in the next five years to \$28 trillion;*
- *Women earn \$13 trillion a year, a number that could increase to \$18 trillion in the next five years.*

Clearly, recognising the power of the female customer will help companies and communities become more prosperous and sustainable.

Who Is the female consumer?

Now that we have substantial economic facts on why women are such an attractive customer segment, it is important to understand some of the universal trends that drive this economic growth? Over recent decades, the number of women in the workforce has increased significantly. As a result, women need more and different products and services. In many markets, women are also delaying marriage. With more disposable income, women are increasingly buying their own homes, cars, financial products and other items typically purchased by men. The divorce rate has also increased across many countries, with implications on the number of goods required. Finally, as women tend to live longer than men, there are more older women who are outliving their partners and who have inherited their parents' wealth. Evidence suggests this segment will increasingly seek out a range of new products and services not currently on offer that cater to the ageing population.

The bottom line is that marketing to the female customer is key.

Appealing to female consumers: capturing market share?

Chances are that if a man needs a pair of socks, a shirt or a tie, it is most likely his wife will buy them. Not only do women shop for themselves, they are also very likely to shop for all others in the household, including friends and aging parents. So what are women looking for when they make their purchases? How can you capture their attention to not only buy your products or services but keep them loyal to your brand?

Over and over again, women express their dissatisfaction with many products, services and options available to them, explaining that marketing campaigns do not reflect their needs. If companies tracked their buyers by gender, they would probably make a number of changes in their approach to design, marketing and sales. More importantly, companies should ensure they have input from women, both female employees and customers.

When it comes to design, women in particular will tend to pay attention to a number of

details before a final decision is made. Specifically, they look at design, workmanship, pricing and the promotional material that goes with the product:

Design of the product:

- Originality and creativity of design – Is there a new ‘angle’ on the product? What are the practical attributes and benefits?
- Functionality of design - Will it be easy to carry? Will it be easy to use? Is it easy to understand?
- Use of colour
- Quality of design - Will it last? What are the guarantees and return policies?
- Utilisation of materials to design - Is the material suited? Is it environmentally friendly?

Workmanship of the product(s):

- Finishing details and craftsmanship - Is the product well constructed? Is it child safe?
- Clothes and products that fit - Were the design teams anatomically aware for not only different genders but also different ages/sizes?
- The quality of the product itself is more important than any particular style or trend.

Saleability of the product(s):

- Pricing and consumer appeal - Does the price match the quality?
- Is there perceived value to distinguish the product from others’ in the marketplace? Why should a customer buy this product/service?

Promotional material

- Proper packaging, presentation and labeling is a must - What are the products made of and how are they cared for?
- Is there a link to the community? Women like authenticity and human interest stories, especially if they know that there are connections to worthy causes.
- Many buyers think ‘green’. Are your products, techniques or materials re-cycled, reclaimed, natural, non-toxic, organic or clean? If so, promote it - it has added-value for a growing number of buyers and customers.

In addition to design, when a woman has a great experience with a product or service, it is probably due to some other factors, such as:

- **Services and settings that are kid and husband friendly** – Ensure facilities are accessible, for example store designs with big aisles that take strollers; comfortable sitting spaces for partners and others to wait while trying on clothes; clean washrooms with proper baby-change facilities; adequate parking with designated spots for mothers; activities for kids (crayons, videos, toys) especially while negotiating house and automotive deals.
- **Timing and convenience** - Respect women’s time by offering services, delivery options and service calls outside regular work hours and work days. Be flexible and accommodating.

- **Communication style** - Ensure communications are respectful, not patronising. Provide relevant information on what the service will actually provide and/or about how something works.
- **Trust and peace of mind** - Ensure the customer does not need to worry if the product doesn't work. What is the worst case scenario? What are the guarantees/reassurances?
- **Cause marketing and "green" campaigns** - Worthy causes are especially important to women.
- **Great customer service and after-care services** - By far, the most important element to building loyalty and referrals is the company's care services. People may not remember what you said or what you did. But they will always remember how you made them *feel*. There must be evidence that the company cares about *the customer* and not just the sale. Always ask yourself how you would want to be treated and build your customer service with this in mind.

How to reach women

Gone are the days when companies should rely entirely on magazines, TV, direct mail, and/or radio ads. These methods should not be discounted entirely, however, because in the end, most mediums will work if it is a great campaign and relates to women.

The internet in particular has changed behavioral and buying patterns for billions of people. Consider these options:

- On-line shopping - Women have taken to the internet in an amazing way, and now account for over half of all shoppers online. It is appealing to women as there are no crowds to fight and they can spend time on other priorities. But a site must be user-friendly, including telephone numbers for human assistance to place orders, cost sensitive shipping and return policy options.
- Great products and great service leads to word-of-mouth - When women have great experiences, referrals are made through all the social media tools (blogs, podcasting, on-line editorial, etc.) as well as in person. Think of customers as an advocacy group. You can't get better advertising than third party marketing and endorsements from satisfied customers - by far the most effective marketing vehicle for reaching and influencing women. Providing an "e-mail a friend" option on your corporate site is one way to facilitate this.
- Hyperlinked e-newsletters and e-mail campaigns - Women like to be informed and educated, as well as emotionally connected. Show emotion, humour and sincerity in everything you develop and send out.
- Focus groups - Women like dialogue and to give their opinion, especially if it affects them socially and/or economically. Get them interested in your brand, your corporate social cause, etc.

Whatever medium is used, keep in mind that cultural context is important. Customise appropriately for local markets and different segments (i.e. the elderly women versus a teenager; Hong Kong versus Dubai).

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