Pocketbook Power

How to Reach the Hearts and Minds of Today's Most Coveted Consumers—Women

Bernice Kanner

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Don’t Even Think About It: A Dozen Ploys Bound to Backfire

Marketers are targeting women, but not all their messages arrive as intended. Here are some tactics that are bound to miscarry.

One

Sexy ads are fine. Ads that feature women as sex objects are not. Buxom babes and frat-boy raucousness can sell beer. But Miller Lite’s salacious “catfights” between two sexy bimbos who tear each other’s clothes off while wrestling in a trough of cement crossed the line. In versions of the “taste great, less filling” argument aired on cable, Playboy playmate Kitana Baker tells model/actresses Tanya Ballinger, “Let’s make out.” Then viewers learn that it’s all a fantasy of two guys at a bar.

Women weren’t amused by the sex-inspired parody of beer and babe commercials; neither were most men to whom they pandered. Ironically, for years, former parent Philip Morris had barred Miller from running ads with women rolling in Jell-O because the company considered it disrespectful.

The National Organization for Women (NOW) agreed. Lisa Bennett, communications director of NOW, said that women disdain the vulgarity of Miller’s beer and babes clawing commercials. They
also bristle at more subtle sexual innuendoes that thinly disguise misogyny. Anheuser-Busch’s three-armed man grabbing a woman’s behind and a guy’s dream of dating both his girlfriend and her roommate are cases in point, Bennett says.

Two

Calvin Klein’s fragrance Obsession portrayed a negative concept in a powerful and positive way. Ads that focus on women’s unnatural obsessions, such as an overweaning preoccupation with the cleanliness of their toilet bowls, can’t transcend that negativity. Real women do not relate to the sniveling, helpless, insecure, and indecisive creatures some advertisers serve up any more than they can relate to superconfident superwomen who need only rely on themselves.

In their own ways, they are both as unnatural and unapproachable as the egg-shell-skinned women in the L’Oreal Mineral ad with flashing metallic gold and purple eyes, a dripping red vampirish mouth, stiffly gelled hair, and silvery purple nails.

Showing beautiful, ultrathin women is also risky. Laurie Mintz, associate professor of educational and counseling psychology at the University of Missouri–Columbia, found that women were more depressed and dissatisfied with their bodies after seeing ads with such creatures. Today, the ideal ad model is an accomplished pragmatist. And Jenny Craig learned soon after it hired—and then fired—Monica Lewinsky that fame is not a sufficient connector. The White House intern generated attention, but her endorsement didn’t encourage women to sign on. They did not see her as genuine, admirable, or trustworthy.

Ally McBeal was an engaging TV protagonist, but as an advertising “shero,” she would have been a zero. Her obsession with marriage, hopeless neurosis, and discontentedness and powerlessness to choose the lifestyle she wanted canceled out her sexiness, intelligence, and success.
Three

Sure, women want to be able to relate to the characters in ads, but they also want to understand what the product offers. Sometimes this gets lost when an advertiser uses “$10 words” when “5-cent” ones will do. When people are robbed, they call a cop, not a law enforcement officer, says marketing consultant Al Ries. And no one says, “Let’s go to a financial services company to get our finances serviced” when they mean a bank.

Aiming to be politically correct, marketers often inflate their language to the point that a message becomes unwieldy, confusing, or alienating. UPS changing from parcel delivery to “Synchronizing the World of Commerce” may get people to think that it is going into the watch business, Ries cautions. Boston Chicken stumbled here when it added turkey, meatloaf, ham, and other items to the menu and became Boston Market. “Everyone knows what a chicken dinner is, but who knows what a market dinner is?” he wonders.

Four

Marketers who pitch superfluous benefits rather than real ones, such as the 1960s car ads that emphasized color or whitewall tires or contemporary spots that claim that the sun never sets on a banking empire (why would you care if you’re in Dubuque?), risk passing their pursued like ships in the night.

In a chat room recently, Intuition razor’s commercial was denounced for exaggerating a problem to comical proportions. In the ad, several women suffer discomfit and indignity shaving: Soap flies out of one’s hand, razors nick another’s ankles, and a third loses her balance in the bathroom, while, Jewel, “that sellout,” bops out Intuition in the background. The gizmo, which combines razor, shaving cream, and blades all in one neat place, provides a real benefit, but the problem it pretends to solve is ludicrous. “Leg shaving is not that difficult or something to get that excited about,” one woman
huffed. “Lather ’em up, scrape ’em off, moisturize if you like, and get on with your day. I’ve never had soap go flying out of my hands while shaving my legs.”

Women don’t want lifestyle; they want life—life that is rich, rewarding, and exciting. They can sniff out when they are being played for a sucker, as drug companies increasingly do by inventing problems. “Social anxiety disorder,” for example, a.k.a. shyness, “a benign personality trait once viewed as becoming in some people, is today being cast as a prevalent medical problem, relieved by a powerful psychotropic drug like Paxil,” said Dr. Scott Gottlieb, a New York internist. Too many pills are prescribed for too many soft diagnoses because of marketing, he says, noting that “minimal brain damage” became “attention deficit disorder” and “hyperactivity disorder” for marketing purposes. “Economics have replaced curiosity as the driving force behind research,” complained Gottlieb. “Cashing in on the real and imaginary health anxieties of Americans is a lucrative business.”

Ads that tout a company’s tradition and hierarchy, without providing a reason customers should consider the company, fall into the same trap. While women like the reliability of well-established companies, they know that such companies represent an old order that historically has excluded them, and they are suspicious of big. Then, too, while they respect core brands and values, they want to discover them on their own instead of wearing their mom’s Chanel No. 5 or driving their father’s Oldsmobile or taking the word of some white-coated authority figure. If the marketing involves a sellout, they are even more indignant. The American Medical Association got a real shiner a few years ago when it sold its seal of approval to Sunbeam health care products for hefty royalties. Women today subscribe to the guide at their side instead of the sage on the stage.

Five

Ads that try too hard often come off like the adolescent boy wearing his hat backward. Over-the-top antics or high-tech production values catch women’s eyes but not necessarily their wallets. When “the nation’s
innkeeper” tried to tell the world about its $1 billion renovation to better compete with the Hiltons, Marriotts, and Sheratons of the world, Holiday Inn showed a voluptuous woman turning heads as she strode through a 20-year class reunion. A voiceover intoned the cost of such body enhancements as a nose job and breast implants. An old classmate who claims he never forgets a face struggles to recall hers—and cringes as he realizes he’s looking at Bob Johnson. “It’s amazing, the changes you can make for a few thousand dollars,” a voiceover explains. “Imagine what Holiday Inn will look like when we spend a billion.” A traditional, homespun, vanilla ice cream, apple pie, middle-American brand had stepped way out of character with gender-bending content that tried so hard to be witty that it boomeranged.

Six

Humor works if it is used to explain a specific product benefit, not to be gratuitously mean or mock a cherished value or institution. In the emotional days following 9/11, Kenneth Cole’s “God Dress America!” billboard hitched its wagon to the terrorist attacks in a tasteless way that seemed to mock the moment and the prevailing sentiments of patriotism, solidarity, and seriousness.

An ad where a widow is devastated not by her husband’s death but by the fact that he is being buried in their beloved car is done in by its dark humor, says Jody Moxham, president of ad research company PhaseOne.

Seven

Marketing that makes fun of personal traits that make consumers self-conscious, such as a raspy Fran Drescher voice or an overly ample Queen Latifah dress size, or that portrays people as down on their luck or sadistic alienates its audience. Toyota’s “Key Party” doesn’t open the right doors. The male swingers look scared when a fat woman routs through a bowl. She’ll go “upstairs” with the owner of the car keys she’s fished out. However, when she extracts the keys to
a Corolla, the guys leap up, their zeal to be associated with this car surpassing disgust for the woman.

Gross behavior—Jenny on the john—or rude noises such as belching or farting only work when the target is teens, says PhaseOne’s Moxham. Hip British clothing company French Connection’s edgy ads based on its initials and home country (FCUK) and the Broadway play *Urinetown* generated attention, but both had steep negatives to overcome.

In the 2000 winter Olympics, runner Suzy Hamilton escapes a chainsaw murderer as “Why sport?” flashed on the screen, followed by “You’ll live longer.” Nike intended to spoof a horror movie, but women took it as mocking violence against them. Nike landed in another pickle soon after when it promised that its ACG Air Goat shoe would help the runner avoid trees and becoming a “drooling, misshapen nonextreme trail-running husk of my former self. Forced to roam the earth in a motorized wheelchair with my name, embossed on one of those cute little license plates you get at carnivals or state fairs, fastened to the back.” Women found it cruel and crass, not cute and convincing.

And Budweiser bombed with women in a spot where a young man’s friend tells him to check out his girlfriend’s mom to see how the girlfriend will look 20 years from now. Mom looks great through the peephole, but when she enters, her gigantic butt fills the screen.

**Eight**

Messages that stereotype by ethnicity or sex often bomb. Retailer Just for Feet’s dimwitted and baffling commercial demonstrated foot-in-mouth disease and came off as racist and wildly insensitive. Four white men in a Humvee track a barefoot Kenyan runner, as if in an animal safari, knock him out with dope-laced water, and force sneakers onto his feet. When the bewildered tribesman awakens, he’s horrified and desperately tries to tear off the unwanted footwear. *Advertising Age* vilified it as “neocolonialist . . . culturally imperialist, and certainly condescending” and questioned the sanity of its cre-
ators. The *Des Moines Register* said that it made Denny’s and Texaco (who’d earlier been censured for coarse discrimination against African-Americans) “look like abolitionists.”

Of late, more and more the stereotype is of an incompetent, helpless, clueless guy, the buffoon who scorches the breakfast sausages and ruins the laundry by mixing whites and darks and who is saved by the calm, competent (and possibly contemptuous) wife. This is marketers pandering to women whom they believe nurture a historical grudge and welcome themselves in the dominant mother-child role. In a Visa spot, a couch potato slob points out a spot his wife missed cleaning. She turns the vacuum cleaner hose on him.

Most ads that offend were never intended to do so. Canon doctored a spot in which a smart-aleck seventh grader snipped that her mom’s presentation was “stone-aged” after women complained about the child’s rudeness. Canon had meant the exchange as friendly mother-daughter banter.

Before political correctness hijacked marketing, it would have taken a full-scale boycott to can a costly campaign. Now companies retreat at a whiff of trouble. Pennsylvania mom Sharon Smith, whose 18-year-old daughter had died of a heroin overdose, was horrified to see a Christian Dior’s Addict perfume ad in which a trim woman looked like she needed a fix. Smith objected, and Dior changed the scent’s name and advertising.

**Nine**

Women like to play, but they don’t like to be toyed with. When the Department of Homeland Security warned Americans to tape their windows and stock up on bottled water, women were scared silly. When they figured out that they were pawns in a political game, they got miffed. Fear is a great motivator, but if the marketer’s slip is showing, women see it.

They swallow lots of serotonin uptake inhibitors but distrust the drug companies that make them. This mistrust intensified after revelations that women were, in effect, dutiful guinea pigs in
hormone-replacement therapy (HRT) experiments. Now findings that suggest that HRT causes more problems than it corrects or prevents are being questioned, and women are left wondering what to do.

Anytime women sense that they are being manipulated, their backs go up. When John Nuveen & Company showed the paralyzed Christopher Reeve rising from his wheelchair and walking (by virtue of attaching his face to an ambulatory body) to celebrate amazing things in the future, women were intrigued. When the Chicago-based investment firm with no connection to medical research then asked, “What amazing things can you make happen?” and encouraged viewers to “leave your mark,” they became appalled at being exploited. Like a Jerry Lewis telethon, the spot was designed to elicit tears. Unlike the cerebral palsy fund-raiser, this wasn’t for a socially beneficial cause but for corporate coffers.

Benetton has abandoned “shockvertising,” or at least toned it down, because audiences resented the company’s maudlin maneuvers. Instead of death row inmates, dying AIDS sufferers, and a nun and priest kissing, it has taken to showing respectful images of the world’s poor. Its “Food for Life” ads “put a face on hunger and demonstrate that Benetton has grown up,” says Lucy Farey-Jones, head of strategic planning at San Francisco’s Venables, Bell & Partners ad agency.

Even companies that concentrate on concepts women consider important, such as safety, often hit the wrong tone. Just Ask a Woman Chief Executive Officer May Lou Quinlan says that ads showing crash-test dummies undamaged after being slung through a steering wheel as their auto slams into a concrete wall are less soothing to a mom than Detroit intended.

Ten

Ads that pay homage to another time date themselves. Take the movie Bachelor from a few years back. Showing the eligible man chased by dozens of desperate would-be wives played to an old stereotype. So
did a Bankrate.com ad suggesting that women need to trick men into marriage. A smiling, pregnant bride about to cut the wedding cake stands beside her morose groom. “Less than 2 percent of condoms actually fail,” reads the headline. “Every percent counts . . . no commitment required,” concludes the text.

Another surefire way to derail is by using words that have become clichés through overuse. Cool, for example, has become a lot less cool, just like the once-popular smiley face, because of its ubiquity.

**Eleven**

Marketers may penetrate women’s radar screens with omission but never by commission. Lying is the ultimate insult, punishable by withdrawal of trust, as Sony Pictures learned in June 2001. While movie marketers selectively pick raves and bury pans when they reprint critics’ blurbs, Sony’s flimflam went further: It provided phony reviews by a phony critic.

The fictitious David Manning of the real *Ridgefield Press*, a small weekly in Connecticut, praised Sony’s *A Knight’s Tale, The Animal, Vertical Limit*, and *Hollow Man* when it was actually Sony’s marketing department that penned the accolades—and invented Manning. Connecticut’s Consumer Protection Commissioner summed it up this way: “What Sony did was like having a chef pose as a food critic and then give his own restaurant four stars.”

Women want to believe the ads they see. When they discover that they can’t, they dismiss all the claims the tricky advertiser makes. Clorox Company did itself more harm than good with ads in which animated goldfish talk in upside-down side-by-side Glad-Lock and Ziploc bags. The fish in SC Johnson’s Ziploc bag is in trouble: His bag is leaking, and he asks for help—to borrow a cup of water. But Clorox was found guilty of misrepresenting its rival and publicly humiliated.

On the Web recently a cybercitizen bemoaned a chart she’d seen at a Hyundai dealer. It inaccurately compared Hyundai’s Santa Fe model with Honda’s CRV and Toyota’s RAV4. “Why would a company
bring itself up by lying about its competition?” she grumbled. “They must be embarrassed about what they have to offer.”

**Twelve**

“Ring around the collar” worked for years with its insight that women check the necklines on their guys’ shirts. However, its tattle-tale whine soon diffused the magic of sharing that dirty little secret. It became annoying, in the same way that Mr. Whipple’s penchant for Charmin squeezing did.

For fear of annoying, companies have scaled back on e-mail blasts, telemarketing (even before the do not call registry went into effect), and online pop-ups (despite the automatic setting on Windows XP). IVillage discovered that 92.5 percent of its community found pop-ups the most frustrating feature of the Web.

Smart marketers also have stopped yelling. Remember ranting, red-faced Crazy Eddie or bombastic Jacko for Energizer? Women would much rather listen to a soft-spoken announcer who calmly tells of a sale going on that might interest them than an in-your-face salesman (or Web site) screaming the price and promising the best deal in town.

And while we’re at it, they also resent salesmen butting in when they are speaking, dismissing their concerns and turning their points of discussion into challenges to conquer. Rather, to win them, experts recommend making eye contact (which men often avoid for fear it signals intimacy or confrontation) and nodding, smiling, and offering an occasional “mmm” or “uh-huh,” body language to signal that they have been heard.