

How women buy, and what it means for your marketing plan

Before you can effectively market your products or services to women, you need to know how they think, how they shop, and what motivates them to buy. Since women control \$3.3 trillion dollars of consumer spending, taking the time to understand the way women think and shop is critical. And while we're all for gender equality, the bottom line is: women are different. We think differently, relate to others differently, and we spend our money differently.

A quick buy-ology lesson: the woman's brain

Biologically, women are different from men. Before you respond with a resounding, “Duh!”, let me make it clear that I’m not talking about the obvious physical differences. Women’s brains are different. According to recent research from Nielsen Neurofocus, “Women’s brains are hardwired for big-picture thinking, multi-tasking, ‘gut’ reasoning, social and verbal skills, and worry/empathy. Conversely, men’s brains are preconditioned for concrete thinking, goal-oriented tasks, logical solutions, and competition/defense.” According to Kelley Murray Skoloda in her book, *Too Busy to Shop*, women aren’t just multi-tasking, they’re “multi-minding”: they have cultivated the ability to think of several things at the same time. Conversely, men tend to compartmentalize, to focus entirely on the task at hand before moving on to the next.

Women use both sides of the brain for speech, while men use one. They also have more nerve cells in the left half of the brain—the side that processes language—and so tend to be better at expressing themselves verbally, and have larger vocabularies. Most importantly for marketers, women use this ability to make decisions: word of mouth and the recommendations of friends and family are key factors in a woman’s purchasing choices. To put it simplistically, men act; women communicate first, and then act.

The limbic system—the emotional center of the brain—tends to be larger in women than in men. Women also notice small details and remember them more readily than men. This ability to pick up on emotional signals and details make women, if you’ll excuse the expression, excellent bullshit detectors. We know a bad pickup line when we hear one. And if your marketing message has the feel of an insincere come-on, you’re in trouble. According to Skoloda, credibility is one of the most important factors in women’s purchasing decisions. And to women, the three most credible sources of information about your product or service are friends, family, and media. Skoloda writes that before women shop, they “CROP”—they seek CRedible OPinions. Most women research their purchasing decisions before ever setting foot in a store.

Be credible

How do you convince women that you're a credible source of products and/or services? Women are far more likely to trust recommendations from their friends, family, Facebook friends, favorite bloggers—information that comes from someone other than you, the seller. They read reviews from other buyers online. They read articles in magazines. They Google your product or service online. They listen to favorite media experts—trusted TV hosts, celebrity chefs, doctors (just ask anyone in the health industry about the influence of Dr. Oz on the sales of nutritional supplements). This means that to position yourself as a product/service that women can trust, you need to convince these outside sources. Court influential bloggers, and spend more time on search engine optimization (if you have a carpet cleaning service, and a woman Googles “best carpet cleaning,” your company had better pop up). Women pay attention to the news, so promotions that earn your product/service positive editorial coverage will grab our attention, and spread news of your product by word of mouth.

Do good

Women like companies that have a conscience. The Starbucks website states, “Since we opened our first store in 1971, we dedicated ourselves to striking a balance between profitability and social conscience,” and the company promotes a wide variety of charitable initiatives. Target donates millions of dollars to communities each year, especially towards education—and is there a company women love more than Target? Cause marketing—sponsoring charitable programs, becoming involved in the community—is an excellent strategy in marketing to women. Nothing is dearer to a mother’s heart than family, and anything that improves the community in which her family lives will strike a very positive chord.

Be a time-saver

Next to family, what's most precious to women? Time. All this multi-tasking and multi-minding is necessary because women simply do not have enough time in a day. Save a woman time and you will gain her undying gratitude. Towards this end, make your marketing messages brief and to the point. Make it easy for her to see why your product is better. And make your products/services easy to use, easy to understand, easy to find. Anything that unnecessarily complicates our lives is going to end up in the trash.

Forget “perfect”

A recent study showed that only 22% of men and women believe that women are accurately portrayed in media, and 80% of women said that advertising and media set unrealistic expectations of the “perfect” woman. While this is nothing new, there is a new shift in how women are responding: they just don’t care anymore. Instead of responding to the pressure by dieting, waxing, overscheduling themselves and trying to be the ideal woman, they’re rejecting the ideal and embracing new role models instead: intelligent, successful, funny real women like Tina Fey and Mindy Kaling. If your ads feature a Barbie-doll lookalike who’s effortlessly “having it all” without missing a beat, they’re guaranteed to alienate women buyers.

The bottom line: show us you care

In the 1983 movie “Mr. Mom,” Teri Garr goes back to work in advertising when her husband (Michael Keaton) is laid off from his auto industry job. She is assigned to work on the Schooner Tuna account. While her fellow (male) ad execs offer up ideas for giveaways and contests, Garr’s character points out that the reason women aren’t buying Schooner Tuna is that it’s one of the most expensive tunas on the market, and the country’s in a recession. She convinces the president of Schooner to do a commercial in which he commits to reduce the price of the tuna until the economy turns the corner. Speaking about the women who buy his tuna, she tells him, “Show them that you really care about their problems, and you’ll win their loyalty.” While some of the attitudes and issues in this 80’s movie are clearly dated, she hits the nail on the head with this insight. Once women believe in a product, they tend to be loyal customers, buying the same brands again and again. Convince women shoppers that you care, that you sincerely wish to make their lives easier, and that you are a credible, ethical source, and you will win that loyalty.