

Engendering understanding

It's a fact: consumer surveys consistently show that women feel treated less seriously than men when they go shopping. Meet someone who says this is a problem for your business — and what you can do about it.

What do women want? Mel Gibson had some fun exploring that question in a movie back in 2000, but for retailers it's serious business. According to Joanne Thomas Yaccato, president and founder of The Thomas Yaccato Group, retail does not fare as well as it could in studies that measure the industry's ability to satisfy the needs of its women customers. Her research suggests women feel they are not taken as seriously as men when they walk through a retail establishment's door; a 2007 Thomas Yaccato Group/Maritz study of 1,000 Canadian men and women found women were three times more likely than men to report feeling this way.

In her new book, *The Gender Intelligent Retailer*, Thomas Yaccato argues that a holistic approach to reaching women is what's required of retailers, an approach that puts women's needs as consumers at the epicentre of a retailer's marketing strategy — because, she argues, if you focus on what women want in a retail experience, you raise the bar for everyone. *Canadian Retailer* spoke with her at Retail Council of Canada's national office in Toronto:

So, definitions — what is “gender intelligence” and why does it matter?

In a nutshell, gender intelligence is almost like an “anti-marketing to women” approach. What we see happen in the vast majority of companies out there, not just retailers, is that these attempts [to reach out to women] fall under the “marketing to women” umbrella. We know it doesn't work because women can smell a femme marketing rat a mile away. She is the savviest consumer on the planet for a

number of reasons; her brain physiology, combined with her social role, essentially make her a consumer that has razor-sharp intuition and expectations about what her experience should be all about. She is what's known in academic circles as a “professional consumer.”

This is why marketing to women flunks, because it's just one tiny piece of the pie. Women notice absolutely everything, from how easy it is to maneuver through your Web site to how heavy the door is when they walk into your store, from the condition of the washrooms to whether the store is too hot or too cold... the list goes on. Gender intelligence is essentially taking a gender lens approach, putting on a new pair of glasses and looking at your world in a different way. These are the people making the decisions in the family about purchases, so now more than ever it's crucial to understand this particular constituency.

OK, so let's hear it — what do women want?

Didn't Sigmund Freud cover this one? (*Laughs*) I can answer that in a simple line, but its implications are very complex: women want to be taken seriously. That's the big issue for them. The research shows they're not being taken seriously because companies either guess what they want or they come at it by instinct. It's really about understanding what they want by asking them and not by relying solely on guesses.

Is it fair to say that some retail sectors don't get it while others — say, those where women are the primary customers — do?

Oh no. We just finished a big study with the Quebec Furniture Manufacturers Association and also doing some work with

their retailers, and it was the same when women were going in to buy furniture. I would venture to say most companies that are face to face with women are attempting to get it right, but I would offer that not many are there yet. Interestingly, women's clothing [retailers] didn't rank very well, with less than 50% customer satisfaction level. I would have expected more from an industry that has to live so close to the street and needs to be so close to the customer to survive.

But it's not just in the face-to-face experience [that retailers fall short] — women are very holistic and they'll catalogue away all touch points of their experience, so they'll catch an ad that turns them off somewhat, or how difficult it was for them to find their way in the store. We found this in one of the nation's largest retailers, where there were no baby change tables in the washroom. Actually, many men were furious, which shouldn't be surprising; what we've found is that if you make something woman-friendly, then it's friendly for everyone. And while women may get disproportionately teed off when these kinds of things happen, the men in their lives aren't all that pleased, either.





© ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/CLAUDIO ARNESE

“Women want to be taken seriously. That’s the big issue for them. The research shows they’re not being taken seriously because companies either guess what they want or they come at it by instinct. It’s really about understanding what they want by asking them and not by relying solely on guesses.”

Who do you often point to as a retailer who gets it when it comes to gender intelligence?

I like talking about Mountain Equipment Co-op because they’ve internalized a gender lens, and that’s through Sean McSweeney, who co-wrote the book. At around the time they were looking to revamp their stores, they were looking very carefully at how women consumers differ from men. This was at a time when their customer demographic was about 70 per cent male, 30 per cent female. They just assumed that guys were their audience: they like to kayak, climb mountains... that’s their gig, right? Except MEC was noticing a trend of more and more women who were voicing their discontent about not being able to find appropriate products or, if something was designed for them, it was essentially a male version made slightly smaller. MEC looked at what was driving women into the store, how they use the product — they really analyzed the way women buy, what their preferences were, their interactions in the store, all of it.

What they discovered was amazing — for one thing, women interact with salespeople to a significantly higher degree than men do. So one of the things they did was to delegate more staff to the women’s

department than the men’s. They also put more changerooms in the women’s department because they noticed that men — not all men; clearly, I’m speaking in generalities — were able to walk into a store, walk over to a rack, pick something up, walk to the cash register and leave. Women can’t; we just wouldn’t walk out of a store without trying something on.

So how do you get retail executives to start looking through a gender lens?

We start by locking the executives in a room for a day. In the morning, we give them the data dump and the reasons why you need to integrate this thinking into their strategies. Then at noon we roll in car seats, snugglies, purses, diaper bags, and these babies they use in family planning classes that pee and cry on demand. We morph everyone into “Laura,” a 37-year old with a newborn and a 7-year-old who’s prone to tantrums. Then we tell them to go shopping in their own stores. It’s the most fun we have as grown-ups, I have to tell you.

We had a very interesting time at Home Depot, where a VP was wearing a snuggly on his chest. We’re not in the store five minutes when a keener staff kid comes whipping around the corner at breakneck

speed and clips the front of his cart, crushing the “baby.” It wasn’t nice, but the VP had an interesting epiphany at that point; he noticed this cart he was holding was a very cumbersome thing to maneuver around and what he decided was that his worldview is not the same as everybody else’s. He sent a memo out to all stores that morning asking them to research a more user-friendly version of the shopping cart. That came from thinking like a woman, but there are also people with disabilities, the elderly — all kinds of people who could stand to benefit from this.

Let’s assume I’m a retailer who hears what you’re saying, and I think, “OK, this makes a lot of sense, but with the way the economy is right now I don’t have the time or money to invest a lot in research and strategies. Instead, my plan is to lower prices, be nice to everyone who comes in my store, and ride out the tough times as best I can.” What’s your response?

We run into this attitude constantly whether there’s a full-blown recession or not, and this is why we say “marketing to women” doesn’t work. When the market turns and the economy goes down, what’s the first thing to go on the chopping block? Any initiative that treats reaching out to women as an event is doomed to fail. It’s not something you try on for a month and then discard; it’s about changing the way you think.

What we’re seeing is that companies that look at treating the needs of women as a core competency are experiencing far less of a body blow than companies that haven’t because women are the ones who are deciding if the family is buying or not. We did an interview with [President and CEO] Gord Nixon from Royal Bank and I love this comment. The bank had moved to an approach where they didn’t treat it as an event; it became intrinsic to how the bank did business. His comment to me was, “Even if I wanted to cancel this, I can’t. It’s the culture; it’s how we do business.” And I thought, bingo, there it is — that’s gender intelligence. ☐

The Gender Intelligent Reader: Discover the Connection Between Women Consumers and Business Growth

By Joanne Thomas Yaccato with Sean McSweeney
©2008, John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.
ISBN: 9780470841020

