

Gender Issues

When it comes to the consumer experience for women in Canadian dealerships, a noted business writer says it's time to move the needle ... from bad to a little-less bad and then on to great ... and offers some easily do-able steps that will get the job done

Women working in greater numbers in the auto retail industry, and more and more marketing initiatives that are women friendly, were re-occurring themes when we looked back at the last 10 years. The following special feature on gender issues in the dealership, co-authored by Joanne Thomas Yaccato and Janis Showers, sums up the mistakes of the past, and offers concrete solutions to make the next decade smooth sailing for your current and potential women customers.

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We knew it was bad, but nothing prepared us for what happened.

We got word out that I was looking for consumer experiences for a book I am writing on selling and marketing to Canadian women. Specifically, we were looking for stories where women encountered either really bad or very good service based on what they perceived to be gender-based. In short order, we were totally overwhelmed with responses. Everyone from singer Sarah McLaughlin to the country's top economist, Dr. Sherry Cooper, was busting to tell her story.

I am dumbfounded that so far, we have yet to hear a good service story. It was clear that we had unknowingly struck something — a kind of collective, unspoken, seriously pissed-off, feminine consumer psyche. But here's the kicker.

Though only into the very early stages of the book, we had to drop the boom on "car stories." We were inundated with automotive horror stories by a ratio of 25 to 1.

If there are any among us surprised by this, chances are good you

kept Tom Hanks company for the last 30 years on that deserted island. Every television exposé, newspaper headline and almost every scrap of independent research done on women and the automotive industry in the last 2000 years sings the same tune. Women have, and continue to have, bad experiences buying cars.

What looks, at first pass anyway, as a possible exception to this research trend was a study recently released by Maritz Automotive Research Group which makes the claim that half the people in their survey are "completely satisfied" with their "car-buying experience." However, it doesn't tell the whole story. It would have been a far more compelling and revealing study had it focused in on the "car-shopping experience." It certainly stands to reason people were eventually "happy" at the dealership where they finally bought their car. But what about the other three, four or five dealerships they visited and didn't buy from?

One landmark study done by demographic gurus, Yankelovich Partners, gave the automotive industry the dubious distinction of being one of the industries that "understood women the least." One could, I suppose, take heart in the fact that women felt the purveyors of beer were viewed only slightly worse.

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Other market research from Evans found that women make half the car purchases, but those women trust car dealers only slightly more than lawyers.

OEMs get the religion

Yet, talk to any dealer principal and they are quick to point out the considerable resources spent on training



Authors Janis Showers (left) and Joanne Thomas Yaccato with the staff of Chevallier Chrysler in Aurora, Ontario — advocating a collective approach to solving gender issues in the showroom.

to improve levels of professionalism. They are emphatic that their employees bend over backward to satisfy every customer.

Same drill with most factories, which offer oodles of incentive programs for dealers who treat customers right. In an effort to take customer satisfaction one step further, there is actually a smattering of car companies jumping on the "women's market" bandwagon. Witness a proliferation of women's councils, women's conferences, women recruitment programs, Web sites for women car buyers, education campaigns for women, and huge advertising and marketing campaigns that

aren't exactly the archetype of the traditional players we've come to expect to be in the women's market.

To those of us in the marketing-to-women game, this is a thrilling mark of a decidedly important trend within the industry. These remarkable initiatives clearly illustrate that car companies are finally recognizing women's enormous economic and influential power. Every single CEO of the Big Three has publicly hailed women's pivotal importance to their sales and engineering strategies within in the last five years.

Showroom breakdown

One could understandably argue that women should hail the dawn of a new car-buying era. Alas, to do so would ignore a cogent point continually raised by research and women consumers alike. In spite of all of these welcomed and legitimate efforts, why do women still feel they need some type of bodyguard or shadow before they enter a dealership? Why do women still think men get better deals? And why does a mere 52 percent of the population believe they aren't taken nearly as seriously as men in the sales process? Something is clearly breaking down in the chain.

We figure it all comes down to this. No amount of women-friendly features like adjustable pedals, women's councils, conferences, Web sites, women sales consultants and engineers, women-centred advertising and marketing — regardless of the zeros in the budget — is going to

change one immutable fact: the whole thing can fall apart when women step onto the showroom floor. In spite of very credible and needed initiatives, car companies continue to be pumelled by women's word of mouth customer experience. At best, it is extremely inconsistent.

Our message? This is not about designing cars for women. It's about the process of selling cars to women. Clean up the inside to match the experience of what your advertising is selling. Women's customer experience needs to radically change in order to stem what seems to be a never-ending public relations nightmare.

Those few companies that spend huge sums on advertising and marketing material to reach women need to expand the net and include in their reach their most important brochure — the front-line sales and service people. This is where the real marketing takes place. According to the 2000 Canadian Automotive Retailing Industry Report, "Men believe that they can sell well to women and the comments we have received from consumers suggest that women have no gender preference from their salesperson. Perhaps this supports the contention that men can sell to women, but few have the necessary gender sensitivity."

It's her interaction with the sales consultant who renders her invisible by talking only to her husband, even though she's the one that's buying the car. It's the painfully patronizing explanation of how leasing works to a woman who has 30 years experience as a commercial banker. That's the stuff that drives women right out of the showroom.

And if that alone doesn't motivate dealer principals to change how they sell cars to women, almost every woman we talked to also mentioned something like this: "My husband/boyfriend/son/brother was just as furious as I was!" For all those who still think this "gender noise" is just feminist jabberwocky, think again. Not only are women getting riled, the men in their lives are as well ... you know, the men who also buy cars. Consequently, sales opportunities with both women and men evaporate without companies even knowing it.

Getting started

How can we improve the experience for women?

- A very easy way to start, is create a place that is comfortable to visit. This sounds superficial, but it isn't. This can start with balancing the greeting process somewhere in between being jumped when you first come in to being flat-out ignored.

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- How about price lists and payment selectors that are available without talking to a salesperson?
- Get the women in your dealership together and get their input on what can be improved. This resulted in one dealer taking on a different worldview of something as arcane as the washroom. The women's washroom was a disaster waiting to happen - a small room with cement walls, a shelf with Kleenex, hand cream, scented soap as well as flowers and pictures. A grease ridden, dirty place, whether that be the washroom, service reception, the parts counter, the showroom or the waiting area, is not welcoming nor does it encourage me to spend any extra time, or money there. Look around the workplace with this new worldview.
- Do the salespeople hang around out front smoking? This is tremendously uninviting. Develop a smoke behind the building policy.
- Think kids. Make it easy for parents to look after them. Have a private place to change an infant. Get some toys and have a safe place for children to play while parents discuss purchasing a new vehicle.

Minor to major

Now, will these minor improvements earn you more market share? Uh, no. But it is a small step that has a degree of visibility that makes it appealing.

To have real, sustainable impact on market share and customer satisfaction, the internal corporate and sales (read: dealer) culture needs to change. The car business is still perceived by women to be a testosterone-filled zone. This has major implications on two levels: the woman consumer and the potential woman recruit.

Recruitment easy,

retaining hard

Let's deal with the recruitment issue first. Many believe having more women on the floor will create a more women-friendly environment. It generally comes as a big surprise to those who adopt the "recruitment strategy" to reach women consumers that this often doesn't work. The automotive industry's own research squarely points out women don't care about the gender of their salesperson. And, in almost all cases, little has been done to affect change within the work environment that these women are being recruited into.

If the culture remains unchanged when recruiting women, two things typically happen. The first is women may not stay. The widely perceived maleness of the automotive industry is an environment that may be counter-intuitive to women. The actual recruiting may be easy, but the "retaining" part of the equation is an entirely different matter.

The second observation is one that we've many times seen first hand. Our 15-year experience from training corporate Canada has proven conclusively that the women who do stay often need the training as much as the men do. Most corporations are built on a male, hierarchical paradigm. Male behaviour is the norm and unconsciously rewarded in the workplace. In order to succeed, women needed to assimilate into that environment. Said another way, they need to become more like men. It's a common complaint.

I often hear women in the business say, "I get so tired of having to be a man all day."

And Helen McDonald, vice-president of marketing for Jaguar, offered this comment to me over lunch recently: "Even though the majority of people in this industry are men, why should I have to be one of the guys to fit in?" Consequently, having more women on the floor or in the business doesn't automatically cor-

men negotiate to establish a winner and loser. Women love to negotiate but want all parties involved to be a winner.

rect the systemic gender bias within the industry — it is far more complex than that. Everyone — women and men — need to learn to handle women customers better.

Step one then, is to create an environment where women will actually not only want to come and work, but stay. Once this atmosphere has been created, almost by default it becomes a place where women want to buy. (It is also a well-known phenomenon in "marketing-to-women" circles that if you make it women-friendly, you make it everybody-friendly.) So, though recruitment is essential and absolutely critical to the equation, it must be step two.

Environments and processes

So, how does one go about creating a gender inclusive environment? Let me tell you, in no way are pink cars or expensive ads involved. It's the implicit understanding that it's not about making women feel different, but rather being taken seriously as a consumer. It means understanding that what appeals to men doesn't necessarily appeal to women. But be very clear that this doesn't mean a lengthy discourse about colour over power. Consider the following:

- It means understanding women want information, options. Give her four payments to choose from not one.
- Tell her the price of a used, new, demo and next year's model.
- Don't push or tell her the same deal won't be available tomorrow.
- Don't assume what she can afford or what she will want to drive or whom she needs to help her buy the car.
- It also means understanding that women and men have different communication styles, which has a huge effect on the negotiation process. There is an abundance of research that shows men negotiate to establish a winner and loser. It's all part of the game. Women, on the other hand, love to negotiate, but want all parties involved to be a winner. Women tend to be uncomfortable with an unlevel playing field, where they perceive someone will come out with less than the other.

Classic male miscue

When it comes to illustrating how different communication styles affect the sales process, this next example wins hands-down. We have worked with countless numbers of male sales consultants who commiserate that they find it hard to sell to women. Many say they don't have as much success closing women as they do men. It generally goes something like this, "I do everything right. I give her

tons of good information, I answer questions and I listen. She gives me all the right buying cues, and I go in for the close. She walks out of the showroom and I never see her again." It's a surprisingly common refrain.

So, we ask how he knew the woman prospect was so in synch with his sales presentation. The number one answer is, "She clearly agreed with everything I was saying. She nodded in agreement throughout the whole pitch. That's when I decided to close." Ah. And there it is. This is a classic example of communication style misfire.

Most of these men are excellent salespeople. But for good reason, they were way off in terms of understanding women's readiness to close. They have misunderstood a classic feminine communication ritual.

For all you guys reading this, heads up. This will be the most important piece of information about women that you will ever hear: When a woman nods her head up and down, it does not mean she is agreeing with you. This is merely a listening cue. In fact, it is entirely possible that a woman can be nodding her head and thinking at the same time, "You just might be the biggest goof I have ever met."

For valid reasons, many men can interpret affirmative head nodding as a sign of prospect readiness to close. That may be what is happening when selling to men, but research proves this isn't necessarily the case with

women. If you attempt to close before a proper sales or business relationship has been formed, especially with women, you've blown it. This also might be a contributing factor to why women constantly complain that car sales people are too aggressive and "hard sell." Without understanding the different styles and rituals women and men have in communicating, this kind of sales miscue will continue to happen unabated.

Conclusion

This is just a taste of what women want their automotive consumer experience to be about. Gender-based sales and communications training should be made mandatory at every dealership that has had a woman come through its doors within the last 20 years.

"Like it or not, women can and will demand respect in the showrooms and so smart manufacturers will provide dealers with more training on how to meet the specific automotive needs of women," said GM president, Maureen Kempston Darkes, recently in *The Globe and Mail*. She went on to say that the companies that do this training are going to have a "tremendous leg-up in the highly competitive North American market." This is precisely where the required culture change needs to begin.

Tom Peters, the spiritual leader of

the trend-spotting set, says, "Women want a plan, to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to take the material home and read about it and think about it. They do not want an in your face, high-pressure sales pitch. This is the secret to women's marketing — in automobiles and health care as well as financial services."

None of this is rocket science. She will tell you how to sell to her. You just need to listen.