



**BEWARE
the Gender Trap**

Marketing to the 21st Century
Gender Neutral Consumer

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If marketers continue to create campaigns based on thinking that “men always do this” or “women always do that,” they are going to fall into a gender trap. In this era of the much more diligent shopper, we just can’t make assumptions about how gender influences consumer behavior. Those marketers that do risk irrelevance in a very demanding marketplace. Those marketers who avoid the gender trap and instead serve the highest consumer standard represented by “women’s ways” but serving everyone, will reap immeasurable and lasting brand love.

Today, too many marketers are taking the lazy way out and polarizing male and female consumers in just that way. All along, they’ve been missing the point: It is not gender, but brain traits. In order to connect with the next wave consumer of both sexes, we’ve got to keep that in mind.

Human beings are generally a mix of right and left-brain thinker—most often landing somewhere near the middle of that continuum. (Take the BBC Sex ID quiz to see where you are on that lineⁱ). Whether a consumer makes a purchase or responds to a certain marketing approach in some way depends on the situation, their industry experience, the product category and so much more. What guides their shopping path will be their own unique combination of relational and linear decision-making styles. They will not be forced to fit the gender stereotypes brands might expect.

That is why there is a big trap in making assumptions about the buying ways of today’s consumers. No gender about it.

AVOIDING THE GENDER TRAP

Given the changes in our culture and the emerging male consumer, the imperative for marketers is: embrace and serve the interconnected, relational thinking of today's consumer. While that philosophy has traditionally been seen as serving "a woman's way," let's be clear. A so-called woman's way actually epitomizes the highest consumer standard. Serve such extremely demanding ways and your marketing reach will trickle down to effectively serve everyone—male or female. My manifesto here-with screams for marketers to keep gender out of their language altogether, even as the buying ways and needs they serve may have started with the feminine perspective.

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Drop your anxious tradition-grasping, gender-assigning ways, my friends! Men and women are different in many ways, yes, but they are processing purchases much more similarly today. Let's move from eternal assumptions to the truth of the matter. If you can bring yourself to face the facts—circumstances beyond anyone's control have led to the following gender-neutral realities. People are more:

Interconnected: There is a sudden awareness of the long term and global implications of what consumers now buy. They are inclined to wonder how this step they take or purchase they make will affect future generations or even just their nearby neighbors.

Community Aware: Human beings are reaching out to share and care for one another in challenging times. They realize the emotional value in combining forces and weathering the difficulties together, rather than hoarding or being one-up on their neighbor in order to feel better.

Balanced: The challenges of existence today is forcing the issue of making decisions with a more balanced right and left-brain approach. Thus, people are more fluidly and simultaneously taking in both emotional and relational influences as well as linear facts and figures.

While consuming will be strongly guided by bottom line price in periods of recession, a more deliberate shopper is developing and will emerge from the ashes all the stronger. These new ways of thinking and evaluating purchases will have been deeply embedded in female and male buying minds. Brands need to prepare for a right-brain, relationally guided style consumer of either sex.

HOW WE GOT HERE: CULTURAL SHIFT TO GENDER NEUTRAL CONSUMER

Over the past five years, with much media coverage and marketing industry buzz, “women’s ways” of buying have become the gold standard in the marketplace. And yet, this is not because women are better shoppers or more important than men. Instead, it is because that broad label, “women,” tends to represent those consumers who are most guided by right brain thinking, which means they think relationally, empathically and holistically (and is very different than the logical and linear left brain style thinking).ⁱⁱ Anyone who thinks in a more right brain-guided manner will be a downright tough customer, and that’s exactly who marketers are going to need to serve in the twenty-first century.

There is certainly no short term, band-aid approach to what marketers face right now. Rather this is the time for many marketers to look a bit beyond their noses or next quarter’s earnings, and notice how much the average consumer has changed.

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Consider the powerful male business executive in an urban area who mows the lawn and watches sports with his buddies, while also enjoying the hunt for fashionable, quality apparel and buying the latest not-cheap skincare products. He's very traditionally masculine, and yet he also has a lot of "feminine" qualities. He's very content in his non-gender-specific existence, but don't ever try to sell him anything with the essence of being marketed to women.

In the same way, and in that same office building perhaps, we'd find a powerful female executive who makes a mean casserole and goes to the spa with girlfriends, but also takes care of home repairs and loves a good amber ale. She, too, is suspect of "for women" pitches, while being very clear on her particular likes/dislikes and needs from brands.

Marketing a pink toolkit to her and a cheap suit to him would more than backfire. Shortsighted brand marketers might think women, by virtue of being female, will only be attracted to color/design over functionality. Those lazy marketers, in a similar manner, might think that men, by virtue of being male, won't dig deep and look at the quality details or do more research for their suit purchases.

The times and our culture have changed toward a more gender-neutral existence, in living and consuming. Two new definitions of twenty first century consumers from highly respected sources, in fact, are distinctly gender neutral. Gartner's Generation V (a more socially conscious, digitally savvy person who knows no traditional demographic bounds)ⁱⁱⁱ and Mark Penn's definition of the "New Info Shopper" (one who seeks out, and is not spoon-fed, detailed information before he or she buys).^{iv}

And yet, some marketers are stuck on keeping men and women in their traditional roles, rather than focusing on how they have changed and responding accordingly. It is, after all, a lot simpler to think of consumers as being in one of two groups. And still, the word on the marketing street has long been that your customers prefer to be treated as the individuals they are—making gender assumptions all the more irrelevant.

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Indeed, according to Datamonitor, the male market shows some of the biggest potential for growth in the health and appearance category, a formerly “female” purview if ever there was one. “According to its research eight out of ten male consumers now believe that improving their health and appearance is important, with 45 percent of males saying they are willing to pay more for personal care products with active ingredients.”^v

As well, according to my unscientific survey of men (in my men’s advisory panel), 80% are proud that they “shop more like a woman does” to some degree or another. These guys, in many other ways extremely “masculine,” brag about their nontraditional roles in their marriages and like being that rare man who isn’t emasculated by cooking, cleaning, or parental duties. With no residual sheepishness, I got comments like these: “I am the cook in the house, and I like it that way.” “I’m the one who works from home, so I end up ferrying the kids around the majority of the time and running loads of laundry.” “The house only gets clean if I do it.”

The insight therein? Men like this may be becoming the rule more than the exception as engaged and active shoppers—a behavior long tied only to women.^{vi}

NEW FRAMEWORK FOR GENDER TRENDS

Let me make clear that marketers really need a 180-degree change in gender perspective today. Until they shift their views in this way, they will continue their current ineffective campaigns, and in today's economy where every dollar is precious, from both a budget and consumer perspective, that is unacceptable. All things male-focused should not fall off a marketer's to-do list for good, just because they've discovered and taken on the challenge of better serving women.

Instead, learning more about gender in marketing is about taking in the new research, AND evaluating it in the bigger scheme of things. Getting micro-focused on the women's market because it is trendy is akin to referring to the most recent movie you liked as the best one you ever saw. All of the women's market knowledge in the world doesn't supplant that consumer knowledge base you've long since built—it enhances and enriches it.

Do you see where I'm going with this? Women's market awareness and research seems more special because it is more recent. And yet, it doesn't stand on its own as the silver bullet for marketers. Instead, it should enhance, combine and sort out alongside what has been and is going on in the men's market. Only with a 360-degree gender perspective that includes men and women, will consumer insights pay off to their fullest potential.

In our book, *Don't Think Pink*, my co-author and I introduced the idea of transparently marketing to women, with the goal of being guided and inspired by the customers you serve. This manifesto could easily have been entitled "Don't Think Pink (or Blue): I Mean It," as marketers who are nobly attempting to reach women have yet to understand the subtleties therein, let alone how to apply them to men who are more actively engaged with shopping for themselves and their families. There is now an added and more urgent subtlety to gender in marketing.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MALE SHOPPER RESPONDS TO GENDER NEUTRAL CULTURE

And, if men are, in fact, buying more like women, why shouldn't they? They have seen brands falling all over themselves to offer women a wider selection and richer buying experiences. Now, men realize they can demand the same for themselves. So, what is it about our current culture that brings about this relatively significant change from the 1950s "Mad Men" (men work, women shop) era?

There is a whole new, gender-neutral take on marriage, for one. Fewer men, like women, are getting married, with the percentage of married men dropping from 76 percent in 1970 to 56 percent in 2006 (according to the U.S. Census Bureau). If they do get married (like women, again) it is more likely to be later in their lives, and they are all the more likely to enter into a partnership with someone who is also fully employed. There goes that handy daily errand runner!

In addition, studies have shown that men are doing more of their share of housework and a lot more of the child care. As sociologist Scott Coltrane notes in a 2007 *American Prospect* ^{vii} article:

Overall, experts estimate that men's relative contribution to routine indoor housework is now about half that of women's. Even more change has occurred in men's performance of child care, with fathers now spending three times as many hours on child care as they did in the 1960s, and performing a wider range of tasks. Women's time in child care has also increased, but differences between men and women are declining.


Even in shopping styles, men and women are becoming more similar. A few years ago I came across a survey of grocery shoppers and laughed at the shocking, I mean shocking, finding that men were not so good at it. (Do tell.) Then, and even more now, those findings were really beside the point and not about the grocery shopper's gender at all. Excellence in grocery buying comes with practice! Many, many more men are gaining that experience and are proud of their newfound consumer wisdom.

Which leads me to my point here: men will grow to excel at “consuming” and in their own right. If society as a whole allows for a man to marry later or not at all, share household chores when he is partnered, grocery shop, and so on, the studies have shown that he will very willingly step up to the task. And, perhaps he’ll treat it like a more familiar work-related challenge in striving to become the best.

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Now, before you go begging to differ, I’ll mention the caveat for you. The first men to be participating to such a degree in their households and in the marketplace as such, are indeed those on the coasts or in urban centers. That is how it goes for all shifts in consumer behavior. What will be important is the “allowance” factor. I have no doubt, that once the possibility is raised in a household, women find it helpful to truly share household tasks (and let go of any perfection issues they may have). As more men clean and buy, and more women “allow” for tasks to be done with perhaps a bit less perfection, society as a whole will slowly start to encourage the same of the rest of American men—in those mid-country, more suburban or rural areas.

Like any marketing virus—once the first tier of engaged consuming men is really comfortable with this new style of living and buying, those who are perhaps on the fringe of that first group will also attempt to live that way—and so on. The new gender-neutral household management and shopping trend will then edge its way to include the majority of the consuming public. Savvy shopping will no longer be “for girls.”

The twenty-first century’s more interconnected, community-aware and balanced decision maker is thinking more “like a woman,” and a man, every day. Beware of falling into the gender trap. 

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ⁱ BBC Sex ID quiz:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/sex/add_user.shtml

ⁱⁱ For more on right brain versus left brain style thinking in today’s conceptual age, see Daniel Pink’s book, *A Whole New Mind*

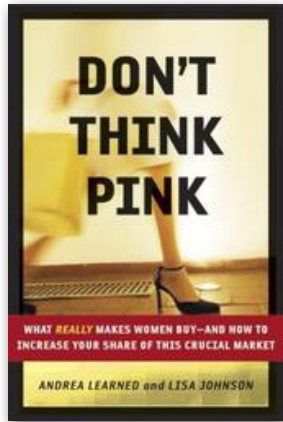
ⁱⁱⁱ For more on Generation V, see: <http://www.businessfeet.com/internet-marketing-news/items/internet-marketing-strategy-for-generation-v-to-be-community-based-1223386500.html>

^{iv} Mark Penn, *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2009, “New Info Shoppers”

^v “The Simple Solution for Meeting Consumer Demands” by Simon Pitman, from *Cosmeticsdesign-europe.com*, April 21, 2006
<http://www.cosmeticsdesign-europe.com/Products-Markets/The-simple-solution-to-meeting-consumer-demands>

^{vi} For more on new male consumer, see Andrew Adam Newman’s *AdWeek* article, “The Man of the House” August 11, 2008
http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/special-reports/other-reports/e3i1e343e9ca0d6f68bc57f2f143dd33c29?pn=1

^{vii} *American Prospect* article
<http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?articleId=12490>



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Learned, the co-author of *Don't Think Pink*, is a leading women's market and consumer gender insights expert. Andrea shares her insights and analysis through her [Learned On Women](#) blog, and in regular contributions to [Marketingprofs.com](#) "Daily Fix" and [Women-omics.com](#). Andrea's no-nonsense Vermont lifestyle (which she highly recommends) forms the foundation for her untraditional, sometimes counter-intuitive, marketing perspective. Andrea's current mission is to make the whole idea of "marketing to women" obsolete—NOT to work herself out of a career, but to point out that serving the right brain-guided consumer, rather than serving solely women, should be any twenty-first century brand's goal.

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