



The following is an excerpt from

**Why She Buys: The New Strategy for Reaching
the World's Most Powerful Consumers**

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**Selling Yourself to Female Customers:
A Primer**

SELLING a product is one thing; selling yourself is quite another. Selling to women successfully requires both. The most important thing to remember when selling to women is this: no matter what your product or service, you're really only selling one thing, and that's *help*. If what you're offer-

ing doesn't enhance her life, her work, or her family's life, then you're wasting her time and probably your own, too. So forget about the specifics of what you're selling, and re-frame it in your mind as selling help.

The easiest path to "yes" from a female customer is through listening and asking open-ended questions. Rocket science it's not, but then again, good listening skills aren't common. When given the chance, women are likely to tell you everything you need to know to customize a pitch and make the sale. Suddenly the information that you might find trivial in any other context is liquid gold, as long as you can actually listen.

Take the story of Stacy, a woman in Dallas who went to buy a thank-you gift at the new Vera Bradley handbag store in her neighborhood.

I had never gone into a Vera Bradley store, but I needed a gift and heard that the store had some really beautiful things. I walked inside, and the place was decorated like someone's living room, which I loved. The store manager walked over to me, and I explained that I needed a thank-you gift. Instead of asking me for my price range, she asked why I was giving the gift. She wanted to hear what I was thanking the person for, so she could help me pick out just the right thing. I buy a lot of gifts, and no salesperson had ever asked me that question before.

I told her it was for someone I'd never met, who had returned to me an important file I'd left in the back of an airplane seat. The file was priceless—my father had just died, and I was the executor of his will, and it had all his important documents in it, including his checkbook, his bank account records, and his last will and testament.

The sales manager agreed that the woman who returned this to me deserved a pretty special gift.

She helped me pick out a great tote bag, then stuffed it with matching little freebies, and said, “This way when she opens it, she’ll find one surprise after another.” Then she told me that Vera Bradley had free gift wrapping and shipping, as well as a card I could send with the gift. Usually when I buy a gift, the job is only half done—I know it will take me another week to get around to shipping it. I walked out of the Vera Bradley store and I was done. I couldn’t believe it. That was my first experience with this store and I will go back there again and again for gifts, because of that sales manager and the company’s amazingly convenient shipping policy.

The sales manager at Vera Bradley made an effort to listen to *why* a product was being purchased, and in the process gave the kind of help that created a new fan for the brand. In addition to listening, there are a host of other techniques that can make all the difference between success and failure with women customers.

- **Make eye contact.**

If there is a woman waiting for you while you are dealing with someone else, nod and make eye contact to acknowledge her existence. She may quietly seethe if you don’t.

- **Let her speak.**

Women are socialized to wait their turn to speak and not to interrupt. Taking turns talking is something ingrained in women from childhood, when they would take turns

in role-playing games. Men, on the other hand, have a habit of interrupting each other to make their points, which is perfectly acceptable in male culture. Men's conversational style can be challenging and even provocative. Some men will take a devil's advocate position in a conversation just to keep things interesting. In a sales transaction with women, this style can be fatal.

Too often salespeople will talk nonstop to demonstrate their knowledge, and forget to give their female prospect a chance to say something. Like the man in the Texas appliance store, they will incorrectly assume that if a woman wanted to say something, she'd interrupt. Chances are she won't—she'll just leave, as Katie did, and he'll tell himself she was never a serious buyer to begin with.

When making your presentation or pitch, take a breath, and give the prospect a moment to say what's on her mind. Forcing yourself to stay silent for a few moments is a powerful tool. Everyone hates an awkward silent moment and will try to fill it; this is especially true with women. If you let the crickets chirp, you may end up hearing exactly what's on her mind, and then you can customize your pitch accordingly.

- **Explain without patronizing.**

Straddle the fine line between underexplaining and overexplaining by letting the customer be your guide. Prompt her by saying things like “Stop me if I'm telling you something you already know” or posing a simple question, such as “Would you like me to go into detail about any specific features of this service?” In all likelihood, she will ask you to home in on just the features she cares about most.

- **Repeat her statements.**

Women are sometimes reluctant to ask too many questions during the sales process because they don't want to appear uninformed and thus an easy target. Save her the trouble of asking you dozens of questions by letting her talk and then repeating her statements back to her as questions: "What I'm hearing you say is that you'd like to find a midrange option. Is that right?" When you get a positive response, it gives you license to go into detail on that particular aspect of the product or service. This technique also demonstrates that you've been listening to her, which women usually find impressive.

- **Identify her biggest concern.**

It may be because she doesn't want to insult you or hurt your feelings, but women are often hesitant to bring up their greatest concern about what you're selling. If you ask her directly, she's more likely to tell you what's on her mind. I once went to a sales presentation in which I was asked, "What is the one thing that concerns you most about choosing us as your vendor?" I was stunned by the blunt question, and it compelled me to say that I was concerned that the senior-level people in the room wouldn't be the people I'd be working with on a day-to-day basis. The vendor had the opportunity to convince me that it wasn't true, and so I hired them.

- **You are a reflection of your brand.**

Women will notice everything about your selling environment, from how messy your desk is to the stain on your shirt. For most women, cleanliness equals competence, and also respect—for yourself, for your customers, and for your business.

- **Be nice to others.**

Women pay attention to how you treat coworkers and servicepeople. They also evaluate your company's reputation. This comes into play in a big way in business-to-business sales. The rule applies all the way from big things (your company's support of social causes) to small things (how you speak to your underlings). If you take a female prospect to lunch, be nice to the wait staff. She's watching.

- **Assume nothing.**

Don't assume a woman has a husband. Don't assume she has kids. Don't assume she's not the decision maker. Don't assume anything. Women wield the purchasing power. Even in cases when they're not writing the checks themselves, they are the influencers who make things happen. This is an especially important point to remember with young women, who have more disposable income than ever before, and larger responsibilities at work than women of previous generations had at the same age.

- **Cater to kids when you can.**

If a woman's children are happy and occupied, she can focus on her conversation with you. If they're miserable, so is she. Whether you use toys, videos, or coloring books, find ways to incorporate the "kid factor" into your environment so that Mom can concentrate on whatever it is you're selling.

- **Use compliments.**

Women compliment each other constantly. It's an important part of American female culture. In sales situations,

compliment her good judgment, good taste, or great questions. Fair or not, it's generally acceptable for a female salesperson to compliment another woman's personal appearance. However, this is dangerous territory for men and best avoided. "I actually had a copier salesman tell me to put my pretty little hand on the "start" button once," says Christine, a marketing executive. "I was so furious I switched vendors."

- **Disclose your own vulnerability.**

Acknowledge when a purchasing decision is difficult. Saying something like "I remember the first time I bought my own hard drive—I didn't know where to begin" will be appreciated and make her feel good that you're helping her. This kind of affirmation is a critical part of the way that women talk to one another. The "geniuses" at Apple are really good at this.

- **Acknowledge her male partner when selling to couples.**

Women tend to be sensitive about making sure their men look good in front of others, especially when they earn high incomes or make more money than their partners. It's important to make sure a woman's husband or male partner is made to feel important and included in the sales process, even if she is clearly the decision maker. Understand that she may be saying little during the transaction because she doesn't want to inadvertently emasculate her husband.

- **Don't assume a nod means yes.**

Women and men have different reasons for nodding. Men nod to show agreement; women nod to demon-

strate that they're listening. Women's nods can mean, *Yes, go on, I understand*. They don't necessarily mean, *Yes, I'm ready for you to close this sale*. Women often nod vigorously when they're in conversation with one another. Watch for the cues and don't try to close too fast, or you'll risk turning her off with what she thinks is a hard sell.

- **Lead with the emotional, close with the rational.**

This is particularly true for luxury products, where the need to buy is purely an emotional one. Women need help justifying a major purchase more than men do. Help her rationalize the decision so there are no guilt feelings about spending money on herself. When it comes to shopping, guilt is largely a female issue, probably because men buy more products based on need and women buy more products based on want.

- **Discuss service and maintenance policies.**

Don't skimp on this information, because as we've seen, women will fast-forward to the worst-case scenario and want to know what their options are should things go wrong. Trust and peace of mind can be your competitive advantage.

- **Give her a reason to tell her friends or colleagues about you.**

Women are a great source of referrals. Give her something to pass along to her friends so that they can get a discount on your product or service. At a minimum, ask her if there's anyone she knows who might also be in need of whatever you're selling. If she likes you, she'll want to help you succeed.