



SAN FRANCISCO Andrea Learned, author and consultant, advises marketers and media on how to effectively reach women and men beyond typical gender advertising stereotypes.

Learned, 43, has spent 17 years in marketing and public relations for trade associations and in 2004 she co-authored *Don't Think Pink: What Really Makes Women Buy*. Her blog and columns in the Huffington Post take a careful look at online and offline marketing that attracts female consumers.

She tells *Adweek's* Joan Voight why big beer brands are finally getting smart, discusses the power of bloggers and explains why she hopes the notion of marketing to women is doomed.

**Do you think some large brands are shooting themselves in the foot in the way they treat women in their marketing?**

In the effort to appeal to young men, brands such as Coors and Bud still go for stereotypes of frat boys and hot babes, which tends to alienate women over 25 as well as many men. The ads look moronic to anyone but the target market. Another problem is financial institutions and other industries that use marketing programs overtly aimed at women. It sends the message that women are not part of the mainstream and need special attention. Both of these strategies are too specific and don't have the kind of universal appeal that will build the brand.

**Speaking of big beer brands aimed at men, do you see any changes in their approach to gender stereotypes?**

I do. For instance, Miller's "Man Laws" ads with Burt Reynolds targeted guys, but anyone could relate to them. And the recent Miller Lite ads showing the frat boys chanting "drink" also show

a woman handing a beer to a man who makes it clear he is not with the chanting group. This approach still talks to men but pokes fun at the old ways that beer used to be sold.

**Does the influence of digital media such as blogs and social networks help or hinder the use of gender stereotypes in marketing?**

Brands can't hide from bloggers. If a company wants to use negative stereotypes to win favor with a target audience, it is not like it can put its ads on a targeted TV program or Web site and only the target is going to hear about it. All it takes is one person outside the target group to see it and be motivated to comment about it online and the word gets around. When it comes to ads that are negative to women, new moms seem particularly dialed into the stereotypes and if they blog they can get their peers up in arms. You can quickly have a groundswell of outrage and generate bad press online that anyone can find. For instance, blogs told women that Unilever, the company that did the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign [showing real-life woman in their underwear], is the same company behind the ads for Axe body spray, which treat young women like sex objects. Blogging is really scary for brands. They have to learn how to speak to their target without freaking out everyone else.

**Are women really going to go to all that trouble to attack a brand?**

My experience shows that women are taking advantage of the fact that many marketers are now noticing them and asking for their feedback, so they are complaining about things and naming names. Take the 2006 Volkswagen GTI TV ad campaign with the devilish "Fast" character [in which nagging girlfriends interfere with young men who want to drive fast]. Word got out and it generated a lot of negative buzz. The online disapproval of Dove's connection to the Axe approach is still going on.

**Can products with a core audience of men use women consumers as allies to grow the business?**

Let's go back to beer. A brand goes after its main male audience, but often to get more women to buy its brand it creates a sweet girly beverage, such as Heineken's new cider beverage. Instead, the main beer brand should seek to convince the 30 percent of females who really like beer to switch to their brand. An overtly girly marketing approach just alienates those women. It is better to include them in the mainstream ads. The approach worked with Nascar. The sport's marketing included women whose husband or boyfriend were fans. Those women became fans and then told their women friends what they liked about Nascar.

**What do you consider "girly" marketing?**

Anything that's pink, that assumes all women are devoted to shopping, dieting or having their nails done.

**Does this work both ways? Are some products with girly marketing excluding male consumers?**

Certainly. Skin care and hair care are my best examples of that. Diet programs are another example. Publishers often assume that all dieters are women. Here's a situation that makes me laugh. This man Jay Jacobs loved this book, *The Beck Diet Solution*, but the cover was bright pink to appeal to women. So on his computer he designed a blue version of the cover, which he used when he was reading the book in public, and he put the blue cover on his Web site for other male readers of the book to download and use. Now the publisher is offering the book with a blue or pink cover. The Method brand of soaps and cleaning products gets around this problem and has done very well with both sexes. The product design is elegant and sophisticated without being stereotypically male or female.

**Why do marketers seem so interested in gender-specific products and marketing?**

Because it is sexy, it's easy and it's familiar. Out of the gate, they identify their market by gender. It reminds me of a survey on shopping that said men are not efficient shoppers. Actually the survey showed that infrequent shoppers are not efficient, whether they are men or women. Many of the men in the survey did not shop frequently.

**If marketers don't categorize markets by gender, what other characteristics can they use?**

That question came up in a recent study about wine by Mondavi and Harris Interactive. The study, released Sept. 18, seemed to indicate that younger people and women are less likely to order wine in restaurants. But the company wisely said the real issue was that some consumers were less knowledgeable about wine and less confident in ordering it. So instead of marketing to men, the winery plans to improve the educational aspects of its marketing.

**How can listening to women help mainstream marketers overall?**

Women's standards in purchasing are higher than men's. So if a company can satisfy women's requirements, they will also serve their male customers. Lowe's and Home Depot improved their aisles and shelves for women but also improved the customer experience for men. The big stereotype is that women are so time starved, but men are busy too and will respond to that message.

**Are there closet female brands, brands that have a strong appeal to women customers but don't identify themselves as being for women or use girly marketing?**

ING Financial strikes me as a closet women-focused brand. Plain, simple, with lots of education if you need it. Also, really nice customer-service

people. I'd also say Saturn, the Volkswagen Beetle and the Life Is Good line of apparel.

**What are your top three tips for companies about including women in their marketing?**

First, use storytelling and anecdotes in your messaging. The American Express TV and print ads with Larry David, Ellen DeGeneres and others do a great job of this. Second, provide tools and services to answer consumers' questions and increase their comfort level with your products. Your Web site can be a good place for this. Third, form a customer advisory board that includes women members, even if your core audience is men. Get female consumers involved.

**Overall, it sounds like you think the idea of marketing to women should become an obsolete concept. Are you talking yourself out of a job?**

Yes, I could be. But I think it is the way of the world. We are in a conceptual age where men are more comfortable with emotional issues—and the right side of the brain and left side of the brain are working together. Maybe we can get out of this ridiculous gender business.