



WINNING HER BUSINESS

BY BRIDGET BRENNAN

Women are the world's most powerful consumers. They drive the majority of consumer spending through a combination of buying power and influence. Throughout all the change and upheaval of the pandemic, their role as "chief purchasing officer" for the household remains unchanged. This fact alone provides a valuable compass for navigating the future in the patio and hearth industry, as we move into the uncharted waters of pandemic recovery. While there's no crystal ball to tell us which new consumer behaviors will stick and which old ones will return, a good rule of thumb is this: If you want to know where the market is going, follow the women.

Women's buying patterns serve as a bellwether for changes that eventually go mainstream across genders and generations. For example, many of the values that historically have been associated with women—like wanting to buy from companies that make the world a better place in some way—now apply to younger generations of all genders. Understanding how these changes impact your business will help you stay one step ahead of Millennial and Gen Z customers.

Patio and hearth businesses have more opportunities than most when it comes to growing sales, customer satisfaction, and loyalty with women consumers. Many of you work in family businesses with women in ownership or senior leadership roles. Your companies are vital members of the communities in which they operate. You provide products and services for the home, the emotional center of family life, and women are already primary purchasers for the category. Yet, female culture is changing faster than ever. How can you formalize strategies to keep up?

Just as we continually upgrade our software to stay current, we must upgrade our customer experiences to stay relevant. You already know that women have been disproportionately affected by

the pandemic in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Many mothers of school-age children were forced to leave their jobs due to a lack of childcare and eldercare resources. This and other pandemic-related repercussions have had an impact on their wants, needs, and expectations.

As founder and CEO of the advisory firm, Female Factor, I work on the front lines of female culture, researching the ways that women's evolving lifestyles, careers, and family roles impact their buying patterns. As lockdown restrictions continue to lift across the United States, my team and I are constantly talking to women about their buying attitudes and behaviors, and how they've shifted. One woman summed it up this way: "When it comes to shopping, I am not the same person I was before the pandemic."

Here are four tips to help you grow and serve this crucial customer base right now:

Double down on your customer experience. There are many things we can't control about our work—a global pandemic being the most obvious—but we can control one important factor: our customer's experience. Women make up the majority of primary caregivers for both children and the elderly, which adds layers of complexity to their buying decisions. Being easy and convenient to do business with is now a given. How can you take your customer experience to the next level? Based on my research, there are four key motivators that influence women's purchasing decisions: They want to feel connected to you, your products, and your brand; inspired to buy from you; confident in their buying decision; and appreciated for their business. These motivators can serve as your guidepost for enhancing the experience for every customer.

Prioritize inclusive marketing and sales training. Female culture is evolving fast. Many sales training programs have been developed without meaningful insights or perspectives from women. Don't let this be a blind spot. Revisit your sales training to ensure it encompasses women's viewpoints alongside those of your male customers. Without an inclusive program, your team is at risk of missing communication skills that help them connect more successfully with this critical

segment of buyers. Conduct the same exercise with your marketing materials to ensure that your images and language are modern and inclusive. Stereotype avoidance is crucial, or you may alienate the very audience you're hoping to attract. Consider forming a gender-balanced task force internally to take on this project.

Focus on sensory engagement in your retail environment and product displays. Women shop with all their senses. With so much of our time spent behind screens, compelling physical environments are more important than ever. For the most part, it's still difficult to touch, taste or smell anything through a device. This means that brick-and-mortar businesses have what I call a "home-court" advantage: The opportunity to engage all five senses within a store. If you're a retailer, determine how many senses you're engaging in your stores. Can you add even one more? When you combine the hospitality of your staff with elements like great lighting, sound, color, texture, and comfortable seating for your shoppers' companions, you're creating an ambiance that inspires people to get out of the house and experience it for themselves.

Communicate your health and safety protocols. Be sure to communicate that you are working hard to create a clean and safe environment for your customers. It matters.

The bottom line: Engaging women as customers isn't about excluding men. It's about excluding stereotypes and elevating the customer experience. Stay close to the changes in the women's market to win their business now and in the future. ■



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