A Checkup for Marketers: Listening or Not?

We already know about women.

Successful marketers are usually good listeners, but today’s competitive environment calls for more refined listening skills, particularly when your primary customers are women. Staying current with women’s needs can be a challenge, though, because of their increasing levels of education, income, independence, and networking. In addition, there are so many different segments of women, each complex and evolving, which makes the listening job even more demanding.

As a marketer, you may feel that you already understand women. Perhaps you feel that a customer is a customer and that your experience with male customers prepares you for understanding women. I have worked with some clients in whom I could feel the hesitancy to embrace the idea of women as the target consumer. I have heard this expressed in many ways: “Won’t that limit us?” “Men won’t want our products if women are the
main focus,” and “We don’t want to turn this into a women’s company.”

Let’s say that your brand is accepted and used by women. On one hand, your success may cause you to wonder why you need to read this book because you seem to be doing OK with female customers. On the other hand, perhaps you have observed some organizational and cultural roadblocks that keep your organization from truly listening to women. Perhaps your traditional processes, whether in marketing, sales, or product development, are somehow shortcutting your stream of needed consumer insights.

How can you tell if your company is really listening to women? The following is a checkup for marketers: 10 of the listening roadblocks I have heard most often in my marketing career. Are any of them familiar to you?

**A Listening Checkup**

Read the following 10 statements. Think of this as a listening reality check. If you have ever said or heard your marketing, sales, or account team say one of the following, you may not be truly listening to women.

1. **“Oh, they always say that.”**

_They_ means women, and the dismissive pronoun is already a clue to a lack of customer respect. You may hear your team say this to the complaints that female customers raise. It is a signal that your team may have stopped listening to women and that they still have not fixed what could be a chronic problem for your business. This attitude can distance marketers from women. This first statement is often heard in the back room at focus groups. In fact, the dynamic of focus groups can instigate the problem.
Behind the two-way mirror in the focus group room, marketers are literally separated from consumers. Isolated in their hidden, cushioned armchairs, marketers are watching, not interacting with consumers. Like scientists observing the way lab rats respond to stimuli, the back room tends to scrutinize female consumers as if they were subjects in an experiment. Rather than engage with women, marketers and agency folks talk to each other behind the mirror and too often react to women’s negative feedback with sarcastic eye rolls and bored head nods. So, rather than help marketers stay open to listen for what women really mean, the focus group format drives distanced nonlearning—which is a dangerous way to get market intelligence.

Have you ever sat in the same room as consumers? You undoubtedly have seen the dismissive attitudes evaporate when the respectful listening kicks in.

2. “We did some groups with women a while ago.”

This is code for “we held about three focus groups in Paramus in 1998, and we are still relying on the opinions of those 24 women.” This attitude assumes that women do not change and that asking them once is enough. It also assumes that the focus groups were recruited properly and moderated well. How many times have you attended a dud focus group? Is that impression ever noted on the focus group report? In my experience, poor groups are forgotten as soon as the client and agency cars leave the parking lot. However, a written report on an unsuccessful group can live on in files as truth. What if those are the groups on which you are relying to make important decisions? Women are constantly evolving and reevaluating what your company’s products mean to them in the context of their lives. Old learning is almost as bad as no learning.

For future reference, you might ask attendees to include a
note on the qualitative reports that indicates their satisfaction with the findings and their assessment of the quality of the work.

3. “Women say that, but they don’t really mean it.”

I have often heard this defensive comment from ad agency creative teams that do not agree with what women say. Sometimes, this statement is true on the surface. For instance, when women say they want to see “real” women in skin care ads, they mean it and they don’t. What they do mean is that they want to see likable human beings in ads rather than perfect automatons. What they do not mean is that they want to see unattractive models with bad or average skin representing a highly effective skin care cream. Accepting or dismissing women’s comments outright is a mistake.

A smart moderator is prepared for the rote answers of your category. If you ask a woman, “Do you really mean that?” she will clarify for you. Women also welcome the respectful moderator who says, “Maybe I’m just being a devil’s advocate, but even though you just said you want to see real women, earlier you said that this pretty ad was appealing. Could you explain why?” She will. She is watching to see if you are paying attention, and if you let her off the hook, she is unlikely to bother to correct your misperception.

4. “The customer service department handles complaints when women call in.”

Customer service departments are as good as the leadership that drives them and the brand philosophy that inspires them. Great ones build customer loyalty and function as effective listening vehicles. Sometimes, however, these departments are trained and compensated as if they occupied the lowest rung on the marketing ladder. In other words, your first line of listening may be delegated to a group, who though schooled in the scripts of your company’s answers may be one of your lowest paid, highest
turnover departments. These folks can get pretty weary of hearing repeated complaints, and they eventually burn out, shut down, check off the communications report, and go home to get a good night’s sleep. Some systems have a recording stating that the call will be monitored for service quality. However, have you ever had a supervisor interrupt a bad customer service call while you were on it? If you have not sat with your customer service team and tried out the system yourself in over six months, you may not discover a critical leak in your listening network—and you risk being out of the loop as a listener yourself.

At Just Ask a Woman, we created the Collective, a database of the women we have interviewed in person. Even though we are always on the street and in the market listening to women, we also e-mail these “alumnae” frequently to keep a reality check on what women are thinking, especially in relation to current events. Their long and deep responses are like our own customer care department and serve as valuable checks on our own theories. For example, our alumnae predicted the weak fourth-quarter retail results of 2002. In June of that year we asked them, “What did you learn about shopping this summer?” They bragged that the economic downturn had taught them to curb spending, research sale prices, and postpone their near- and midterm needs.

5. “Women will say they want the world if you ask them, but we can’t afford to respond to every little thing they ask for.”

No, you can’t. On the other hand, some of women’s requests are make-or-break issues. For instance, in the car buying business, women have been saying for years that they resent male car dealers referring all their attention to their husbands or ignoring them when they shop alone. For a long time, women just felt irritated or tolerated the behavior. Today, many women have devised strategies to avoid time in the dealership. Instead, they do research online and make decisions in advance of visiting the
showroom. In this case, what might have seemed like trifles built until women took matters into their own hands.

As a marketer, it is up to you to call the shots on whether it is profitable to respond to women’s needs. But the first step is to listen so that you can gauge just how seriously she means what she is saying to you.

6. “Women don’t know what they want; we need to lead them where they really want to go.”

I often hear this kind of comment in the fashion, beauty, and design areas. It is a we-know-better attitude that is a blend of egotistical artistry and insecurity. Certainly, many women look to these industries for inspiration and advice, and they want the style community to project what is next. But when the lack of listening among designers results in racks of unsold fads or empty retail stores, it is evident that women do know better. The trick is to ask women not what to design but, “What do you prefer to wear?” or “What makes you feel comfortable or pretty?” In other words, ask women, “What makes you happy?” instead of “What should I design for you?”

7. “Women could never understand the complexities of our business like we do.”

This is the kind of trap that the health and finance companies fall into. Although all female patients do not have medical degrees or MBAs from Stanford, they do know plenty about their health and their money. Most women are willing to admit what they do not know, so they do their homework, conduct research online, and check their boards of directors. Be watchful if your communications complicate rather than simplify. Be careful if your sales force feels smart because they can out-lingo the customer. She will find someone else who speaks her language.
To help your service and sales force become better listeners, encourage them to invite women to talk first. Ask open-ended questions that allow her to be in charge, such as “Tell me about your life,” “What’s the best health care relationship you’ve had?” or “What would be an ideal way for you to receive communications from me in the future?” She will set the rules, her style.

8. “She’s too young (or too old, too fat, too dull, etc.) to be our customer.”

Most marketers would not say this aloud, but I have heard it whispered many, many times. Unfortunately, some marketers like to think of their customers as people they would invite to a cocktail party in their homes. Look at the profile of your customer target on your marketing strategies. So often, the ideal customer is described as young, attractive, ambitious, bright, and confident. Rarely does a strategy define a brand’s customers as unattractive, uneducated, or satisfied with the status quo. Here is a simple test: Walk down a busy street. How many supermodels and Rhodes scholars walk by? Are there enough on which to build a big business? Love the customer you have, or she will fall in love with someone else.

9. “This new product improvement isn’t exactly what women asked for; it’s just slightly more complicated (or takes a little longer to work, takes some getting used to, etc.).”

Marketers who disregard women’s needs for simplifying, saving time, and maintaining control are making a big mistake. Women generally ask for simple, practical things. A woman wants cleaning products without harsh chemicals. She wants a cell phone with number buttons she can read without glasses. She wants a human on the other end of the customer line when she calls, instead of entering the phone tree maze. The genius of new product de-
development is responding to what women really want while delighting them with easier assembly, faster results, or more intuitive usage. The success of the lightweight Sony VAIO laptop and Listerine’s fast-acting Cool Strips testifies to this. Listening to women will lead you to simpler, and ideally more successful, products.

10. “Oh yes, we listen to women. We even have a special women’s department devoted to figuring out what they want.”

This statement is the most worrisome of all. On the contrary, it might make more sense for some companies to create a special department to figure out what the male minority wants and apply the lion’s share of their marketing, communications, and sales resources to the customer majority. Delegating listening to women to a special department might jumpstart the internal focus on female customers. More often than not, however, special initiatives degenerate into an excuse to marginalize the economic clout of women. Then, when it comes to yearly financial allocations, it is an easy budget line to cut.

There is an underlying problem with delegating the task of listening to women to a few specialists. That decision lets the other marketing, sales, and service employees off the hook for understanding women themselves. Listening to the leading customer group is everyone’s job.

Time to Listen

If you have heard or said just one or two of these statements, it’s time to take a fresh look at how your organization listens to women. Marketing with women is about more than selling them what you make. It is about understanding the most powerful feel-
ings and truths in women’s lives so that you will discover the kind of insights that lead to competitive ideas. That is where you will find the answers to how she makes decisions, why she buys, and what makes her loyal to you.

The next seven chapters decode the most compelling issues on the minds of today’s female consumers. Chapter 2 deals with the most overriding theme I have heard from the thousands of women whom I have interviewed: the stress in their lives. See how it affects their feelings about your brand.