

How to Learn From, and Join, The Conversation of Women **By Lisa Johnson, CEO ReachWomen**

Especially when you put them together in conversation, women have the power to help companies solve brand challenges, design more intuitive and relevant products, and create advertising messages that resonate – all with their usual humor and commonsense. Talking with them early on produces yet another bonus, it gives them a sense that their role in product development was active, so they will likely be purchasers and purchase influencers as soon as it hits the shelves.

Tips for conversation joining:

Encourage story telling. I had a college boyfriend who encouraged me to tell the stories of my day by stating my point first and then filling in the details, in order of importance. That way, he explained, he could choose whether to listen to the whole story. That relationship didn't last long, but mentioning that memory serves a purpose: Women share vital information, about the things brands need to know, in the context of stories. So, it's not our job as marketers and researchers to ask women to sort their conversations into essay outlines or bullet points, rather we must develop our ears to extract the rich information and insight embedded in their stories – however long and winding.

Use all of your senses to listen. Pay attention to the energy level in the room, as well as the content of the conversation. It is important to notice when the group gets into a buzz, because then you know that you've hit on an important topic or issue. When everyone starts talking on top of each other or laughing, they are having a "that's me" moment such as, "that's how I am with my kids" or "that is the state of my finances." These powerful energy shifts often provide signature stories that can form the essence of a brand's messaging.

Support the conversation through environment and context. Most research approaches don't allow women to share information in a natural way. But, fun and relevant environments can do wonders to support authentic conversations. As an example, Panasonic tested the Panasonic Pantene™ Ultra Ionic Hair Dryer by inviting their focus group participants into a beauty school. Each participant was given a complementary shampoo from a professional stylist in training, a new blow dryer and a station with a chair and mirror. As women took the new dryers for a test drive, Panasonic's brand managers spent time watching and interacting with participants, gathering their real time feedback and insight.

Look at her holistically. Women will often view products and services as part of a solution or life improvement that they will incorporate into their being. By understanding the factors that influence a woman's buying decision along with

her specific motivations for buying your product, you can gain further insight into how to position your brand.

Examine, for example, how soy milk entered the marketplace as one thing, but has since become so much more for the people who use it. When it first hit the mainstream market, soy gave customers a lactose free alternative to cow's milk. Then, it became a popular choice with women looking to decrease menopause symptoms by adding soy. And, for a whole separate reason, vanilla soy milk became popular with people who simply enjoyed the sweeter vanilla taste in their cereal and coffee. So, some milk manufacturers then caught onto this and began creating vanilla flavored milk. It just goes to show that you might think women buy your products for a certain set of reasons, but then discover that a health condition, flavor, color or even the portion size is tipping the scale in your favor. By understanding the full range of reasons people buy your product, you can form a more complete picture of which factors really influence buying decisions.

Use your best listener. When conducting research and listening to women, make sure to send people who understand and enjoy the market, and who are clear on the objectives of your brand to listen to women. If you don't pay attention to this element of your research, the listening part of the process can end up being delegated to a professional discussion leader/stranger who may not have your brand's real interest in mind at all. Remember, it's not just what women are saying, but what the listener is hearing.

The biggest advances in learning from and joining the conversations of women will come as companies use streamlined internal communication systems (intranet and email) to make the ongoing feedback from women available throughout their organization – in real time. That's when listening truly becomes powerful... and profitable.