

Sales Savvy Series for Women Entrepreneurs

6 - Gender Differences in Buying Habits

Successful sales strategies are based on a solid understanding of target customers, their needs and what drives them to buy. For every small business owner, a marketing plan is the foundation for solid sales because it shows exactly how to generate awareness and interest in your product or service. However, it's the sales strategy itself that turns consumer awareness and desire into a sale; you can't have one without the other. This article will assist you in understanding how your knowledge of your customers will help you discover their motivations and how the general differences between men and women's shopping habits might affect your sales strategy.

Motivations to buy

With your market research and target market profiles already prepared, you know who your customers are. Now it's time to start understanding what leads them to actually make a purchase. Every single one of your customers is motivated by thought and emotion when they buy a product or service from you. It then becomes your job to understand these motivations. Are they looking for comfort and convenience or perhaps they desire the prestige and status associated with a product or service? Maybe they want to feel more secure and are looking for something that will protect them from potential danger and risk. Or, perhaps using your product or service simply makes them feel good and the purchase is entirely emotional.

Whatever the underlying reason, each motivation has an emotional aspect, whether it's fear, pride or pleasure, or even a combination of many emotions. Although people tend to make purchases based on their emotional responses, they generally justify their purchases with rationality and won't even admit to themselves the emotional reason for the purchase.

As a business owner you need to recognize that you are never just selling a product; you're selling your customers the benefits of that product which appeal to their motivations and emotions. For example, if you're selling shampoo, your customers might claim they're buying it for personal hygiene, but when it comes down to selecting which bottle to put in their basket, that selection is based on an emotional response. Your customers aren't just buying shampoo; they're buying a product that has certain perceived benefits other than cleanliness. One person might want thick, silky hair, while the next person wants to protect their colour and yet another is concerned about a dry scalp.

Market research, continued customer research and observation of customers will help you understand basic motivations that lead customers to buy your products and services.

Gender differences in buying

In our quickly changing culture it's a common occurrence to see women in electronics departments and hardware stores, and men pushing carts in the grocery store with a young child in tow. Traditional roles are changing at a rapid pace, however, the general differences in the way men and women shop and make purchasing decisions remain the same. When developing your sales strategy, the following should be strongly considered in how you sell to your customers.

What women want

There's a sense of satisfaction women experience when they seek out an item, compare quality, prices, and the benefits and downfalls, before finally making a purchase. Women enjoy taking their time and

picking out the perfect item, rather than just grabbing the first thing they see. Women still do the majority of shopping for a household, and it's also very commonplace to see women shopping as a social activity.

Karen LeMoel, owner of Bourbon Street Boutique in Castlegar, a medium to high-end women's clothing store, experiences this female shopping ritual in her store on a daily basis. Her typical customers are women aged 30 to 60 years, professionals, or retired professionals with disposable incomes who are looking to purchase casual to semi-formal clothing.

"Women come to Bourbon Street for the camaraderie, to talk about what's going on in their lives and to shop while doing it," says LeMoel. "Customers will spend an hour chatting with each other or with me, trying on different outfits and exploring their choices without even thinking about the time gone by."

LeMoel recognizes that shopping and socializing go hand-in-hand for women. In fact, women who shop together are prone to spend far more money than women who shop alone, or women who shop with men. Ever the savvy business woman, LeMoel holds trunk shows where her customers get together to have a glass of wine and admire a designer's entire fashion line. At these events she's selling clothing to her clients that wouldn't normally be available in her store. LeMoel is appealing to her customer's basic motivation for pride of ownership, which is increased by the social atmosphere and encouragement of the fellow shoppers.

The male shopping mentality

Shopping is a "get in and get out" mission for men and this mentality makes them much more susceptible to purchasing products quickly and without thought for cost. Men are out to find the first item that meets their criteria, not to spend hours examining the many choices at hand. Business owners should recognize that a lot of money can be made from men's desire to get their shopping duties over with as quickly as possible.

Despite the fact that LeMoel's target market is all female, she saw the opportunity to increase sales by targeting her customers' husbands' lack of enthusiasm for shopping. LeMoel keeps track of her customers' personal information in a database, so when someone's birthday or anniversary is coming up she'll call the husband and let them know that she has the perfect outfit for their spouse. Within minutes she's taken the shopping stress out of the man's hands and made a quick sale. She'll even mail the clothing or a gift card to them so they never have to enter a store. Brilliant!

Conclusion

Shopping excursions can happen for any number of reasons: as a reward, necessity, for entertainment, to socialize, to escape, bribery...etc. Every time a person goes out shopping it's because they have a motivation for doing so, and are again motivated when they make a purchase. Each person buys for a different reason and when they do it's due to one or more emotional responses. In sales, you need to know how to invoke that emotion in your customers to get them to buy. With a solid understanding of their motivations, you'll be able to drive your sales strategy based on their buying motives.

To learn more about the topics discussed in this article, Women's Enterprise Centre recommends *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, (2009) by Paco Underhill.

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Call us at 1.800.643.7014 or email info@womensenterprise.ca from anywhere in BC.

All examples cited are BC business owners who have volunteered at Women's Enterprise Centre events.

