

YOU TALKING TO ME?

Does South African business really respect the power of the purse or are female consumers being humoured with 'pink' packaging?

By JANINE JELLARS

Im a single woman with multiple degrees. After expenses, I have a certain amount of pocket money. So, why do I often feel that South African companies don't want me to spend it? According to advertisers, women like me don't exist. Instead, I see bimbos battling to find their burgers and chips under their breasts, mothers cleaning their gleaming townhouses while wearing white chinos and smiling young women whose lives are transformed by cereal (I prefer more nutritious porridge).

HAVE MONEY, WILL SPEND

South African women are wealthier than we've ever been. According to numerous consumer studies, we take more than 87 percent of the buying decisions in this country.

'We're not just buying clothes, food and the usual household items; we're taking care of so much more,' says Lindsay Grubb, who owns L Communications, a Jo'burg-based marketing and PR consultancy. 'We're buying cars, getting them serviced, buying property, sourcing architects and builders who will understand our vision for our dream home; we're doing our own home repairs and recycling. We're pickier today about what we're buying than we were before.'

But despite our powerful purses, few local businesses know how to talk to us. She-conomy.com, a portal with information relating to marketing to women, points to a survey that found that 91 percent of women say advertisers don't understand them. And that's bad for business.

'In order for companies to succeed in today's competitive environment, they need to make women their number one focus. Companies need to remember that they are marketing to an individual and not a demographic,' says Pippa van den Berg, brand strategist at Imagine Nation Alliance. We definitely don't want to be stereo-

typed as a mother, wife, dumb blonde or housekeeper and the 2006 Women Nation survey confirmed that. 'Women prefer to be spoken with and engaged in conversation, rather than spoken at and told what to do,' says Van den Berg.

Marketing guru and non-executive chairman of Bizcommunity SA, Chris

Moerdyk, says the way companies in South Africa speak to women is well below par with international trends. 'Generally, companies handle women as if they can't think for themselves and this stems from a long history of paternalism. You don't even have to look at any data about this; just ask any woman about her interactions with companies in this country.'

BRAND FAIL

What woman doesn't have a story about being patronised by advertising or in stores? Some of the biggest insults come from brands that trade on sexist jokes to sell burgers or pizzas, cleaning product advertisements that feature a superhero flying in to save a damsel distressed by a dirty kitchen and advertisers that completely ignore women in their communication. Banks, car dealerships and cell-phone service providers are notorious offenders.

One of the most common marketing mistakes, says Van den Berg, is the assumption that every woman is a mother. The other, she says, is creating 'pink-washed' brand communication that doesn't deliver on the brand promise. These products and services are generally gender neutral but companies add bows, pink lettering and an image of shoes hoping to lure women.

'Women are aware of these "tricks" and are quick to dismiss them. They do not want to be portrayed in a stereotypical way. Instead, they are looking for a brand that understands and respects them, a brand that is real and addresses the real-life issues and needs that a 21st century woman experiences,' says Van den Berg.

'Companies have to realise that this sort of marketing is sexist and become aware that they're "othering" their female customers,' says Tara Turkington, CEO of Flow Communications. That's not to say that this form of marketing doesn't work at all. 'There is a certain market for it, but the professional women I know say they don't want to be "girlified", something you find a lot of in advertising,' says Moerdyk. 'A large number of women find it patronising and insulting.'

'CAN I SPEAK TO THE MANAGER, PLEASE?'

Companies seem to forget that for many of us a fancy ad campaign is meaningless if we experience bad service.

‘The front line is the most important factor in marketing today – where the consumer comes into contact with the product. This is where the sale is won or lost and brand loyalty is forged,’ says Moerdyk.

Grubb agrees: ‘We’re picky, particularly when it comes to customer service. We don’t just see the person in front of us giving us poor service as the problem. We assign blame to the entire company because we see it as a reflection of their corporate culture. If the shop assistant is incompetent or rude, or worse, we walk away.’

SUCCESS STORIES

There are companies who are getting it right – and seeing results. First For Women provides an interesting case study of taking insurance, a gender neutral product, and creating a package specifically aimed at women without merely ‘pink-washing’ the product offering. The added benefits it provides – the concierge service, trip monitor and roadside assistance – set the company apart as one that understands what women need and want.

‘Insurance is a grudge purchase, so they offer their clients extra value which encourages interaction between their clients and their call centres, so long-term relationships are built,’ says Grubb. Another success story, says Van den Berg, is Skip Intelligent’s We Do Laundry, You Do Life campaign: ‘[It] shows that Unilever understands and believes that women have moved on from only worrying about household chores, and have bigger, more important things in their life.’

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty also resonated with women by including ‘real’ women as opposed to models in its advertising. The campaign saw the brand becoming a household name and in the United Kingdom sales of Dove’s skin-firming lotion grew by 700 percent.

But it isn’t just your advertising agency that needs to hit the right notes. ‘Companies who continuously do research into what their female target market wants and needs, and incorporate the analysis into their product development and marketing decisions, can only become better at what they do,’ Van den Berg says. ‘It is important to continue a dialogue with your target market to further understand their frustrations and challenges in day-to-day life, so that your messaging can be effective and relevant.’

BANKING ON WOMEN

Standard Bank spent a year researching women’s spending patterns and preferences before launching MyCard, a credit card for women, last July. Along with access to roadside assistance and a handyman service (for which cardholders pay) and women-specific disease cover, benefits include a cash rewards programme that was

initially intended to put cash back into cardholders’ credit accounts. Based on focus group feedback, however, the bank developed MyGift, a prepaid loyalty card linked directly to the MyCard credit card. ‘MyGift allows clients to redeem their cash rewards at the shops of their choice. This hits the mark with women,’ the bank’s Leila Fourie told Louise Naughton of VRL-financial-news.com.

With a women-only credit card, as with any gender-specific financial product, Standard Bank walks a fine line between coming across as patronising to a segment of their market or offering a tailor-made service to a valued customer. Marketing and customer experience will tip the scales, and it is worth noting that the agencies charged with the MyCard PR and digital campaigns are both run by women. So is the bank’s card division, which is headed by Fourie.

Hiring more women, giving them executive powers and actually listening to them can save companies a lot of time and money for further research. But obvious as this may seem, She-economy.com points out that, even though 85 percent of all brand purchases in the US are made by women, only 3 percent of American advertising agency creative directors are women.

As the number of women in decision-making positions grows, marketing messages are bound to change. ‘As a woman running a company, you would inherently be wanting some of the same things that your market is, or at least be much closer to them than a male-run company,’ says Van den Berg.

Meanwhile, companies should know that all they need to do is ask.

‘If a businessperson believes that women will benefit from his product, then spend time with real women,’ says Grubb. ‘Spend an hour or two a week taking a group of women from different walks of life for a cup of coffee or lunch. Let them do the talking and really listen to what’s important to them. Or spend the afternoon sitting in a coffee shop listening to the conversations around you.’

And Moerdyk says, ‘Successfully marketing to women boils down to understanding the essence of marketing: finding out what your customers want to hear.’

VOTE WITH YOUR RAND

In the meantime, what can female consumers do? Complain effectively, Moerdyk says. ‘There’s a lot of apathy in consumerism in South Africa. We need to understand that complaining about bad or insulting service is something we must do. Too many women just accept it and this kind of encourages the patronising. As long as shops, banks and car dealerships think they are providing a good service, it won’t change.’ □

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