MARKETING TO WOMEN:
AN OVERVIEW

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If you don’t believe that we are living in a challenging, exciting, and innovative time when it comes to marketing to women, then you haven’t been paying much attention. More than ever before, women are making money and choosing how they wish to spend it, both in the home and in the office. Many marketers have noticed, and they are flocking to women, trying to get them to buy their products. Some have had great success, some have had even greater failure.

At its very core, marketing to women is simply good marketing. The kind of marketing that makes people sit up in their chair, take notice, pay attention, laugh, sympathize, or cry. It should be one step in a process of great customer service that your business delivers.

Targeting your marketing to women takes extra knowledge, and a little more finesse. That finesse is where marketers usually get tripped up; and truthfully, that is understandable. We live in a world where women run their own businesses and are the CEO’s of major companies, yet where the phenomenal success of a website like Pinterest leads marketers to think women are still generally concerned with matters of the home. Truthfully, the sweet spot is probably somewhere more in the middle. You can’t sell everything to everyone, no matter how much you want to. While some general rules apply, the core of your strategy should come from getting a deep understanding of your specific female customer.

Here, we will run through the essentials of marketing to women. We will discuss why women are so important to market to, the basics of what women want to see when companies sell to them, and the various ways you can go about your marketing to women. These tips and ideas can serve as a starting point for your marketing plan, or at least get you thinking about ways your business can tap into the female market. First, let’s discuss why you should care in the first place.

Why Should I Care About Marketing To Women?

Hopefully that question doesn’t need much of an explanation, but let’s take a look at the numbers anyway. In her book Pocketbook Power, Bernice Kanner (2004) lays out the economic force of women.

Women make up 51% of the population and spend $6 trillion dollars every year. They make 88% of retail purchases and buy:

- 53% of all stocks
- 51% of all sports equipment
- 66% of all PC’s
- 51% of consumer electronics
- 47% of hardware and home improvement materials
- 85% of toilet tissue
- 81% of groceries
- 94% of all home furnishings
- 46% of men’s wear
- 60% of flowers
- 65% of cars
- 80% of all health care
- 88% of medical insurance
- 60% of self help books
- 4 out of 5 homes in America
- 7 out of 10 appliances

Women also manage 75%...
Women also manage 75% of family finances. They write 80% of all checks and initiate 65% of all divorces.

Women comprise over 62% of the workforce and make up over half of all managers. Every 60 seconds a woman starts a new business. Women earn 55% of all bachelors and masters degrees, 59% of associate degrees, and 40% of doctoral degrees.

One in four women make more than their husbands, and 43% of people with assets over $500,000 dollars are women. It is believed that by the year 2020, women will control most of the wealth in the US.

So, convinced yet? You should be. You should also be worried. Why? Because for all those trillions of dollars women are spending, Lisa Johnson and Andrea Learned (2004) found only a fraction of women who could name even one company that they felt spoke to their specific needs.

While that’s a signal that women are truly having a disservice done to them, it also means that there is a lot of room and potential for your company to do something great.

At this point you may be thinking, “Awesome. We can totally make half of our products pink, yellow and purple. That’s easy! We’ll call it “Widgets for Women” and it will be a smashing success. Think of the packaging, with flowers all over it. We’ve got this.”

Stop right there, and don’t take another step. “Marketing to women” is not interchangeable with “turn everything pink.” As we’ll discuss later, going that route, and even naming your product “for women,” often has disastrous results. You’re going to have to go much deeper than that and figure out what your female audience really needs and wants, what their real problems are, and how you can fix them.

While this is no easy task, and each business is likely to find that their customers need something a little different, there are some general rules to follow and basic ways to go about it. In the next section, we will dig into what the modern women is in need of, and what she really wants to see in marketing messages trying to catch her attention.

Who Are These Women, And What Do They Want?

In her book Why She Buys, Bridget Brennan (2009) says it well:

“If the consumer economy had a sex, it would be female. If the business world had a sex, it would be male. And therein lies the pickle.”

She has picked up on something interesting, and that is that corporate culture (even when lots of women are involved) just tends to be different than consumer culture. Whether or not corporate culture needs to become more feminine is a discussion for another time and place, however, it is imperative that corporations at least start to understand the female market, and what they are doing.

So where to start? If you take a wide look at all the different women in the US, you’ll find an incredibly diverse group. Some women make lots of money, some women get by on very little. Some have children as teenagers, some marry in their fifties. Some are straight, some are lesbian, some live in small towns, some live in big cities. Some work outside the home, some never went to college. The truth is, you can’t possibly target each and every one of these groups with one message. Unless you are a massively popular large brand, your customers most likely come from a smaller group of the overall female population. For example, a woman looking to buy a filter for the pool in her backyard is not the same woman wondering how she is going to afford to put gas
in her car this week. Figuring out exactly which woman is looking at your company is the first (very big) step you can make.

While this whitepaper isn’t about the specifics of each group, there are still some interesting things to note that can apply across all groups of women. Both the woman shopping for a pool filter and the woman concerned about paying for gas have probably purchased a similar product at some point; something like toothpaste, toilet paper, or a can of soda. What could potentially drive these two women to go for the same brand, and what strategies can all businesses look to as they start to plan their marketing to women? Here are a few:

**Women just want you to get real.**

This is a tricky point for a lot of corporations, the idea of “getting real.” A lot of marketing, especially marketing to women, focuses on the aspirational. Purchase this expensive dress and your life will be better. Make over your home and your family will be happier. Eat this diet food and you will be beautiful and find the man of your dreams.

To some extent, a little fantasy is nice. But in some cases (or lots of cases), it just makes women roll their eyes. If aliens came down from another planet to study humans, they might think all women do is plan weddings, eat yogurt, do yoga, and drink cosmopolitans in giggly groups of ethnically diverse friends. Get real! That doesn’t describe the majority of the average woman’s life at all.

Years and years of aspirational messages and the idea that women should be perfect did more harm than good. Women were expected to have homes that looked like something out of a catalogue, children that were perfectly behaved, marriages that never ended, and faces that were perfect from the start to the end of the day. The backlash to all of this is that women are pushing to have their true selves heard.

Holiday marketing is a great example of this. A home, meal, and family that looks perfect and happy all the time? Forget it. A real woman is probably just hoping that her children don’t throw their Christmas dinner across the table and onto her high maintenance sister. Or that her relatives don’t belittle her career, comparing her to her uber-successful cousin. Or that her grandmother doesn’t chastise her for not being married. That’s what is on the minds of real women, and it’s time for marketers to realize that.

In a post on her blog Marketing to Women Online called “Turkey and Tequila,” Holly Buchanan (2010) shares a touching story about how one Thanksgiving, her sister was going through a difficult divorce. When Buchanan asked her sister what she wanted to do, she replied, “Sit on the bathroom floor and drink tequila.” The sisters shared that experience, and it even became a tradition. Buchanan’s point in sharing this story is that it’s not the usual holiday message pushed on us by marketers, but it is an experience much truer to what real women go through. Marketing tequila to women over the holidays seems unorthodox, but there are a lot of women who could probably use it.

The inability of companies to get real, quit stereotyping, and portray women as they truly are is why a lot of people get nervous when the phrase “marketing to women” starts getting tossed around in the first place. It has the potential to go to a really bad place. Just look at how Samsung attempted to market their Galaxy S IV phone to women during its launch. According to a story by Rebecca Greenfield (2013) in The Atlantic, it was a train wreck. A group of women, apparently bridesmaids (since all women do is get married and participate in weddings), showed off how the phone can help you cook, lose weight, and, of course, wedding plan. When a version of the story by Doug Barry (2013) appeared on the website Jezebel, one commenter said:
"...just tell us what we can do with it in our everyday lives and what special things are included and if we like it, we’ll buy it. But it saddens me that companies still pull these kinds of stunts because not only do they think this is how all women behave and care about (which is farther from the truth), but that women buy into this, thus reinforcing this infantilizing, patronizing attitude."

Another added:

“I spend a lot of time amongst my fellow humans in a large metropolitan city, and very rarely do I see a group of women or a lone woman behaving like an obnoxious, nail-did, yogurt-chugging, chocolate-glimphing, giggle-talking, puppy-squishing, super-gabby Barbie person. Sure, they are out there, but the GRAND MAJORITY of women I encounter act like normal people. Or as the media likes to call them, ‘men.’"

Samsung would have been smart to just show off how great the phone is. Does it have cool features? Is it fast? Will it not drop your call? If you have problems, will there be good customer service? Those are the things women care about, probably just like men.

If you feel nervous about marketing to women because you don’t want to insult them, rest assured that if you do it correctly, that type of thing isn’t likely to happen. The new age of marketing to women means treating them like equal, normal people (even if a lot of businesses are still getting the memo). Understand who your customers are, don’t use stereotypes to guess at what they want, and set up your marketing not to shout “Women, we made this for you!” but to show off the great features that should make women want to do business with you, regardless. That is the point of “getting real,” and it will get you far.

Women want exceptional service from an exceptional company.

People, be they men or women, want personalized, high quality service. It doesn’t matter if it is B2B or B2C, you are dealing with a person, and that person wants to feel like a valued customer. They also want to believe that the company they are doing business with is morally good, and has a good reputation. Women may put you up to even tougher standards when it comes to meeting her needs, she may be more likely to vocalize to others if you fail her, and she is certainly more likely to care about what kind of a reputation you have as a company. So how can you answer to these demands?

For one, know that women’s minds are scientifically different than men’s. It doesn’t mean better or worse, or that she wants to be treated like a delicate flower, it just means she may go about decision making differently. Johnson and Learned (2004) note that women tend to make decisions in a more holistic way. That means they take into consideration everything from how a product looks and functions to how a company treats its employees and what charity work or ethical positions they have taken.

What that means for you is that you need to focus on sharing your company in a holistic way as well. Keeping your head down and pumping out sales pitches and products doesn’t cut it any more. Lots of companies share photos of their employees volunteering on social media. Many host annual charity events that get a lot of attention. Some companies donate to nonprofits or organizations, and some even have foundations in their name. Whatever you do, don’t feel like you have to keep it a secret. The work that you do is part of your company culture, and women like to see that.
A very large-scale example of this would be Walmart. By no means are they a company without controversy. However, it is interesting to note what a massive focus they place on charitable works, particularly since their marketing is so focused on women, the main purchasers of the consumer goods they sell. On the Walmart website there is an entire section dedicated to the good works they do. That includes giving to charities, volunteer work, and strengthening communities. They also have a section dedicated to global responsibility, which spans everything from environmental practices to empowering women across the world (Walmart Stores, Inc., 2012). Their TV commercials, particularly over the holidays, push their “feel good” side as well. Many involve thanking the troops and showing touching moments between families (YouTube, LLC, 2013). That has very little to do with what Walmart sells, rather, it is meant to give people a sense of the values and good deeds the company performs.

Certainly, most companies can’t afford to give or advertise on the level that Walmart does, and thankfully most don’t have the same level of negativity directed at them either. Whatever level of good you are able to do, it’s worth sharing.

Along with their holistic view of businesses, Johnson and Learned (2004) note that women are keenly aware of inconsistencies in business. They tend to be more turned off by them, and are more vocal when they encounter them. So to attract and keep your female customers, be honest about what are and what you are not. If you have the only product like yours on the market, but are only working with a team of three people, highlight that customers won’t find anyone with the same offerings as you. Don’t tell people that customer service requests will all be answered the same day. If a woman has a positive experience based on what she was prepared to expect, she will have far more favorable things to say than if expectations are broken.

To finish out the holistic, exceptional experience women want, treat them like they are valued customers. This should be a given, but in many cases, especially when women are involved, it just doesn’t happen. Brennan (2009) discusses a personal example that happened to her at a car dealership when she was test-driving a BMW with her husband. While she loved the car they were considering, the cup holders were inadequate for the mug of coffee she carried with her to work each morning. The salesperson (a man) rolled his eyes when she asked, and suggested “stick it between your legs.” He did not get the sale, and she found out on her own it was a complaint many Americans had about the car, and there were custom options that could be installed. After the discovery, they wound up purchasing the car somewhere else.

Such an experience isn’t uncommon, especially in industries (like the automotive industry) that are considered typically male. It shouldn’t have to be said, but in many cases women are just trying to be treated as equals in business transactions. Provide exceptional customer service, and you are a step ahead.

One example of a company doing this right is J. Crew. A typically female centered business, but one many businesses could learn something from. Their level of personalized service is reflected in many smaller details, like the emails listed on their website. Have a question about an international order? You email julie@jcrew.com. How about an order in Japan? Email ritsuko@jcrew.com. Wedding apparel questions go to ashley@jcrew.com and style questions go to erica@jcrew.com (J. Crew, 2013). Considering the high volume of emails they likely receive, it probably isn’t just these ladies answering questions, but the designated emails make it feel much more personal that a general email would.
Another example would be the community American Express has built around their small business credit cards. There is a forum for small business owners, card users share their stories (many are women, perhaps by no coincidence) and the level of customer service is applauded as being more personal and more efficient than other cards. They also show off their community involvement by supporting Small Business Saturday, an initiative they have championed. In this instance women business owners, who not so long ago existed in small numbers, are treated as valuable customers. There is no glaring reference to the fact that they are women, just a respect for what they value and what their business needs are (American Express Company, 2013). When it comes to being an exceptional company with exceptional service, that is what you should strive for.

Women trust other women, and they like to share.

You can have a fabulous marketing message, but it will likely never compare to the power of one woman raving (or ranting) about your products to another. As Johnson and Learned (2004) say, women often look to others for inside information as they make choices. That means building a vocal fan base for your brand is important. Opinions and discussions can appear on social media, review sites, the review section of online retail stores, or any other website that tips people off to interesting businesses. Women may also simply talk to other women face to face. Johnson and Learned go on to advise giving your customers “a sense of ownership” so they are inspired to “lead the charge in your marketing efforts.”

So, how can you get started? Clearly, the best way to reach a lot of people by word of mouth is online. If a woman sat down and typed your name into Google while drinking her coffee in the morning, what would she find? The worst thing she could find would probably be nothing; however scathing reviews probably wouldn’t do you much good either. Though, at least if you have terrible reviews (and there will always be some terrible reviews) you have a chance to improve.

If you haven’t already, set yourself up on social media. It’s ubiquitous advice at this point, but women are power players on social media. An infographic that appeared on SocialMediaInfluence.com (2013) detailed women’s activities on social media. 86% of them have some sort of an account, 81% are on Facebook, and they spend about 2 hours a day on their accounts. Women who are on social media “like” and recommend products, ask for recommendations, and retweet or pin products they like. Social media is made for women’s sharing instincts. Depending on what you sell different platforms may be far more useful to you. If you are in the decorating industry, Pinterest is a given. If you are a B2B company, SlideShare is a great place to let people find and share your ideas. Facebook can work for people in lots of areas, and so can Twitter.

Think about other websites where reviews and recommendations can appear. Places like Yelp.com cover lots of businesses, and you should pay attention to what people are saying. If a woman goes to Yelp to complain about the service she received at your auto dealership and you respond to her, eventually resolving the issues she has had, there is a chance she will change her negative view, continue to give you her business, and tell others as well. Similar advice would apply to sites like TripAdvisor.com and Google+.

If it works for your business, you can also create a whole community within your website to let women create some of their own content. A great example of this is beauty retailer Sephora’s “Beauty Talk” community. Women (and men) share tips and ideas about all of Sephora’s different products, they rave about what they like, and suggest products for people who have questions (Sephora USA, Inc., 2013). Because Sephora lets these women share, chat, recommend, and build relationships, they drive more business back to their store. Creating a community like this, run by your fans, can have a big influence on women and encourage them to purchase your products.
One potential pitfall you will want to avoid is to consider these sharing activities a “gabfest” between women who like to talk too much. Don’t dismiss women, or make them feel ashamed for wanting to share. You need people to talk about your business if you are going to make any money. You don’t need to make whatever network people share on ultra feminine either, because men will likely join in too. Just enable people to do so, take it seriously, and use what people have to say to your advantage.

Now that you know why women are so important and what they like to see in marketing messages, you can finally get down to the business of selling to them.

Methods Of Marketing To Women

Johnson and Learned (2004) discuss the three most common forms of marketing to women: visible, transparent, and hybrid. Each of these methods is a little different, and each may be extremely successful in some cases, but disastrous in others. Because of that, it’s important to understand how each works, and which will work for your company or product.

The first style, visible, is the most obvious way to market to women. Usually the products say, up front, “for women.” In general, it’s a good idea to tread very carefully what it comes to visible marketing. In order for a product to legitimately be labeled “for women,” it should have “gender-specific features and benefits” that set it apart from products for men. Take note that making something pink does not mean that it has features or benefits specific to women.

Instead, consider products that are inherently created for women. Many health products fall under this category. A product like One A Day Women’s vitamins is a good example.

The supplement contains nutrients that are medically beneficial to women more so than men. Labeling it for women helps female consumers know that this product is designed for their needs (Bayer Healthcare, LLC, 2012).

Any product that is not inherently created for women but says it is faces potential backlash. The most infamous recent example is the Bic for Her pens detailed in a Forbes article by David Vinjamuri (2012). Not only did the product come off completely sexist (were women not allowed other pens before?), but nothing about the bright, sparkly design would actually benefit a woman over a man in any way. It’s a classic example of how turning something pink does nothing to actually connect to a female audience.

The next style of marketing is called transparent. This type of marketing should suit what women like, but there is nothing on it that explicitly says “for women.” Indeed, in many cases both men and women may appreciate the style. If your business sells a product that everyone could
use, but you are looking to increase your share of the female market, this may be a wise choice for you.

Johnson and Learned (2004) discuss one group that has been practicing transparent marketing: the home improvement industry. Traditionally considered a male dominated world, home improvement companies and stores realized there were many women tackling these projects and looking to spend their money, and they didn’t want to be talked down to or feel like they didn’t belong. Stores like Ace and Home Depot started changing the layout of their stores. They made aisles wider, the lighting brighter, and organized their products better. They staffed more employees trained to answer questions, and worked to make the experience less intimidating for women. Stores also started offering classes just for women, where they could feel free to ask questions and get help alongside other women, and also provide feedback to the store.

Companies that sell to home improvement stores also took notice. While a few pink drills started popping up, the smarter companies figured out what would really make a difference to a woman purchasing tools. They began to manufacture them with better grips, in more lightweight and easy to maneuver styles. This may have attracted some men to these tools as well, but the subtle changes were made with women in mind.

Another big part of transparent marketing is getting women to have the “that’s so me” moment. That idea goes back to “getting real” when you market to women. Stereotypes don’t really make women jump up and feel a connection with a company, which is a negative of transparent marketing: it’s really hard. You have to have a very deep understanding of who your female customer is to target her without making it obvious that you are targeting her. If you get it wrong, you could embarrass yourself and wind up with women making fun of you. To have a better shot at getting it right, consider: does your product have a story that women would connect with?

Are there real women out there struggling with something you could fix? When a woman looks at your product, what questions does she really ask? What feature is she really interested in? How does your company answer to the holistic way she buys? It won’t always be easy to answer these questions, but if you do, transparent marketing will be much more successful for you.

Finally, the last method is called hybrid. Used mostly by companies who are already established, it creates a separate division from the main company that is totally focused on women. Hybrid marketing is more fully realized them simply having one product labeled “for men” and another “for women.” Think of an investment firm with a special team dedicated to helping women with their unique financial concerns, or a hospital with a singular women’s health team. The marketing messages, online presence, even contact information and employees may be totally separate from the rest of the company.

One of the better-known examples of this would be Nike’s offshoot Nike Women. They have done a very good job of tapping into the interests of female athletes and the challenges and triumphs they have. Their social networks are a good example of how they get this across particularly with their images, such as the following from their Nike Women Facebook Page (2013):
I WILL NEVER MEASURE SUCCESS ON A SCALE
JOIN ME
AND TOGETHER WE WILL
#MAKEITCOUNT

WE WILL
WORK OUR BUTTS.
NOT OUR BUTTS.
WE WILL
#MAKEITCOUNT

I WILL RUN HARDER
THAN MY MASCARA
JOIN ME
AND TOGETHER WE WILL
#MAKEITCOUNT
Their commercials, in particular their “Nike: Voices” commercial, do an amazing job of storytelling and expressing the connection between female athletes everywhere (YouTube, LLC, 2013). This area of their company has allowed them to focus on women, while still keeping their recognizable branding and personality present.

The downside of hybrid marketing is that, like visible marketing, if it isn’t executed very well it can turn disastrous; and since you have a whole division dedicated to it, it is at a much larger scale. Imagine the backlash Nike would have faced if their ads would have been about looking hot and finding a man at the gym in the New Year. Sure, it sounds silly after looking at what they really did, but is it so hard to imagine that a company trying to be funny would push an idea like that out? Similar to transparent marketing, you are going to have to understand your audience in a real way. Get to know how the women you want to sell to talk, and what they are talking about. What could you help them with, or how could you speak to them and inspire them, if one part of your company was totally dedicated to their needs. Once you have a plan in place, it will also need continuous dedication and upkeep, if it is going to stay current with modern women.

Going Forward

So there you have it. Hopefully you have started to learn why women are such an important audience, what they want to see in marketing messages, and the different methods companies use to market to women.

Nearly every week we hear about another company or product that falls back on the idea that women want sexist, pink products sold using dated stereotypes. It’s time for us to hear about more companies doing amazing things. Companies who have taken the time to understand women, help them, and move us all forward along the way.

I hope you found this white paper helpful, and I hope it has gotten you thinking about your own marketing plan to women. Done right, you can gain the trust and respect of the toughest but best customer you could hope to have.
References


