

## Understanding The Female Customer: Marketing And Selling To Minority Women

by Gerry Myers

Women continue to be a major force in the automotive industry – affecting design, sales, marketing, corporate cultures, showroom floors and the bottom line. Within the total women’s population, which is seen as a substantial buying power, are less recognized sectors. Hispanic, African American, Asian and other ethnically diverse female populous are becoming an increasingly important market for dealers to consider.

According to Sharon Hadary, executive director of the Center for Women’s Business Research in Washington, DC, minority women business owners are growing at four times the rate of other small business owners nationally. This means more women of color are making buying decisions for their businesses’ and families’ procurements – including automotive merchandise.

“Ethnic minorities spend \$1.3 trillion annually, including \$50 billion on new and used vehicles and services,” said Shelia Vaden-Williams, executive director of the Virginia-based National Association of Minority Automobile Dealers. According to Ms. Vaden-Williams, they are customers worth pursuing.

Dorothy Miller-Shore, president of the Miller Agency, a Dallas-based advertising agency specializing in the automotive industry, has seen a surge in Hispanic advertising over the last several years. “Five years ago we did zero Hispanic advertising. Now about 25% of our advertising is aimed at this market.”

To reach the Hispanic market, Dorothy Miller-Shore advises her dealer clients to run commercial spots on Hispanic TV or radio stations with Hispanic actors/actresses speaking the language, as well as creating direct mail pieces. “You need to have a presence of Hispanic salespeople on the showroom floor as well,” counsels Miller-Shore.

“It is a rare client who doesn’t do some Hispanic marketing and advertising,” Miller-Shore said of her dealers and dealer groups. “Of our clients, the two top spenders on Hispanic advertising are also the two top sellers to Hispanics. That is a market with real growth potential in many parts of the country.”

Carmen Moses, co-owner of Ed Moses Dodge in Scottsdale, agrees. “We have seen our dealership grow substantially since we started advertising in Hispanic publications. While Scottsdale does not have a significant Hispanic population, Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe and several small surrounding areas do. They come from all over and after two years of advertising, we are beginning to get a lot of referral customers as well.”

While the female influence on the purchase may not be as overtly obvious as in many other instances, Hispanics tend to shop as a family, bringing wives, children and oftentimes in-laws to the dealership. Ms. Moses, who is Hispanic, believes their business is growing because they make the buyers, including the extended family members, feel comfortable. “You have to expect lots of noise and discussion when you have so many people involved in the purchase.” She doesn’t, however, undermine the importance of the

fact that the husband often makes the final decision even though the wife frequently chooses the kind of car the family needs. “Dealerships need to re-evaluate their culture to make sure it is open to new ways of doing business,” said Moses.

Ms. Vaden-Williams is still amazed at some of the things friends tell her about their car buying experiences. “A woman friend of mine saved a long time to be able to afford her dream vehicle. She picked it out, did the negotiating and purchased the vehicle. Her husband went with her when she took delivery. During the walk-around, the salesman was demonstrating the memory seats for her. Upon achieving the perfect seat position for her, he programmed in button #2, explaining that button #1 was for her husband.

“It’s the small things that matter to women,” said Vaden-Williams. “Don’t miss opportunities to make a sale or get a referral.”

Lillie Biagas, the first African-American female dealer to receive five General Motor franchises in a single location, believes that salespeople think the man is always the buyer of the vehicle. “That just isn’t true anymore,” said Biagas, owner of Fairway Automotive Group, Inc. in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. “Educating your sales force about women, especially minority women, is number one. Don’t assume they are not serious buyers or can’t afford a specific model. If a woman is in the showroom, she has generally come to buy,” continued Biagas. “Today, many African-American women are single heads of households who need a vehicle to get to work or chauffeur kids around. Many minority women are highly educated and very powerful.”

Biagas said that women are delighted when they realize she owns the dealership. Having women on the sales floor helps as well. “I am continually talking to schools and organizations trying to encourage young women to consider the automotive industry as a career choice,” said Biagas. “Women bring a different perspective, a fresh approach and will try new things.”