

Designing Customer Experiences – *for women, as women*

“I am woman, hear me roar – in numbers too big to ignore....”

When I was recently asked to speak about designing customer experiences for women, I couldn't help but recall the opening lines from Helen Reddy's iconic song. (Yes, yes showing my age I know).

There is no question that 'the numbers' are big. After all, there are more women between the ages of 15 and 64 in the UK and the US than men. But whilst organisations are not exactly ignoring them, just how effectively are they at really 'hearing' them?

Where the needs of women often get most neglected are when we consider the needs of the female business person. It appears that where women are participants in a world previously dominated by men, some organisations still seem to be a little clumsy at their attempts to create compelling customer experiences for them. And yet this is a fast-growing and influential group.

Let's just pause and consider the statistics....

Sheryl Sandberg – COO of Facebook – generated a lot of interest in this audience with her recent book – *Lean In*. She highlighted that working women are the primary breadwinners in 40% of US households. A quarter of all US women earn more than men. Experts believe that within the next 5 years this will be closer to 50%.

Add to this some UK reports which show the number of stay-at-home dads has grown 10 fold in 10 years, we can see that women (especially female business women) are an increasingly lucrative audience. And yet – some organisations seem to have followed what can best be called the 'My Little Pony' principles in the design and delivery of their customer experiences.

One of our favourite examples is the designated parking area for women at Frankfurt airport. The walls of the 'Ladies (sic) Parking' are pink with flowers, the ticket dispensers are pink and it is even lightly perfumed! It is not clear whether there are any additional CCTV cameras and it is apparently no nearer to the terminal but at least it's pretty!

Nippon Airways introduced a female only toilet on-board their planes a couple of years ago apparently because female travellers are fed up of – you guessed it - men leaving the toilet seat up. Once again, this appears to fail to meet the immediate needs of women (or indeed any) travellers who are in an environment where the ratio of facilities to people are lower than required so speedy access is essential. This does not though come at the expense of a meticulously clean environment. Ask any travellers and their priority will most likely be fewer queues, regular cleaning and perhaps somewhere to be able to put wash bags and a change of clothes on rather than that rather unpleasantly sticky floor. (Sorry – too much information!)

This year we are starting to see the number of women-only hotel floors increase. The first example in Europe is the Bella Sky Hotel. According to CEO Arne Bang Mikkelsen, *"Men's and women's preferences are very different. When men come into a hotel room, the first thing they do is check the view, turn on the TV, plug in their computer, and check out the minibar. Women on the other hand go straight for the bathroom. Does it smell nice? Is it clean? Does it have a nice bathtub and shower?"*



This approach has definitely divided opinions. Some observers like the fact that hotels such as the Bella Donna are showing that they ‘listen’ to the female traveller. But, Denmark’s gender equality board has ruled the women-only floor discriminatory and illegal. The hotel is contesting this. Regardless of the outcome, Marybeth Bond – National Geographic Author and founder of gutsytraveler.com believes it is merely a ‘flash in the pan’. And we can’t say we disagree - after all, we confess we love peeking into the minibar pretty quickly before obviously resisting all temptation of course!

Seriously though most female travellers when staying at a hotel on their own, place safety and comfort above ‘smellies’ and flowers.

These examples highlight that it is too easy to design for the cliché of a woman rather than the reality.

That is why we are huge fans of Premier Inn in the UK. Whilst it is a budget chain, it really does understand the needs of its core target audiences – whether male, female or families. We love the way all members of staff are trained to where possible, place single female travellers in rooms above the ground floor. If you are a lone traveller, they always hand you your room details discreetly, information face down without saying your room number aloud – to give you that extra bit of security and privacy. And whilst we haven’t visited all 600+ establishments they have across the UK, all the ones we have stayed at have been remarkably consistent – so much so that we have often opted for them versus more chic and design-oriented establishments.

So how can more organisations get it right for women? Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts’ wonderful book ‘*Inside Her Pretty Little Head*’ certainly gives us some great pointers. They outline four ‘codes’ that are the foundation for understanding what is important and compelling to women.

1. *The Altruism Code*

At its most simple, the Altruism Code is implicitly expressed as general interest in the welfare of others – wanting to shift from individual goals to a sense of shared goals. At a broader level, women are concerned with creating a mood and atmosphere that makes others feel good. This can be expressed in an organisation’s ‘ethical’ aspirations e.g. Fairtrade or more broadly with a sense of optimism and a sense of enhancing the world at large.

2. *The Aesthetic Code*

Women want to make the world a more attractive place. Not necessarily in a ‘pink’ way (as described above) – but rather a genuine attention to detail – where cleanliness and care is paramount.

3. *The Ordering Code*

Cunningham and Roberts describe this as the ‘head prefect’ bit of the female way – which likes to get things in order and for everything to have its place. It is about practicalities – the organising and the planning as well as finding out new ways of doing things faster and better.

4. *The Connecting Code*

There is much made about the difference between the ‘hunter’ man and the ‘gatherer’ woman but regardless of the range of theories, the accepted belief is that women have a deep and profound survival instinct that requires them to make friends – i.e. there is an enhanced ‘connecting tendency’ amongst women. Witness the popularity of approaches such as Weightwatchers, the rise of book clubs and charities that encourage community e.g. Race for Life.

So taking these principles or codes into consideration, which organisations seem to get it right?



It will come as no surprise that the organisations that are most well-known for their excellent customer experiences are those that embrace these codes e.g. Apple, Virgin, First Direct, John Lewis etc. Having worked with 3 out of these 4 organisations, we know that they don't appeal only to women but by embracing feminine 'values' they appear more human, more authentic and therefore inspiring more 'love' and of course loyalty. It is interesting to note how many of these organisations use the word 'love' in their internal positioning e.g. Virgin Atlantic's stated desire to *'grow a profitable airline where people love to work and people love to fly'*.

So organisations that project a more 'feminine' appeal in their customer experiences are often able to engender a deeper emotional connection with their customers – whether they are men or women. By designing *for* women we end up appealing to both. This in turn highlights an interesting prospect – organisations today don't just need to get better at designing *for* women but rather at designing *as* women.

Step up another fabulous read – *The Athena Doctrine* by John Gerzema and Michael D'Antonio. This book considers the new world order – one that has seen more political and financial change in recent times than in the previous 25 years. It surveyed 64,000 people to mirror the populations of the 13 countries in the world that represent 65% of the world's GDP including the US, UK, France, Germany, China, Japan, South Korea, India and Japan.

It is probably of no huge surprise to hear that people believe they now live in a world of extended anxiety and most reject the idea that our children will have it better than us.

What was particularly striking was that the dissatisfaction was not just with governments and economies but with the behaviour of men in general. Nearly 2/3 of the world thinks the world would be a better place if men thought more like women!

This is where the study becomes really interesting. It examined what it meant to be 'more like a women'. The authors started by defining 125 behavioural traits. And then asked people to consider whether these traits were male, female or neutral. Then asking a separate group, the survey asked which traits were most important to leadership. You guessed it, strong feminine values emerged as essential for leaders of today and tomorrow.

The authors boiled these values down to 10 core traits.

1. Connectedness – an ability to form and maintain human networks
2. Humility – an approach to life that allows for listening, learning from others, and sharing credit
3. Candour – a willingness to speak openly and honestly
4. Patience – a recognition that some solutions emerge slowly
5. Empathy – a sensitivity to others that promotes understanding
6. Trustworthiness – a track record and strength of character that inspire confidence
7. Openness – being receptive to all people and concepts
8. Flexibility – the ability to change and adapt when circumstances require
9. Vulnerability – the courage to be human and make mistakes
10. Balance – a well-rounded sense of purpose



The authors believe that gathered together, the qualities resemble the character of the Greek goddess Athena – the goddess of industry, arts and crafts. Of course, it must be stressed they do not advocate “the end of men” (honest!), but rather a “rebalancing” of values. They argue quite rightly, that men can be as caring as women and women can be as analytical and assertive as men. Where this study has real rigour, is that when the authors compared their survey results with data related to economic status and quality of life, they found that countries whose citizens think in a way that balances masculine values with feminine ones have a higher per capita GDP and higher reported quality of life.

So what are the implications of all this. Several key points emerge as a summary:

1. In a world where often more than half of the population are women, women can no longer be seen to be a ‘special interest group’.
2. Organisations need to get better at designing great experiences not just for women but using feminine values to attract deeper emotional connections.
3. And at a broader, more macro level, the significant changes in our economic backdrop over recent years demonstrate that not only do organisations need to embrace women as customers, they also need to embrace feminine values in their leadership.

In a world that is becoming more and more inter-connected, certainly more social and therefore more transparent, feminine values are in the ascendant. This is a change that is not only necessary but as the Athena study showed, will be positively welcomed by both women and men. The 10 Athena traits are not a guarantee of success but won’t the world be a rather more wonderful place if we all embrace them?

Gillian James is Managing Director of TMI. TMI has partnered with some of the world’s best brands to create and embed compelling customer experiences – for women and for men! If you would like to find out more, visit our website on www.tmi.co.uk, drop us an email at engage@tmi.co.uk or give us a ring on +44 (1926) 833027

