

Experts Offer Steps to Stimulate Sales

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According to Linda Landers, founder and CEO of Girlpower Marketing, women are the largest consumer group in the United States and the third largest in the world with their combined buying power greater than Japan's economy. Women remain under recognized, however, in the long-considered, predominantly male market of home improvement.

Shifting away from established modes of marketing might seem daunting and unfamiliar, Landers said, but recognizing the differences in the demographics and applying proven techniques wins a stronger consumer base of both genders.

Mel Toellner, president and co-owner of Gold Crest Distributing, in Mexico, Mo., observed the buying differences between men and women and adjusted his displays in 'layers' which he said attracts both genders. All consumers respond when they see a product in use in the real environment, Toellner said.

Grouping products in subsets with proper signage generated an incredible response in his wild bird marketplace, Toellner said. He also discovered that putting gift items with pictures of the birds on them next to the functional items for those birds increased sales.

"Women seem to respond to the visual of the cutting board or flag with a bird picture on it," Toellner said. "Men who want to buy something for their wives say, 'She likes hummingbirds so I'll buy this gift.' What continues to amaze us is that in the same store that carried the same items, by grouping the gifts with the functional, we've had a market increase of the functional."

Adding books represented the third layer of Toellner's display. "When a woman comes in to buy something for hummingbirds she finds the books that tell her which plants to plant and which water features attract the birds," he said.

Taking his marketing one step further, Toellner said he uses tips brochures to meet customers' need for information. For example, Toellner said to gather information about your display's topic or theme and print it in a color brochure with the store's name, address, telephone number and e-mail address on the back for people to take home for family and friends.

"We've tracked it in test markets," Toellner said, "and often you'll think it isn't working. Then at Father's Day, Mother's Day and Christmas, it's amazing how many people come back to the store looking for the items in the brochure."

A critical layer in the marketing, according to Toellner, is the display unit itself. He recommended wheeled fixtures. Retailers can keep their stores looking fresh by rotating seasonal stock up front where the customers can see it.

Shoppers follow a triangular path known as the milk and bread path, Toellner said. Customers go in for an item, proceed to the check-out counter and then head out the door. Retailers must constantly change what customers see in that triangle, Toellner said. Rotating the stock brings new items to customers' eyes, even if the item is not new to the store, he said.

When marketing to female consumers, Landers said women do not want to be marketed down to by using lightweight or inferior products, or by painting existing products pink and labeling them 'for women.' Andreas Szabados, CEO of Oase Living Waters in Corona, Calif., and Bill Minnick, president of Danner Mfg. Inc. in Islandia, N.Y. said consumer-friendly products with higher efficiency, lower cost and easier installation and maintenance attract all consumers irrespective of gender or physical ability.

Surveys also prove effective, according to several retailers and manufacturers. For example, Minnick, Toellner and Szabados each said that listening to customers proves key to providing quality service and products the customer wants.

What do women consumers want from the pond and water garden marketplace? According to Landers, "Women are looking for solid information, ease of use, stellar customer service and brands that are looking to build real relationships with them based on their interests, personal identities and problems they need to solve."