

"Bridget Brennan's highly informative and entertaining book provides keen—and unusual—insights into women consumers."

—JOSEPH V. TRIPODI, Chief Marketing Officer, The Coca-Cola Company

WHY SHE BUYS

THE NEW STRATEGY FOR REACHING
THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL CONSUMERS

B r i d g e t B r e n n a n



WHY

SHE

BUYS

**The New Strategy for Reaching the
World's Most Powerful Consumers**

BRIDGET BRENNAN



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Published in the United States by Crown Business,
an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

www.crownpublishing.com

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Originally published in hardcover in slightly different form in the United States by Crown Business, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 2009.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

eISBN: 978-0-307-45040-1

COVER DESIGN BY WHITNEY COOKMAN

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY GETTY IMAGES

v3.1

TO ERIK,

who makes me happy to be alive

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WOMEN ARE

FEMALES FIRST

AND CONSUMERS SECOND

The salesmen were all standing at attention as my husband and I walked through the door of the car dealership. After months of searching, we knew we'd found our dream car. We strode into the place with confidence. In a few short hours, we'd be walking out with three thousand pounds of fine German steel. The tallest salesperson stepped forward, thrust out his hand, and said he'd be happy to help us. He had a firm grip. Things were looking good.

The test drive was incredible. It was a BMW 540i, and it's not called the ultimate driving machine for nothing. But I noticed something that seemed like ... well ... a flaw. At first I was afraid to mention it, even to myself. Who was I to question the magnificence of Bavarian engineering? Then I closed my eyes and imagined myself commuting to work every morning and I could no longer keep silent. I hope you won't judge me harshly, but it was ... he goes ... the cup holders. Yes, the cup holders.

If you've ever driven a European car, you know what I'm talking about. The cup holders in this model were almost comically inadequate—like tiny plastic crab claws that made a feeble grasping motion when you touched a button. The little claws didn't seem like they could handle a sippy cup, let alone the tall, battered coffee thermos that was my constant companion.

I sat through the rest of the test drive in silence, listening to the salesman deliver a stream of performance terms including *torque* and *zero-to-sixty*, just like in the commercials, before I got up the nerve to say something. This wasn't my first car-buying experience, and I knew the disdain with which many of these guys—and they are overwhelmingly guys—view women buyers like me. How badly would I be mocked for this? I braced myself and said the words.

“What's up with the cup holders?”

He stared at me.

“They're right here.”

He moved the crab claws in and out.

“Yes, but they don't seem strong enough to hold a normal cup of coffee.”

Silence.

The salesperson then shot my husband a look that could be understood in any language to mean, *You poor thing, how do you stand her?* I cringed. My husband looked sheepish. I cringed.

again. And then the salesman said the first of two things that ensured he would never have my business or the business of anyone who knew me.

“Europeans don’t eat or drink in their cars.”

While I occasionally suffer from an identity crisis, in this case I knew with 100 percent certainty that I was not, in fact, a European.

“I’m American and I do drink in the car. In fact, I drink a cup of coffee every morning on the way to work. It’s a tall thermos—you know, the kind you buy at Starbucks.”

And then he went for a second jab, this time below the belt.

“Well, then why don’t you just stick it between your legs?”

You can guess the ending to this story. We did not purchase the dream car from this man on principle, and found the car somewhere else a month later, after my husband discovered a website selling aftermarket cup holders specifically for the 540i. The night of the dealership incident, I went on the consumer review website [Epinions.com](https://www.epinions.com) and was overjoyed to find dozens of other people lamenting the state of the cup holders in this particular model. I felt vindicated. It appeared that the aftermarket in custom cup holders for all kinds of European cars was thriving. It wasn’t just me.

These days, it’s never just me. Women now dominate consumer purchasing to such a degree that some companies, like Procter & Gamble, have started simply referring to consumers with the pronoun *she*.

In the automotive industry, for example, women buy more than half of all new cars and trucks and influence 80 percent of all automotive purchases.¹ Influence means that if the woman doesn’t like a car’s coffee cup holders, the couple (if she has a spouse) walks out of the dealership empty-handed. Women not only have money, they have veto power. It’s the most powerful one-two punch in the consumer economy.

As women all over the world continue joining the workforce—earning their own paychecks as well as driving the spending of their spouses’—they have become the alpha consumers of planet Earth. As a result, executives in almost every industry are scrambling to create products and programs with female appeal, particularly in gender-neutral and traditional “male” product categories like electronics, insurance, automobiles, and finance.

The BMW story provides a classic example of how gender differences play out at their best—and worst—in business. Women will pay attention to aspects of a product that salespeople, particularly male ones, may consider unimportant or irrelevant, whether it’s the number of electrical outlets in a new home, the style of reports submitted by a consulting firm, or the quality of cup holders in a new car. In the case of the BMW, I knew from previous experience that spilled coffee is a tough smell to get out of a car and that the odor of sour lattes would ruin the luxury car experience for me. If the salesperson had taken my issue seriously and recommended an aftermarket solution, he would have gone home with a lot more money on his commission check that day.

Most sales training programs include a mantra about *knowing thy customer*. Across the world, women are the customers who buy virtually everything there is to be sold. Women make the purchase or are the key influencers in about 80 percent of all consumer product sales in the United States alone. But who markets and sells products to women? The answer—overwhelmingly—is men, who occupy 85 percent of all Fortune 500 corporate officer positions,² the majority of chief marketing officer positions (nearly 70 percent)³ and

corporate executive sales management jobs, and over 90 percent of the top creative director roles at major advertising agencies.⁴ They also happen to represent more than 90 percent of automotive salespeople. It's enough to make one pause and reflect on all those jokes about car salesmen. Would the jokes be different if the gender split were even? For that matter, would there still be jokes?

To make a massive generalization, men are the sex that manufactures products, and women are the sex that buys them. This is the part of the story where you may be channeling Jerry Seinfeld and thinking, *Not that there's anything wrong with that*. And you'd be right, except for one thing: most men don't understand women. (Women don't understand men either, but that is the subject for a different book entirely.) And while almost all of us will acknowledge an even joke about the gender gap in our personal lives, what's shocking is how few people have applied an understanding of gender differences to business.

This book is designed to teach you what business schools don't—how to craft your products, pitches, and marketing campaigns to cater to female buyers. Women are female first and consumers second. The ability to understand their brain structures, priorities, worldviews, and demographic patterns can provide your company with one of the most genuine competitive advantages it may ever know. And the bonus of reaching female buyers is that when it's done well, you'll make your male customers happier, too, and they won't even realize they weren't your original targets.

Forget Everything You Think You Know: Most of It Is Wrong

WOMEN weren't in positions of power when the modern corporate world was created, which means that misunderstandings about women are about as common as office cocktails on the set of AMC's *Mad Men*. The inaccurate stereotypes would almost be funny if there weren't so much money and market share at stake. Ever since the first wheel rolled out on the first assembly line, the default "gender culture" of the corporate world has been as male as a Bar Pro Shop. Men had a huge head start in the business world because they got there first. And while women are now there in such huge numbers that they're predicted to surpass men in the U.S. labor force, they got to the party so late that all the "rules" had already been set.

This means that most of the things we take for granted as conventional wisdom in marketing, sales, and product design are actually based on a male point of view. And while many companies understand that women are their primary consumers, their executive teams still go about creating products and marketing campaigns for women as if they view the world the same way men do.

Take the case of the ugly Snugli, one of the incidents that became a catalyst for this book. The year was 2003. The place was Dayton, Ohio. I was with my former colleagues from the Zeno public relations agency at the headquarters of Evenflo Company, a baby product manufacturer that was one of our biggest clients. One of Evenflo's star products, the Snugli baby carrier, had experienced a slowdown in sales, and our team was brought in to help turn the situation around. The Snugli has a proud history as the original soft baby carrier. Worn over the shoulders, it looks like a backpack in reverse. On the day of this meeting, still in competition from European brands, including BabyBjörn, was challenging the Snugli

position in the market. The upstarts were charging double or triple the price of a Snugli and still grabbing market share. It was time to strategize.

The Evenflo team put the Snugli in the middle of the conference table. We stared at the lump of cloth like scientists examining a new life-form. One of the Evenflo people said, “We’ve got to find ways to get more PR for this, or we’re going to lose shelf space at our retailers.”

As I looked down at the lump of cloth on the table, it was clear to me: no amount of PR would help. It was mud brown, with a pattern on the inside that looked like an old man’s plaid shirt.

“It’s an ugly Snugli,” I told the group. “That’s why it’s not selling.”

First I heard awkward giggles (mainly my own), and then silence. We all stared at the bulky, quilted material in front of us. Finally one of the product managers spoke.

“The important thing is that this is the safest possible baby carrier. It surpasses all Underwriters Laboratories requirements and can hold up to twenty-six pounds. It has greater tensile strength than our competitors’,” said the manager. Everyone listened and nodded. The functionality of the Snugli was never in question. Not only was it strong and safe, it was practical—it had pockets, a place for keys, and sliding back straps that could be adjusted for the wearer’s height.

I looked around the big table. As I’d seen so many times, every person on the agency side of the table was female, and the overwhelming majority of people on the client side were male. I had that old familiar feeling that there was a cultural misunderstanding happening in the room—a misunderstanding of gender cultures. Except this wasn’t just a gender gap; it was a gender *canyon*.

So I clarified. “This is something a woman actually wears on her body, like a piece of clothing. If she’s going to wear it, the Snugli should look fashionable, like any other thing she would choose to wear. It’s a reflection of her taste. It needs a different style.” The fabric of the Snugli wasn’t just homely, it was bulky, and as any woman knows, the last thing a new mother wants to wear after childbirth is something that makes her feel even bigger.

Silence again. Then smiles. Then nods. I could almost see the lightbulbs going off above the heads of everyone in the room. What a concept—to think that because this product is worn on the body, it should be fashionable and flattering *as well as* functional. Of course! What an insight into the female mind. We all laughed at the revelation: the male-dominated Evenflo team was thinking like engineers, and we were thinking like women—their customers! The clients agreed that embarking on a new fabric design for the Snugli was the best course of action. Our team offered to draw up a list of designers that Evenflo could work with for the new style, and we soon boarded the plane home.

After that fateful meeting, we helped Evenflo partner with fashion designer Nicole Miller to create a limited edition of the Snugli as a test of the fashion-forward concept. Miller designed a sleek, unisex version of the baby carrier in black with white piping. We sent the stylish new Snugli off to celebrity moms, and before we knew it, pictures of the product being worn by celebrities, including Courteney Cox and Cate Blanchett, started appearing in glossy magazines. The company even got a thank-you note from little Apple Martin, daughter of Gwyneth Paltrow, one of the most stylish actresses anywhere.

The redesigned Snugli was selected by Oprah Winfrey as a giveaway during her “World

Largest Baby Shower” episode, and subsequently sold out online. Soon after the Nicole Miller project, Evenflo brought in a new CEO, Rob Matteucci. As a twenty-seven-year Procter & Gamble veteran and former head of Clairol, this was a man who knew from women. Matteucci embarked on a makeover for the brand, which is now fully under way.

What’s different today? The company now employs women brand managers and engineers who interact directly with mothers to get feedback on Snuggli designs. It has fashion directors who go to Paris and Milan for inspiration on fabrics and color trends. The lumpy cloth is a thing of the past. The brand team follows mommy blogs and website communities to stay in tune with their customers’ needs and opinions. In essence, understanding women has become every employee’s job.

Matteucci acknowledges it’s been a long road from the bad old days of the brand, when designing from a woman’s point of view was an afterthought. “The process of translating what we learn from mothers has become part of our culture, but it’s something we have to work at every day,” says Matteucci, who’s installed a library of information about women at the company’s headquarters. “We are still a work in progress. We’ve made strides, and we expect great things to come. Understanding women is a commitment at every level of the company, and without a doubt, it’s the only way forward for our business.”

If You Don’t Know the Price of Milk, Read On

AFTER that Snuggli meeting in Ohio, I sat on the plane thinking that if only all of our clients could see their products and campaigns through women’s eyes, how much easier it would be for them to succeed. The majority of male executives I worked with had long ago abdicated shopping to their wives. I knew that when pressed, few of my clients could tell me the price of a gallon of milk. They weren’t the shoppers for their households, but they spent the workdays trying to reach the people who were.

And I observed that the more senior an executive was, the more he or she made decisions about customers based on second- and thirdhand information, whether it was quantitative research reports, agency briefings, or written reports from focus groups. (Let’s face it: the higher up the food chain someone is, the less likely they are to be munching M&Ms in the back of a focus group facility.) Most significant of all, the vast majority of executives were male, so they were also separated from their customers by the wide gulf of gender. Things got lost in translation. The trouble was, these smart and well-intentioned executives would assume that as long as they used women in consumer research or placed women in a few key management positions, gender differences would be taken into account somewhere along the way. Mostly they weren’t.

There are many reasons for this, which we’ll explore throughout the book. But one is that it isn’t just men who misunderstand their female audiences. Women executives have been schooled in the same conventional wisdom of business that men have. And many find themselves going against their better instincts at work or refraining from putting forth their ideas because they don’t want to cast themselves in the soft pink light of femininity, in case it’s used against them.

There is no doubt: the companies who invest in understanding their primary consumer are winning. In the pages ahead, you’ll learn how these companies are changing the rule

dominating their markets, and reinventing their categories. From upstarts such as Method and lululemon athletica to titans like Procter & Gamble and MasterCard Worldwide, the mavericks are mastering gender differences and leaving their competitors behind. Their best practices will provide a blueprint for how you can do the same for your business.

It's not a gap, it's a canyon

Gender is the most powerful determinant of how a person views the world and everything in it. It's more powerful than age, income, race, or geography.

Most of us ignore biological differences when we examine our customer base, mainly because we've never been taught about them. The brain is still a poorly understood organ, but we do know one thing—there's no such thing as a unisex brain. New medical research has shown that brains in human beings have sexually dimorphic regions, or areas that are distinctly different between the sexes. The balance of hormones that drive our decision-making processes are complex and distinct to each sex. Biology dictates behavior in every species, whether it's muskrats, antelopes, or human beings. This book will examine the real-life implications of brain differences and their impact on women's purchasing decisions and emotional responses to product design, advertising, retail environments, and sales pitches.

Consumer research has a forest-and-trees problem

Without arguing the merits of various research methods or the fact that research is often outsourced too many levels down from corporate decision makers for them to get a handle on important nuances, one thing is true: we often overlook the obvious. Most of us have worked for companies that spend serious money conducting studies to learn about the target consumers. We'll do things like:

- Analyze their propensity to buy
- Segment them by income bracket
- Target them by age group
- Deconstruct their search patterns
- Dissect their warranty card information
- Study their media habits

We'll slice and dice data until our eyes are crossed, yet in many cases we'll overlook the one piece of information that trumps them all: *the sex of the buyer*. Considering there are only two genders in the human race and one of them does most of the shopping, it's stunning how many companies overlook the psychology of gender, when we all know that men and women look at the world very differently. It's as if the most fundamental aspect of human nature has been overlooked: *What if we are selling product X to a woman instead of a man? How does that change the equation?* The answer is that it changes the equation entirely, and far more deeply than the thin research that's so often generated. [Chapter 4](#) will show you how Procter & Gamble developed female-centric research programs to create wildly successful products such

as Swiffer that have increased the company's stock price and reenergized its standing as one of the most innovative companies in the world.

Normal depends on which bathroom you use

It's human nature to think that our own behavior is normal and that it's all those other people who are strange. Men and women inadvertently use their own gender "filters"—or personal biases—to make decisions about what they believe the other sex wants in a product, brand message, or sales environment. In a corporate world dominated by male senior executives and female consumers, the implications for misunderstandings are large and costly.

Most human drama is driven by the fact that men and women are interested in and desire different things. What's true at home is true in business. Women respond to different tones and styles and stimuli than men do, and they assign different values to various facets of their own experience. The fact that many, if not most, major marketing campaigns go through a male "filter" before hitting the airwaves has real consequences for businesses that are trying to reach women. The lessons from companies that have successfully tapped into the female human experience, such as MasterCard, are profiled in [Chapter 5](#).

There is a distinct female culture that decision makers need to better understand

Even though men and women live together their entire lives—as siblings, offspring, parents, spouses, friends, and colleagues—women live in a distinct female culture, with its own standards of behavior, language, priorities, and value systems, that can be as difficult for men to detect as a dog whistle.⁵

From the moment they're born, girls are socialized differently than boys, and the codes of behavior and messages they receive from adults and society are wildly different. In the pages ahead, we'll examine the fundamentals of female culture and learn why women such as Oprah Winfrey and the late Princess Diana can be considered case studies of female value. On the flip side, we'll look at how the military is a nearly perfect microcosm of male culture in action. You'll learn how to view your campaigns and communications through a new filter to determine whether your efforts are "gender tone-deaf" when it comes to connecting with a female audience.

Five major trends drive the female demographic, and these are key to predicting consumer needs

As women increase their purchasing power almost everywhere, they're unleashing major changes in society as well as in consumption patterns. These changes create needs for new products and services that are only beginning to be tapped to their fullest potential. From more women in the labor force to delayed marriages, higher divorce rates, more time spent as "singletons," and an aging population, the opportunities are enormous for companies that understand the business implications of these demographic changes.

This book will chart the five major trends driving female populations around the world.

You'll be able to use the information as a blueprint for long-term planning. Each macro global trend is engendering a number of specific micro trends, which are changing women's behavior and, therefore, their needs and wants.

Life stage is more important than age

Women go through similar experiences throughout their lives, but not necessarily at the same ages. This is especially true today, when women are marrying and entering motherhood so much later in life, and "forty is the new thirty," "fifty is the new forty," and so on. Purchasing decisions are typically based on the context of what's happening in people's lives at any given moment, not necessarily their chronological age (with the notable exception of biology-related medical products).

The old "rules" about what characterizes a forty-year-old woman, for instance, no longer apply. Today, a forty-year-old woman might have just had her first baby and is embarking on the life stage of new motherhood—which was once the province of twenty-somethings. For the next two decades, this life stage will drive her purchasing needs in a different way than the case with other women her age, who may already have grandchildren at the same age, or perhaps no kids at all. As such, for a significant number of product categories, life stage is a more accurate gauge of a person's needs and shopping patterns than the date on a woman's birth certificate.

The knowing/doing gap

No matter how many jokes we make about the opposite sex, we continue to find our differences shocking, which is why we fail to institutionalize professional practices that account for them. The pages of this book will outline step-by-step instructions on how to approach women consumers as if they were a foreign market, because for most people, the opposite sex remains a mystery.

Case studies with senior male executives from companies ranging from Callaway Golf to Ryland Homes will prove that you don't need to be a woman to effectively market and sell to women. The chapters ahead will synthesize demographic trends, gender psychology, new research on the female brain, the wisdom of industry leaders, and field-proven business practices to give you the tools you need to create, market, and sell products to the world's most powerful consumers. Office Max, Best Buy, Sony, True Value Hardware, and even Harley-Davidson are just a few of the companies that have publicly announced female-focused initiatives. You'll learn the most common mistakes (hint: pink is not a strategy) as well as the best practices (hint: assume nothing) that you can apply immediately to your business, no matter what you're selling. This book will help you take all the fundamental truths about men and women that you've observed in your own life and apply them in a fresh way—to your business.

Now More Than Ever

In the economic downturn that's gripped the world since this book was first published, its principles have been validated more strongly than ever. Decreased spending combined with the rising influence of social networking, social retailing, e-commerce, and the mobile Web has meant that capturing the business of women remains one of the most critical tasks for consumer-focused companies. Women dominate e-commerce spending in the majority of consumer categories, just as they do in traditional brick-and-mortar retail.⁶ The tools of the trade may be changing, but women's role as "chief purchasing officer" of the home hasn't—and nor have the fundamentals of female culture and biology.

It's comforting to know that no matter how fast technology advances, no matter how frequently people shop on their mobile phones and laptops, no matter how many clicks are required to make a purchase online, one thing remains the same: women are the shoppers of this world, and understanding *why she buys* is the most valuable insurance policy there is.

WOMEN ARE THE

MOTHER LODE

What They Didn't Teach You in Business School

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.

New research shows that male and female brains are so different that it's almost as if we're each living in our own gender-specific realities. You may already have suspected this—perhaps since kindergarten—but the implications for businesses are just beginning to be understood, and they are nothing short of revelatory.

Women are the driving force of the global economy, and men drive the majority of senior-level business decisions. Which means that men are usually the people who have the final say in designing and approving products that are aimed at women; developing marketing campaigns that target women; creating retail environments to attract women; and setting up sales training programs that motivate women to say, "I'll take it."

Yet when profit goals aren't met, when products aren't moving, or when marketing isn't working, it rarely occurs to executives that sex might be the problem. Not *sex* the verb, but *sex* the noun. Instead of thinking, *Perhaps we just don't understand our female customers*, people will tell themselves that the media mix wasn't right, or the distribution strategy didn't work, or the agency didn't do its job. But there is another possibility: that one sex is making its purchasing decisions differently, in a way the other just can't see.

There are some obvious reasons this can happen. From the moment we're born, gender identity is a crucial part of our personality development. Masculinity itself is often defined as *that which is not feminine*.¹ From the time they're young, boys learn to reject or repress anything feminine to be accepted by their peers and society at large, which is just one reason you don't see a lot of six-year-old boys wearing hot pink outfits to soccer practice. Throughout their childhoods, boys are under pressure to prove their masculinity by shunning or even mocking feminine traits. The penalty for being viewed as even remotely feminine is to risk being humiliated for being a "sissy."

Then, after about twenty-two years of this societal pressure, many men find themselves graduating from college (and some from the über-masculine world of fraternity culture) and entering jobs in which their paycheck suddenly depends on understanding, identifying with, and selling things to women. Fresh out of business school and poof! they're a junior brand manager on a diaper product. Once on the job, few executives of either sex get any kind of

formal training on gender differences. They are just expected to informally “pick up” the knowledge through colleagues and vendors. For many people in these positions, achieving success has historically involved some trial and error, lots of smarts, and just enough consumer research to be dangerous. But in an era where businesses are struggling and every sale counts, that old formula isn’t enough anymore. Now, most consumer-driven companies must master female psychology to survive, because when it comes to consumer spending, women are the sex determining their fortunes. Just when executives have mastered becoming tech literate, they find there’s another skill they need to keep up: becoming *female literate*.

It’s a subject that can seem overwhelming when you stop and think about it. How well can the sexes ever really understand each other? The fact that we don’t—and that we often want different things from life—is what drives sitcoms and drama plots the world over. It’s the foundation of everything from Shakespeare’s plays to my husband’s insistence on setting our alarm clock to his favorite Rush song (“Limelight”) every morning, just to playfully torture me. Ask any woman you know: Geddy Lee’s wailing falsetto is a guy thing. Mutual incomprehension between the sexes is one of the most maddening and delightful aspects of life. But there’s no room for it in business.

We don’t check our biology at the door when we walk into work every morning, so the challenges we have in understanding the opposite sex in our personal lives can spill over to work without our realizing it. To plumb the depths of the gender gap for this book, I’ve talked to dozens of executives of both sexes, across industries. For better or worse, the stories are similar.

“The things that interest women are so strange to me,” explains one male senior sales executive. “For instance, I got a new suit and wore it to the office the other day. When I got home, the first thing my wife asked me was, ‘Did anyone comment on your new suit?’ It was such a crazy question, because of course no one commented—I work with a bunch of guys and nobody would ever care about my clothes, let alone say anything about them. I’m constantly mystified that my wife and her friends notice everything about everything—what other people wear and how they look, or whether they’ve gotten a new haircut or lost weight. Every time we go to someone’s house, my wife will notice a new piece of furniture or a new picture on the wall. And when she brings it up to me, I usually have no idea what she’s talking about, because I would never notice—or care.”

It’s easy to see how this example of the gender gap could impact a business. Been to a Sears lately? The out-of-date decor, peeling paint, and drab fixtures are just a few of the things keeping female customers away from the once-mighty retailer, which stubbornly refuses to update its stores, and has seen its stock price and market share diminish as a result. Women may notice things about your products, marketing campaigns, or sales environment that men dislike, and these are the very things that can escape the attention of management entirely or be viewed as too inconsequential to invest in. Is it common sense to take women’s responses seriously? You would think so. But when men and women look at the world, they often see different things.

If women consumers are important to your business, the path to increased revenues is to listen to them long enough to hear what they have to say. Some men have told me this isn’t always easy.

“When I’m around groups of women, I genuinely find it hard to listen to them for very

long,” confesses a male CEO, speaking on condition of anonymity. “I try, but I’m just not interested in talking about other people, or discussing who’s having marital issues, or hearing about someone’s emotional problems. I either leave the room or tune them out, which is something I learned to do when I was about twelve years old, growing up with sisters. My refuge was to head to the garage and build go-carts. Now I keep a pool table downstairs instead. At work, I find it hard to listen to research about women consumers for the same reason. You have to wade through so much stuff to get to the root of things. All I want to know is, ‘What’s the issue?’ Then I can address it with a solution, get the results, and move on. But it’s not easy to discover what women want, and sometimes I think we take shortcuts.”

In interviews, I heard this same opinion expressed, in slightly different ways, from all kinds of businessmen. Men tend to think that women talk about *nothing*, when the reality is they talk about *everything*. I feel compelled at this juncture to acknowledge that women are often just as uninterested in, or confounded by, some of the topics of men’s conversations—fantasy football, anyone?—but since it’s women who dominate consumer spending, and women who determine the fortunes of so many companies, then it is women who must be understood.

It doesn’t require a leap of imagination to think that if some men find it difficult to tune out the conversations of the women they know and love, they will have the same issue at work when it comes to hearing the drives and emotional aspirations of their female customers. The innate desire of most men to avoid discussions about messy, emotional female “stuff” is what leads to shortcuts in business strategies targeting women (such as painting products pink with the presumption that it’s female catnip) and the continued use of stereotypes in advertising, because it’s simply easier to go those routes than to wade deep into the female mind.

Here’s the headline: if you think women’s conversations are trivial, it’s time to get over it, especially if you want your business to survive through a tough economy. Within the rich details of women’s conversations are the road maps to what they need and want—and, ultimately, to increased profitability for your business. Women will tell you—indeed, probably have already told you—everything you need to know about how to run a business that appeals to them, but too often executives are tuned out or only listening for what they want to hear.

Take the story of two guys we’ll call Trey and Steve. They’re a couple of twenty-something agency creatives whose company recently won a piece of canned-food business. Trey and Steve have been assigned to come up with a new campaign targeting mothers of young children. Their strategy is to shake up the category by positioning their client’s product as the hippest thing to hit canned food in years. They believe the product can be transformed by their creative powers into something aspirational. And while they would never admit it to their client, part of their strategy is driven by the thought, *If we have to work on canned food, then at least we’re going to make it cool.*

The only problem is that Trey and Steve don’t know anything about what drives the purchasing decisions of mothers, and quite frankly, they’re not that interested. On the surface they are, but they have no real desire to go deep, because they already have their own ideas about what’s cool, and being a mom isn’t one of them. Trey and Steve’s creative “war room” is full of ripped-out magazine pictures depicting their target consumer, and without

exception, the mothers in the photos look like the kind of women Trey and Steve would like to date.

Like many young creatives, Trey and Steve are living the classic bachelor's lifestyle. Their refrigerators are empty except for the requisite "dude food": beer, cheese, and ketchup. They order takeout for dinner. The daily life of a mother with young children is as alien to them as that of a Tibetan monk. Trey and Steve have read research reports on the target audience given to them by their all-male client team, but when it comes to developing the strategy and the creative, they're relying on their gut instincts—and so are the clients who hired them.

Naturally, their gut instincts are *male*. Since their clients are also male, they think Trey and Steve's ideas are right on. They're currently embarking on a concept that's so edgy it's in danger of alienating the very women they're trying to attract. But they can't see that, because for Trey and Steve and their male clients, masculine concepts don't seem "masculine"—they seem normal.

I'll fast-forward to the end of Trey and Steve's story. After the campaign proves ineffective and doesn't "move the needle," the client will fire Trey and Steve's agency and go on the hunt for another hot shop to deliver the elusive big idea. It will never occur to any of them—Trey, to Steve, or their clients—that the reason for the campaign's failure might have been a lack of understanding of the opposite sex.

You know the old expression that goes, "I know 50 percent of my marketing budget is wasted. I just don't know which 50 percent"? Here's the answer—it's the 50 percent that doesn't appeal to women.

Trey and Steve and their clients are a composite of several teams I've worked with over my agency career who were part of the inspiration for this book. I've also worked with incredibly insightful men who taught me a thing or two about tapping into people's emotions. But as of today, there are still too many executives like Trey and Steve out there, of all ages, who are out of touch with the very target audience with whom they need to connect. It's hard to blame them; the lessons they must learn are teachable, but no one is teaching them. In most businesses that rely on a predominantly female consumer base, there's no formal structure for learning about gender psychology. It doesn't appear anywhere on the organization chart, but it should. Surprisingly, women also find this gender education valuable as well, because they have been taught the rules of conventional wisdom, which are often rooted in masculine values.

Still Relevant After All These Years

SOME people think talking about gender differences is passé—just a hangover from the twentieth century. We're all equal now, right? Gender is so 1970s! Women fought the good fight in the liberation movement, they're beginning to outnumber men in the U.S. workforce, they graduate from colleges in higher numbers than men, there are (a few) Fortune 500 women CEOs, and there's Rachel Maddow on MSNBC and Hillary Clinton as secretary of state. And many men will tell you, "I'm surrounded by women at work." Right?

Well, not exactly.

The matter of the glass ceiling is not what we're here to discuss (and yes, it still exists). This book has a different goal—to help you see your business through the eyes of women.

and to identify the blind spots that might be weakening your financial performance without anyone in the company realizing it. There is an unseen female culture in this world, and whether you're a man or a woman, the job of this book is to help you identify it at one hundred paces, understand it, and leverage it for mutual success—yours and that of the women you serve. In a depressed economy where women are keeping an even tighter hold on their purse strings, understanding women should be job one, because no one can afford to guess.

Women Are Females First and Consumers Second

HERE'S the rub: women are females first and consumers second. If you don't find that surprising, then here's what is—the lack of serious thought and attention that's been given to gender differences in product development, sales, and marketing, when it could be argued that these are the differences that matter most. Knowing your audience as women must be accomplished before you can begin to understand them as consumers.

Some people still need to be convinced that studying women is important, even though the knowledge that women are the world's power shoppers is so intuitive and well supported by market data, society, sitcoms, husbands, magazines, and late-night comedians. An outsider from another planet could be forgiven for assuming that most businesses conduct themselves accordingly. It would be natural to believe that executives are constantly engaged in the study of this “alpha consumer,” creating products that ergonomically fit women's bodies, retail environments that appeal to female sensibilities, sales training programs that address women's speaking styles and body language, and marketing campaigns rooted in female gender psychology. All with the goal of increasing stock price and market share. Right?

Wrong.

It's human nature for people to assume that their own preferences are natural, normal, and “right” without realizing that these preferences may in fact be rooted in gender. Once you become aware of this, you'll start noticing it a lot in your personal life, as I did a few weeks ago. My husband and I were over at another couple's house for dinner when our friend suggested we watch a movie on cable—the violent, computer-enhanced film *300*. Our friend is a cultured guy who likes all kinds of movies, but this night, he wanted an action flick. When his wife and I protested because the violent scenes from the movie's advertising campaign had turned us off, he said, “Come on, it was a big hit!” and then read aloud the summary of the movie from the popular website IMDb.com to convince us:

When the ambitious King Xerxes of Persia invades Greece with his huge army to extend his vast slave empire, the brave King Leonidas brings his personal bodyguard army composed of three hundred warriors to defend the passage of Thermopylae, the only way by land to reach Greece. Using courage and the great battle skill of his men, he defends Thermopylae until a treacherous Greek citizen tells King Xerxes a secret goat passage leading to the back of Leonidas's army....³

Goat passages? Was he kidding? We laughed out loud. We couldn't believe he thought the description would persuade us to watch the movie. It is an understatement to say it had the opposite effect. In this instance, our friend's masculine instincts about what was exciting d

not match ours.

Watch Your Blind Spot

THE point of this story isn't that all women hate action movies or that all men love them because it simply isn't true. (I myself am a huge fan of the Bourne trilogy.) The point is that sometimes words and images that can be exciting for men can cause a negative reaction in women. This is a misunderstanding that can be harmful to businesses, and you see it repeatedly in advertising—especially automotive advertising. As an example, consider the print campaign for the Ford Flex SUV. It shows a car driving through the darkness in a way that seems either scary or exciting, depending on your point of view. Here's how the copy reads:

FORD FLEX: CPR FOR THE DEAD OF NIGHT

Go stimulate something. Like the idea that a vehicle with three rows of seats can also be a nimble-footed, refrigerator-equipped, 24 mpg head-turner. Discover the strikingly original Flex at fordvehicles.com.

Now let's see. This car has three rows of seats, with capacity for seven people. It's got a fridge. It sounds like a family vehicle to me, which means that women will be buying and influencing the purchase of this car. Perhaps it would be better not to use words such as *CPR* and *dead* to headline a campaign for a vehicle in which women are going to be transporting their families. The ad is stimulating, all right, but not in a good way.

The American automotive industry is an easy target, I realize. But is there any doubt that a lack of awareness of customer preferences has played a role in its downfall? The industry is littered with ads written from a masculine point of view, even though women purchase and influence more than half the car sales in the United States and even though these ads frequently appear in women's media. The campaigns are a reflection of an automotive culture (specifically Detroit's) that clearly emphasizes masculine ideals. Models like the Yukon, Navigator, Expedition, Suburban, Hummer, Durango, Escalade, and Ram, to name just a few, are four-wheeled monuments to size and power. If you played a word association game involving the names of American cars, you'd likely come up with adjectives such as *hulking*, *horsepower*, and *guzzling*. If you played the same game but substituted the names of Asian imports, you'd probably hear more "feminized" words such as *small*, *nimble*, and *practical*. Asian cars used to be mocked by some people for these quasi-"feminine" traits, but clearly no one is laughing now.

With a few notable exceptions, the design and marketing of American cars scream "masculine." Detroit has clearly and painfully missed the boat on changing consumer tastes in the last few decades, including female tastes. The predominantly male management teams have assumed for too long that their own values and design tastes are the same as consumers'. Only time will tell if they will recover from this near-fatal blind spot, and I have my rooting for them that they will.

There Are Two Sexes in the Human Race, and One of Them Does Most of the Shopping

It's no secret that women make or influence the majority of consumer purchasing decisions for the home—about 80 percent in the United States. Women are the primary shoppers for their households, which means they're buying not only for themselves but also for everyone else—spouses, kids, friends, family, colleagues, and often their older parents—which multiplies their buying power and influence. If a married man needs a new pair of socks, there's a decent chance his wife will be buying them.

The gender gap in business is illustrated by the fact that men occupy 97 percent of all Fortune 1000 CEO positions,⁴ the majority of top chief marketing officer positions (66 percent),⁵ and nearly all the head creative director roles at the major advertising agencies (always north of 90 percent, though the exact figure depends on the day).⁶ Men hold 83 percent of clout titles (those higher than vice president) in the Fortune 500.⁷ Studies show that even now, women feel misunderstood and ignored by marketers. A recent body of research from the Marketing to Moms Coalition (of which I am a founder) demonstrated that nearly half of the women surveyed—46 percent—felt that marketers were not doing a great job of connecting with them. That's a lot of room for improvement, and it represents a massive opportunity for the brands that can break through their competitors' ineffective messages. As if the economic benefits of reaching women weren't compelling enough, there are social and political implications as well.

We're actually getting to a point where gender understanding might be legislated. In 2009, members of the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in support of a report on the negative effects of marketing on gender equality and stereotyping. Though not legally binding, the report will be used to draft new European Union legislation that calls for businesses to stop using unrealistic and sexist images of both genders in their advertising. Could a lack of gender understanding eventually go from being unwise to illegal? Probably not, but this new development from Europe is certainly enough to give one pause.

As I write this, people in every conceivable industry are being challenged to create products and programs with female appeal, particularly in gender-neutral or traditionally “male” categories such as consumer electronics, insurance, finance, and, yes, automobiles. This is because women have never been more powerful in terms of their buying power. Historically, they've always had *informal* purchasing authority for their households (meaning they were in charge of shopping for it, though they often were spending their husband's income), and they still do, but they now have the added weight of *formal* shopping authority—they're earning money themselves, and enriching their households while they're doing it.

Goodbye Bunk Beds, Hello iPods

THE entire economy has benefited from women's labor. Almost all the income growth in the United States since 1970 has come from women working outside the home.⁹ Before women started working in large numbers, America lived in a world where families had one car, one television, and one stereo, and the kids shared bedrooms as depicted so cheerfully in the popular 1970s television show *The Brady Bunch*. Then millions of women went off into the workforce and their incomes slowly created a new norm—households with multiple cars; ki-

with their own rooms, television sets, and computers; each member of the household with his or her own cell phone and iPod. The mass affluence we've grown accustomed to in industrialized countries has been driven in large part by women's incomes.

In addition to increasing their households' purchasing power, women are driving consumer trends, from the mass luxury movement to the design movement to the do-it-yourself industry. And because more women than ever are running their own households (27 percent of all U.S. households are headed by a woman, according to the U.S. Census), they're often the only one in their homes making the purchasing decisions, large and small. Women are also the dominant sex earning bachelor's degrees in most of the world's industrialized countries, which means that the trajectory for their earning power will be even higher in the years to come.

The social and demographic trends impacting women around the world, which are outlined in the next chapter, are valuable insights that set the stage for what women will want and need from business over the next twenty-five years. The pages ahead are designed to do four things: first, arm you with the most current data about female buying power; second, provide you with insights into how women view the world and everything in it, including whatever you are selling; third, give you an overview of the most important demographic trends that will help you with long-range planning; and finally, bring the concepts of this book to life by sharing real-world case studies, with practical tips and strategies that you can apply to your own business.

Assume Nothing: No Matter Where You Live, Women Are a Foreign Country

THE easiest way to grasp female culture and use the insights to your advantage is to view it as a foreign market. Every country in the world has its own official language(s), cultural norms, and rituals. This is generally true for men and women as well. Each of us is born into an unseen and imperceptible culture built around our gender. We're so close to it that we take it for granted, and we assume the opposite sex knows all about it and understands it, too.

Not long ago, I went on a business trip to Italy. I was at a lively bar full of Italians, and there was another American in our group. He was a man in his fifties. Back in the United States it was the middle of football season, and this guy could not stop talking about his favorite team back home, the Philadelphia Eagles. He talked animatedly and at length about his favorite star players and controversial plays, none of which anyone in the room cared anything about.

As the only other American present, I was embarrassed. This guy had forgotten himself; he couldn't step out of his own culture long enough to realize that Italians—and the rest of the world, for that matter—were interested in an entirely different kind of football, and wouldn't have any reason to be interested in the gossip and inner workings of the Philadelphia Eagles. They were all clearly bored by the conversation but trying to be polite. It was a cultural gaffe—the same kind of cultural gaffe that can occur with businesses that are trying to reach women when they don't understand what really interests them and what doesn't.

Take consumer electronics as an example. Products are often sold by emphasizing technical descriptions that are meaningless to anyone other than enthusiasts, who are likely to be male. Other examples appear almost everywhere you look. Many furniture stores still schedule

deliveries during business hours, which requires customers to take a day or half day off work—a decades-old practice that assumes someone in the household stays home all day. Business-to-business ads use the language of war to sell their services, finding a thousand ways to call competitors “the enemy” without realizing that kind of language turns off female executives. Customer service numbers force busy callers into irrelevant sets of options that compel them to either scream into the phone or slam down the receiver. A woman buying a BlackBerry for her new job will be handed a belt clip that she will never wear, instead of something more suitable for a female wardrobe. Every day, in virtually every industry, the gender differences of the most powerful consumers are overlooked or untapped. The good news is that the opportunities for improvement—and subsequently increased sales—are vast, and the solutions are relatively simple once you train yourself to see the world through a woman’s eyes.

Seeing the Forest as Well as the Trees

LET’S stop right here and take a moment to assess the situation. Here’s what we know:

- **Women drive consumer purchasing.**

In cultures around the world, gathering provisions for the household has long been considered an important part of a woman’s role. This is obvious.

- **Men dominate the senior levels of most of the companies that make and market the products women buy.**

This isn’t always obvious, because there are so many women in middle management.

- **Men and women are so different, they often have trouble communicating with one another.**

This is obvious to anyone who has ever lived with a member of the opposite sex.

- **Understanding these differences can provide businesses with a significant competitive advantage, but it takes work.**

This is obvious only to those companies that are already doing it.

- **The gender gap is a source of missed opportunities and lost revenue, and it should be addressed through education and training.**

Aha. This is the part that hasn’t been so obvious. Until now.

This train of thought seems simple, but there are big reasons why many companies cannot yet see the forest for the trees, nor the opportunities that can open up for them when gender differences are understood in depth.

- **Political correctness stifles frank discussion of the subject, even among women.**

Because the glass ceiling still exists, many people are uncomfortable discussing the differences between men and women at work, in all kinds of contexts. Over the past few decades, women have worked so hard to prove they’re equal that they’re often hesitant

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