

What women want

Joanne Yaccato helps businesses overcome the gender gap

By Marissa Ponikowski

WHAT DO WOMEN WANT? This question has perplexed many, including Sigmund Freud, who is rumoured to have uttered it plaintively on his deathbed. Bad news for Freud: He should have spent his life agonizing about something else, because apparently the answer isn't all that complicated. "What women want," says Canadian corporate consultant/trainer Joanne Thomas Yaccato, "is to be taken seriously."

The dynamic 50-year-old has built a business around doing just that. In 1992, following a career in financial services, she made the jump to self-motivated entrepreneur, opening The Thomas Yaccato Group. Her mission was simple. After toiling in an industry that catered almost solely to the male "breadwinner," she wanted to shake things up and pass along to companies, through training, consulting, writing and public speaking, the essence of what women really want.

Reality versus practice

According to a battery of statistics, the current reality of corporate consumerism is that although women control 80 per cent of each dollar spent on everything from food to electronics, they are consistently ignored by the companies from whom these goods are purchased. "A study we did found that 50 per cent of women feel their gender affects the way they're treated when they enter a place of business," says Yaccato, the author of several books, including *The 80% Minority*. "In 2006, for women to say this is a problem is just unbelievable."

What Yaccato wants to convey to the business world is that although women often have very different needs and priorities than men—a new baby, a sick child, a burgeoning career balanced with a beloved family—these needs should not serve to diminish women in the eye of the corporate beholder. In fact, they are prime reasons to stand up



Joanne Yaccato wants to cast a "gender lens" on corporate culture to precipitate change.

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and take notice, or be left behind. "If you meet the needs of women, you'll exceed the expectations of men," she says. "In a nutshell, understanding women will in fact benefit organizations right across the board."

Changing perspectives

Over the years, Yaccato has employed some unconventional methods to get through to clients, including Toyota Canada, Sears, Home Depot, Ikea and Imperial Oil. Using

Check the next page to evaluate your company's "gender performance."

hands-on workshops supported by a module called Gender Intelligence—which Yaccato explains as the process of casting a "gender lens" on corporate culture, marketing, advertising, product development, sales and sales training—she tries to get them to recognize that there are different ways of seeing things, such as through the eyes of a woman with children.

"One way is to get all the senior executives in a boardroom. We roll a trolley into the room, loaded down with car seats, strollers, diaper bags, baby carriers and those 10-pound 'babies' that are used by high schools to simulate the parenting experience. Using this equipment, we morph all of the executives into 'Laura,' a 37-year-old mother of a newborn and a 7-year-old prone to temper tantrums. We then tell them to go shopping in their own stores."

Yaccato's favourite memory is of a vice president attempting to shop in a home-improvement store while carrying a faux newborn in a front-harness carrier. "We're not in the store two minutes and some staff kid comes flying around the corner and clips the front end of his hard-to-control shopping cart and crushes his baby. The next day he sent a memo out asking for research on a more user-friendly version of the cart."

The hard results

Thanks to her company, some of Canada's major banks are taking a long, hard look at their small-business programs, a great many of which are owned and operated by work-from-home mothers. The insurance industry is paying attention as well. "There was once this conventional wisdom which stated that women are not involved in making decisions about home insurance," says Yaccato. "We did a study that found close to 90 per cent of women were the sole decision makers, and a major insurance company is now in the process of revamping its approach to support this piece of knowledge."

Yaccato's books have also opened the door for much globe-trotting on her part. She explains, "I do a lot of speeches relating to the books, about consumer awareness and gender intelligence, in many different countries, to large groups and organizations. Women everywhere are so supportive of the work I do, which is in large part what motivates me."

Yaccato takes her role as gender ambassador very seriously—but that doesn't stop her from approaching a sensitive issue with a hearty helping of humour. "You cannot know how wonderful it is to see women and men bantering back and forth, making little jokes, with nothing taken in the wrong way and the whole gender dynamic back on equal ground. Good lord, we're each 50 per cent of the population. We might as well have some fun with it!" ☞

Marissa Ponikowski is a Toronto freelance writer who covers a variety of topics for national publications and Web sites.

Evaluating products through women's consumer lens

THE THOMAS YACCATO GROUP (see previous page) built the following list for evaluating products through women's consumer lens. See how your products or services stack up.

Biological criteria

Does the product need to be gender specific?

Is colour your main point of product differential? If so, ask yourself why?

Can the product be modified or created to more specifically "fit" women's physiology?

Where appropriate, can it address women's longer life span?

Does it affect or address women's unique health concerns?

Does it support or interfere with a woman's life while pregnant, on maternity leave or caring for children?

Pricing criteria

Is the cost structure based on sound math?

If there is a flexible price policy, can you justify the criteria for charging different prices?

Internal company criteria

Is it good for the company? Does it match the company's objectives and strategies?

Does it deliver more value to women customers than competing products?

Have you checked out magazines, television, stores and Web sites targeted to women consumers?

Have you observed women's experiences in settings similar to yours?

Do you have the people, skills and resources to make it succeed?

Does your company's leadership demonstrate diversity awareness?

Does your sales and marketing department include users of the product?

Are women involved in the design process?

Can you assimilate consumer information from various sources in your organization?

Does your system allow frequent innovations to address a constantly evolving market?

Can your product cycle be shortened in order to accommodate market changes? Is it easy to advertise and distribute?

General product criteria

Is it truly useful to women consumers?

What primary benefit will it provide women?

What existing products compete with it?

When and where will women use it?

Can it be positioned as a personal-finance/small-business solution (if appropriate)?

How can it offer flexibility and choice?

Can it be positioned to support women's self-employed status?

Can the benefits be communicated in terms of its impact on issues important to women?

From the outside: Are you talking to women consumers?

From the inside: Do you have a gender-intelligent team to interpret the research?

Are you asking gender-intelligent questions?

Social criteria

Does it satisfy women's demand for information?

How can it save women time?

Can it support a woman's many roles or does it serve only one need?

Does it respond to women's concerns for the environment?

Does it address women's safety concerns?


Does it support women's role and circumstance as primary caregivers?

Does it support women's role and circumstance as parents?

Does it reflect women's view of money as medium of exchange or tool to purchase rather than power and status?

Does it consider that women control 80 per cent of the purchase decisions for the household?

Does it help women share information?

Does it pose a win-win outcome or an ethical solution, or does it "do good"? 

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