

Brands struggling with the "for her" marketing approach

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The end of ‘shrink it and pink it’: A history of advertisers missing the mark with women

Ladies, as everyone knows, are dainty and fragile, and prefer the world to be awash in pastels. Or at least, that’s the philosophy behind the old **marketing** mantra for making products attractive to women:

“Shrink it and pink it.”

It’s hard to imagine this phrase being uttered in a boardroom in this era. And yet, every so often still, a new product emerges doused in shades of magenta and labeled “for her”: Dell’s cutesy laptop Della, which [promised nifty ways to search for recipes and count calories](#). The Tampa Bay Buccaneers’ [website for women who like football](#), filled with game-day style tips, manicure ideas, and, of course, more recipes. Bic’s pink and purple pens “for her.” (“I know you’re thinking, ‘It’s about damn time!’” [Ellen DeGeneres snarked](#). “Can you believe this? We’ve been using man pens all this time!”)

And now, soon to make its way onto grocery store shelves in Florida: beer made especially for women.

It’s infused with chamomile, elderflower and passion fruit juice. The packaging resembles a knockoff Lilly Pulitzer print. The label is adorned with hops poking out of a stiletto. The **brand** name: High Heel Brewing.

The reaction?

“What a slap in the face to all women brewers and drinkers,” one commenter on [the beer’s Facebook](#) page said.

“What does gender have to do with beer?” wrote another.

You can’t begrudge any manufacturer for wanting to tap into a burgeoning market, and for the

beer industry, there is certainly room to grow: Women make up slightly more than half the U.S. population but consume [only 32 percent](#) of American-made craft beer.

But is wrapping it in pink really going to do the trick?

“We didn’t put pink on the label for women,” said Kristi McGuire, the brewmaster and creator of [High Heel](#). “We put on a dark raspberry color because it popped on the shelf.”

After her beer was unveiled in May, McGuire was shocked by the backlash. She sat up at night scrolling through the comments and mulling her 20 years in the male-dominated brewing community. She says she believed she could make a beer everyone would like, while using the name and packaging to celebrate that it was brewed by a woman.

But the “for her” **marketing** approach seems to have lost its appeal.

Pink is not a strategy, unless you’re raising money for breast cancer research,” said [Bridget Brennan](#), the author of “[Why She Buys](#).” “In 2016, **marketing** to women is all about being inclusive. That doesn’t mean excluding men; it means excluding stereotypes.”

It’s not that women don’t want products made with them in mind. “[Marketing to Women](#)” author [Marti Barletta](#) points to other examples in the business of alcohol: [Skinnygirl Cocktails](#) and [Vixen Vodka](#). Their logos feature spiky pumps and female silhouettes to indicate their target market — but without explicitly declaring it, [as High Heel Brewing did](#). (It may have helped that vodka has long been seen as a drink that appeals to both sexes, unlike beer.)

“Anything that says ‘you women’ is going to get a backlash,” Barletta said, whereas an approach that comes from the angle of “we women” just might get a listen.

Women have been the primary targets of **advertising** since the early days — notably for food products. But that was because marketers saw them more as the domestic providers than the ultimate consumer. Those early ads didn’t quite recognize women as full people, said Katherine Parkin, an associate professor of history at Monmouth University who has studied [gender roles in advertising](#). “They impressed upon women that if they serve GrapeNuts, their husband will be a successful businessman or their children will be popular. All these kinds of threats and promises go with their messages.”

In the early 1900s, when women started to lobby for a vote and roles outside of the home, advertisers began to recognize women’s complexity — sort of. Royal Baking Powder created an ad that showed women marching for their rights. But look closely, and the “right” they are marching for is for “pure” food, for their families.

“They wanted to acknowledge women and their new roles,” said Jennifer Scanlon, a professor of gender and women’s studies at Bowdoin College. “But of course, if all women started working, who is going to stay home and buy Royal Baking Powder?”

Eventually, **advertising**'s pearls-and-apron housewives were replaced by working moms in jeans or business suits. And many companies began to recognize the ever-growing purchasing power of women — by offering them “man” products, but in pink. Pink toolboxes, pink guns, pink Legos. Bic (creator of the “for her” pen) created Miss Bic, lighters adorned with lipstick, bows and smiling ladies. Occasionally, “women’s” products took on the “men” stamp: Kleenex’s “man-size” tissues, YogiTea’s “man’s tea,” Banana Boat’s “for men” sunscreen.

But when **marketing** becomes more gendered, it’s often the ladies’ products that cost more — notably body-care products such as deodorant, shaving cream or body wash. There is often no difference in the women’s and men’s versions of these items besides scent and color. But as an [analysis of nearly 800 products](#) from the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs showed last year, women pay approximately 7 percent more than men for similar items. This is especially true in the kids’ aisle. “Girl” toys — even when they’re basically the same trinket, just in more feminine colors or patterns — cost an average of 7 percent more than toys in “boy” colors. In clothing, girls’ shirts cost an average of 13 percent more.

Where manufacturers really go wrong, said Barletta, the “**Marketing** to Women” author, is when they assume that if they make something pink, women will buy it. Like when an item comes in only two colors, black and pink. Or when sports apparel in women’s sizes is made only in pastels.

“When pink is a color women can choose, they will choose it. When it is the only color that isn’t the ‘normal’ one, women will not choose it,” Barletta said. “They don’t want it forced on them.”

Subtlety, **marketing** experts say, is key. Forget about the quirky craft beer industry for a moment; what if America’s brewing giants made a concerted push for female customers? They already are; they’re just doing it quietly. Perhaps you noticed [Amy Schumer in all of those Bud Light commercials](#). Or [Coors’ recent “Climb On” ads](#). Right there, next to the manly dudes climbing mountains and drinking beer with mud on their faces, are tough gals climbing mountains and drinking beer with mud on their faces.

The [NFL](#), the [auto industry](#) and [athletic clothing brands](#) such as UnderArmour have all caught on to the same secret.

“Most of the things marketers do don’t have to have a gender,” said Jim Winters, president of **branding** agency Badger & Winters. “Women are not a special-interest group. They are over half the population.”

Still, **advertising** and **marketing** remain a slow-moving and conservative culture, said Jessamyn Neuhaus, a pop-culture scholar and professor of history at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. “It doesn’t instigate change; it reflects **social** change, slowly.”

True progress for women, she said, won’t be when women are regulars in beer or car or football ads. After all, feminism “did a pretty good job of showing that women can do what men

do,” Neuhaus said. “What we haven’t achieved is showing that men can do what women can do.”

They won’t have to label it “for him.” Just show her a man in a vacuum commercial.

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