

To Sell a Car That Women Love, It Helps if Women Sell It

By GEORGE P. BLUMBERG

October 26, 2005

FREUD admitted he did not know the answer to "What does a woman want?" Mel Gibson, in the movie "What Women Want," sought the answer by dressing as a female and sampling feminine products.

Automakers use women in focus groups, design clinics and product planning to design vehicle features with appeal.

"Men and women don't necessarily want something different," said Gerry Myers of the Myers Group, a Dallas company that teaches businesses how to appeal to women. "It's just a different ordering of importance. Men want safety too; with women it's just higher on the list." For a man, handling relates to the feeling of sports cars, but for a woman it's part of safety.

She said that when buying a car, men tended to look at engine size and how fast a vehicle could go from 0 to 60 miles an hour, while women viewed performance practically, like how fast a car could accelerate onto a highway safely. "Men care more about exterior styling," Ms. Myers said, "while women care more about interior styling and finishes, and practical items like third-row seats, built-in cold storage, better cargo loading." But she added that women were not all the same, and it depended on the life stage they were in.

Building the right vehicles helps, but manufacturers' desires to connect with women may disconnect at the dealer if sales representatives are not knowledgeable or the atmosphere is demeaning or even hostile.

Auto dealers operate in a traditionally male industry, from their service departments to their showrooms, making it daunting for some women who want to buy a car.

"Women are scared to death of buying a car because the process can be intimidating," said Heidi Webster, who operates an independent auto-buying service, the Amazing Autowoman, in Seattle. "In the showroom you generally deal with men, and some can talk down to women as if

they're interested only in color. Negotiations can be grinding. Couples often find that salespeople address mostly the man."

A nationwide survey by Capital One, a financial services company, found that 75 percent of female car buyers planned to bring a man with them to the dealer to ensure fair treatment. Carol Newberg, a 53-year-old insurance saleswoman from Westerville, Ohio, said, "After I brought a male friend along, they finally started showing me what I was interested in – a practical four-door for business – instead of pushing coupes and convertibles on me."

Ms. Newberg likened having her friend along to putting "a blowup doll in the passenger seat so you can use the express lane."

Ms. Webster said, "Most women buyers I talk with say they'd rather work with me because I'm a woman." Many women would rather deal with a saleswoman on cars, said Art Spinella, president of CNW Marketing Research, an automotive consulting business in Bandon, Ore. But, he said, women own only about 7 percent of the nation's approximately 20,000 dealerships, and "less than 6 percent of salespersons are female."

Cynthia Price, the head of General Motors' Women's Market Initiative, said the sales and finance processes were important to focus on when trying to appeal to women. Ms. Price said one goal was to increase the number of female dealers. "We want showrooms to mirror our markets," she said, adding, "G.M. is the leader in women-owned dealerships among the Big 3, 267 dealers out of about 7,500." Still, that's only about 3 percent, far from mirroring a market where, Mr. Spinella said, women buy about 48 percent of vehicles themselves, and influence 80 percent of all vehicle purchases.

"Until carmakers' boards of directors represent women proportionally," he said, "the car culture won't change enough to reflect the female point of view." The Capital One survey found that about 40 percent of women felt that being female negatively influenced the way a dealer treated them.

Ann Griffin, a Seattle real estate agent, visited several Toyota dealers last spring when she was looking for a Toyota Sienna minivan to chauffeur clients around. Subjected to buy-it-now sales pressures and a "closing" technique in which the salesman and manager "kept scribbling calculations on scrap paper and pushing them around," she said, she returned with her husband. When the salesmen repeatedly directed conversations toward him even after they were rebuked, the couple left.

Ms. Griffin contacted Ms. Webster through a referral. Within hours, Ms. Webster found her a car in Oregon and negotiated it for \$6,000 less than the dealers wanted.

Heidi Getzlaff, 26, has been selling cars for seven years at Acura of Glendale, a dealership in California owned by Jeanne and Bill Brewer. "Women do come in from other dealerships saying they were ignored, and they focused on the man," Ms. Getzlaff said. "With couples it's good policy and fair to ask upfront who is the primary driver, and what's important to you? Find out what the woman wants. Sure, women are generally more practical, concerned with ergonomics, but women are into performance too – it's not about the color."

Ms. Getzlaff said she thought men were less defensive with a saleswoman, but that "your knowledge gets tested, especially with men. When I prove my knowledge, it removes doubt and gives me a stronger position than a male salesperson." She said women tell her it's nice to see her in the showroom. It's "kind of like, 'You go, girl,' " she said.

Ms. Price of G.M. said the no-haggle pricing used at Saturn was popular with women because it disarmed the negotiating process. CarMax, which specializes in selling used cars, started similar pricing in 1991. Its computerized inventories are accessible on the Internet. (Studies show female car shoppers use the Internet more often than men.) Sales representatives earn flat fees no matter what is sold.

Donna Wassel, a CarMax regional vice president, said a company poll of 16,000 women nationwide "clearly shows they want a no-hassle transaction." Mr. Spinella said his research showed that 85 percent of men who had bought cars through CarMax would recommend that their friends do so, and 94 percent of women would.

Susan M. Franco, 39, the only saleswoman at a BMW dealership near New Haven, said she was ranked third of 11 sales representatives for her performance there. Women, she said, were more inclined to approach her than salesmen, and they were "more upfront than men, who hold back like it's a poker game."

Recently, she sold a BMW to Karen Callahan, 27, of Branford, Conn., who said she had been "treated like an idiot," at two Ford dealers. The Ford salesmen did not know that Ms. Callahan, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, was a West Point graduate who had commanded a transportation detachment in Kosovo and that she sold racing bikes.

"One dealer told me I'd look great in the blue Mustang he had," she said. "The other dealer said I'd look great in the black one he had. I gritted my teeth. Neither talked anything about the cars, and the financials were way off."

Ms. Callahan said of Ms. Franco after she went to her dealership: "Susan pointed out the BMW's features, broke the costs down clearly and didn't pressure me. I'll admit on seeing a woman in the showroom my feeling was I'd have less wool pulled over my eyes. She had to be good, but I think a female dynamic was operating."

© Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company