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Women & The Economy

Transformers: Women And The Automotive Industry

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By Maddy Dychtwald



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"One of my colleagues was buying a car recently, and she became more and more irritated because the car salesman was talking only to her husband," says Mary Lou Quinlan of Just Ask a Woman, a marketing consultancy targeting women. "So she said, 'You know, I feel like you're not paying any attention to what I say.'" The car salesman, surprised, insisted he was paying attention to her. "Oh yeah?" she replied. "What's my name?" The dealer--who had made a point of using her husband's name repeatedly--was speechless.

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It's true. Women buy 52% of all new cars sold in the U.S., influence more than 85% of all car purchases and are the fastest growing segment of buyers for new and used cars. All told, women have full or partial say over a staggering \$80 billion worth of spending on cars.

But car dealerships do a terrible job communicating with women. Seventy-four percent of women say they feel misunderstood by car marketers.

"The auto industry today is in trouble, and automakers are struggling so hard," says Jody DeVere, president and CEO of Ask Patty, a site staffed by women car experts who advise other women on car purchases and service. "Yet they're only doing lip service to women in terms of marketing and selling. When what they need to do is change, and create an environment where women don't equate buying a car or getting it serviced with going to the dentist."

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It's an industry that's owned and operated by men. Some 95% of the country's 20,000 auto dealers belonging to the National Automobile Dealers Association are male. And it shows.

"It's a very male culture. They're family businesses, and they've been owned by men for a long time, so that's part of the culture," says DeVere. As part of her job she travels around the country, training car salesmen to build better relationships with women. She's used to the boys' club vibe--she worked in the male-dominated technology industry for years before moving to the automotive industry in 2000. She became president of the Women's Automotive Association International, and later launched AskPatty.com.

Still, she wasn't prepared for the locker-room antics of car salesmen. During one training presentation to a large group of salesmen recently, she explained the importance of careful listening with women customers. "Men and women communicate differently and can misunderstand cues and singles," she said. "Men need to learn how to listen, and why. It makes women trust you and creates a relationship." Meanwhile, a group of salesmen in the back was whispering, shuffling papers and giggling.

"When the Q&A time came, they asked me inappropriate questions, which I'm used to. I used humor to deal with it." At the end, she cleaned up the literature and found the men, all in their 40s, had drawn crude cartoons of her with labels like "Manhater.com."

She was angry at first but then thought, "at least the management is smart enough to know they have a problem and they need me." Two weeks later she received a surprise gift--a \$275 Mercedes-Benz branded handbag she'd mentioned during the speech. The note read, "Dear Patty: Just wanted you to know that some of us were really listening."

Isn't it nice to know that the day is coming when the guys in the front of the room--the ones who sent her the handbag, the ones who sincerely want to listen to women with respect--will get their reward?

Car dealers don't have to offer cookies and manicures to improve the buying experience. The most important thing they can do is change the way they listen, DeVere says. "Women like to tell stories. We don't talk in bullet points. When I come in to get my car serviced, I want to tell you the whole history. But men tend to interrupt and cut to the chase, and that makes me feel bad, like they're not respecting me. Men need to learn how to listen," she says. Not because it's polite, but because real listening will sell more cars.

Can small changes, like better listening, really help? Marti Barletta thinks so. "When you're starting from zero, doing even a little bit to appeal to women in general can make a huge impact. That first 20% of your effort will get you 80% of your value. Most companies are not even in the beginning of the curve."

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