

Direct Mailshots: The Gender Effect

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Abstract

Direct marketing can target individuals, but not merely according to name and address drawn from lists - it can also use different content and tone of voice. But is the 'gender effect' such that men and women should be targeted differently? This paper reports a research programme which explores this issue. Ten group discussions were conducted around the UK and it is found that men and women do react differently to certain features of written communication.

Women respond well to bright colours, photographs and images and men respond well to bold headlines, bullet points and graphs. These findings were true for all age groups and in all areas of the UK. The exception to these findings is that for cars and leisure products, men also respond well to pictures.

Introduction and Background

Gender has been a long established segmentation variable in traditional marketing. There are clearly products for men and products for women. Historically most consumer goods were bought by women and although they may not always have been the deciders or the final users of everything they bought, women at least they did most of the buying. Above-the-line media advertising has long recognised this and much advertising activity has been directed towards women.

Female stereotyping in advertising has been the focus of much criticism over the last couple of decades. In the mid 1970s there was a general reliance on either the 'mother' or 'mistress' images of women in advertising. Towards the end of that decade criticisms centred on these approaches becoming less and less realistic (Scott, R. 1978, Women in Media 1981, Hamilton, R., Haworth, B. and Sadar, N. 1982) During the 1980s we had the emerging 'career woman' stereotype, but sometimes poorly conceived and inappropriately implemented.

An important trend for the 1990s has been the continued change in respect of the 'Feminal Consumer'. Increases in the divorce rate and the 'singles' market have added to the more general changes in sex roles, with women becoming more individualistic through their own careers rather than being housewives per se. Marketing to women, however, may still be in need of updating. There are new female roles such as the independent assertive woman, independent passive woman and independent sexual woman. Some of these clearly relate to what in popular culture has been termed 'girl power'.

The concept of the 'new man' emerged towards the end of the 1980s and we saw the manifestation of this in the advertising of cars for example. Audi's 'caring-sharing' man who holds the baby was quite different from the aggressive and selfish boy racers of earlier periods. Whether the 1990s really saw a significant shift towards the caring and sharing new man is debatable. What is clear is that,

as female roles change, so inevitably do male roles. The increase in the divorce rate affects both sexes and produces sizeable singles markets, some male, some female. All requiring greater independence in buying terms. Recent male images include the family man, the job lad, modelling man, househusband man, as well as gay images.

However, much of the above is based on socialisation/environmental influences on gender roles. Are there inherent differences between the sexes in how they react to marketing activity ?

This paper does not explore these issues across the entire marketing function but focuses on the gender effect for direct mail. If direct marketing practices what it preaches, then it needs to target individually, not merely according to name and address drawn from lists but also in terms of the content and tone of voice.

The Gender Effect

The literature on gender communication differences is substantial. Table 1 summarises some of that literature in terms of verbal communication. Some of the differences may be explained by the different parts of the brain between the sexes which deal with speech (Moir and Jessel, 1994). The part of the brain controlling speech in women is efficiently located in the front of the left hemisphere. In men it is less effectively split between the back and front of the brain. Because of this men are less able to talk about their feelings.

BT (Pidgeon and Lockier, 1997) found that the average length of female telephone conversations to be 20 minutes compared with just 6 minutes for a male conversation. Similarly, pre-school girls take an average of 92.5 seconds saying goodbye to their mothers compared with just 32 seconds for boys. So, at least verbally, the literature points to men get straight to the point, whilst women constantly gauge the impact the conversation is having on themselves and the person they are talking to (but you can only guess the relative contributions of each of the authors of this paper !). Indeed, can all this be transferred to written communication? If there are "male" and "female" writing styles then the impact on the Direct Mail industry will be enormous.

The study reported here also builds on the findings of a direct mail test which indicated that women do, indeed, respond to an "emotional" style whilst men respond to a "factual" style of mailshot. Charities have tended to use a "female/emotional" style of writing in their fund-raising mailshots. Target Direct worked with Help the Aged to rewrite one of their established mailshots in a "male" i.e. "factual" style. When this was mailed to men it pulled 85% better than the original "female/emotional" pack. Additionally, when the "male/factual" version was mailed to women it pulled 15% less than the original "female/emotional" version.

Although there are different findings with respect to the range of gender effects, there is a relative consensus over women being more risk averse (Powell and Ansic, 1997, Johnson and Powell, 1994, Sexton and Bowman-Upton, 1990, Stinerock et al., 1991) than are men. This is taken further in a number of studies set in the financial services market where women are consistently found to exhibit less confidence over purchase decision making (Powell and Ansic, 1997 and Stinerick et al., 1991).

Table 1 Language and Gender (Pidgeon and Lockier, 1997)	
Men to men	Women to women
<p>Use commands and imperatives 'Help me', 'Do this'. 'Go there'. (Maltz and Borker)'Should we go there?'</p> <p>Use interjections to change the subject with words like 'Hey', 'Oh by the way', 'Listen' (Lakoff)</p> <p>Describe things in basic detail, particularly colours - green. blue (Lakoff)</p> <p>Use single adjectives to make a single point. 'That's a nice dress' (Lakoff)</p> <p>Use 'right' or 'OK' as interjections (Lakoff)</p> <p>Regard questions as requests for information (Druck, 19985)</p> <p>Answer questions with a declaration of fact 'Yes', 'Fine' (Lakoff)</p> <p>Use quantifiers such as 'never', 'all', 'always', 'none' (Lakoff)</p> <p>Make simple requests 'I need help to move this box' (Druck, 1985)</p> <p>Use colloquialisms and jargon (Druck, 1985)</p> <p>Use more concise language Zimmermann and west, 1975)</p>	<p>Tend to use suggestions 'Let's do this'.</p> <p>Use conjunctions to change the subject with words like 'And of course', 'But'</p> <p>'However'</p> <p>Use many more adjectives in description to convey complex detail - chartreuse, indigo</p> <p>Use adjectives to elaborate 'That dress looks great on you, it's so lovely'</p> <p>Use interjections much less (using ones such as 'uhm-mmm') because the conversation provides natural openings</p> <p>Questions are used to keep conversation going</p> <p>Answer questions with another question 'I don't think so, what do you think?'</p> <p>Use qualifiers such as 'a bit', 'kind of'. 'sort of'</p> <p>Make compound requests 'Would you be kind enough to help me move this box?'</p> <p>Use less colloquialisms and jargon Articulate more precisely but less concisely</p>
<i>And where language and behaviour merge...</i>	
<p>Express emotion with increased vocal intensity (Henley and Thorn, 1975, Luchsinger and Arnold, 1965)</p> <p>Use staccato tones which make sentences sound shorter and sharper (Henley and Thorn, 1975, Luchsinger and Arnold, 1965) Interrupt more (Kester, 1978)</p>	<p>Express emotion with verbs describing their psychological state 'I think', 'I feel'</p> <p>Use more flowing tones which make sentences sound softer and more full Interrupt less</p>

Objectives

Essentially, then, the proposition that this research addresses is that women respond better to some sort of "emotional" appeal. This may be invoked by the use of pictures; bright colours; longer, chattier prose; real-life examples. Whereas men respond better to the straightforward communication of facts. This may be achieved by the use of bullet points; graphs; charts; bold headlines.

Methodology

One issue to emerge from the array of gender studies is the need to be context-specific (Archer, 1996 and Eagly, 1995). Our research set out to gather the reactions of a cross-section of men and women to gender-biased mail shots within specific product-market contexts. the product-markets concerned are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Product Markets		
Client	Product/Service	Aim of mailshot
Book Club Association	World Books	Join the book club
Book Club Association	Music Direct	Join the CD club
Transnational	UK Golf	Join the scheme
Bank of Scotland	Personal Choice Mortgage	Call the hotline
Nationwide	Guaranteed Equity Bond	Invest quickly
Mitsubishi	New Colt	Take a test drive

To this end 10 single sex focus groups were conducted across the UK with a range of respondents (Table 3). The aim in creating the male packs was to communicate information in as straightforward a manner as possible. The aim in creating the female packs was to include elements of emotional appeal. These aims were realised in slightly different ways for each mailshot but the basic fact/emotion split was maintained throughout. The sorts of techniques used were:

Male Style

- Bold messages
- Bullet points
- Short letter
- Minimal imagery

Female Style

- Longer letter
- More inserts
- More pictures
- Brighter colours

The campaigns for each group were chosen on the basis of perceived relevance backed up by some customer profiling information supplied by clients. E.g. mortgages were not discussed by retired people who had probably already paid off theirs.

The groups were all run by the same moderator and the moderator also analysed the transcripts. Recruits were told that the aim of the research was to examine different styles of writing and presentation in direct mail and were asked to discuss their preferences for "male" and "female" styles in a variety of direct mail packs. They were not told that the different styles were gender-biased.

Table 3 Focus Groups	
<i>Location</i>	<i>Lifestage</i>
London Redditch (Birmingham) Edinburgh Weston-Super-Mare Manchester	Singles living in own home Dinkies (Dual income no kids) Couples with children living at home Empty Nesters (children left home) Retired
All those recruited had responded to direct mail in the past twelve months All those recruited were of social class BC1 Respondents were recruited by life-stage rather than by age alone. One male only and one female only group was run in each location Each group discussion lasted 1.5 hours Each group discussed 4 pieces of literature There was an average of 8 people per group	

The campaigns were dealt with one after the other and the discussion for each campaign was guided in the same way:

1. Shown male and female envelope from first campaign and asked for first reactions
2. Probe into reasons for these reactions
3. Shown contents of each envelope and asked for first reactions
4. Probe into these reactions
5. Given copy of both letters to read and asked which they preferred
6. Probe into reasons for likes and dislikes

Findings

Features of a mailing which appeal to women

The "mood" or "feel" of the mailshot is vital for women in deciding whether or not to open an envelope and whether or not to read what's inside. The most powerful methods of creating a "mood" or "feel" are bright colours and pictures.

These methods proved to be more effective than attempts to create moods by the use of long, chatty prose or by the inclusion of "interesting" bits and pieces in a mail pack.

Bright Colours

When asked to state a preference for a brightly coloured envelope on the one hand and a plain coloured or white envelope on the other, women across the regions and across lifestages respond positively to bright colours on an envelope. None of the women found it easy to say why they preferred any of the coloured envelopes - despite a lot of probing.

What was perhaps most telling was the speed with which the majority of women went straight for colour. It was a gut reaction. The closest any of the respondents came to articulating their reasons was:

"When you see something jolly, you tend to open it straight away." (Empty Nester Woman)

This implies that the bright colours create, at an unconscious and instinctive level, a positive mood. The majority of men, on the other hand reacted neutrally to bright colours - the colours did not appear to make them feel anything. Rather the men used the colour as a piece of information. So , some felt that a company using bright colours was trying to manipulate them.

"It doesn't look reputable." (Dinky Man)

"It's junky mail. Too many bright colours." (Dinky Man)

For some men, on the other hand, the colours simply reminded them of something tangible. One man thought that a purple-coloured envelope looked like:

"Lager and blackcurrant." (Family Man)

Pictures

Women across regions and lifestages responded positively to pictures - and especially full colour photographs. These pictures might be in information leaflets, on the envelope or on the letter. Their enthusiasm for pictures was a spontaneous reaction which they found hard to explain, but it would seem that pictures, like bright colours actually evoke an emotion in a woman. This emotion creates a receptive frame of mind.

"It relaxes you." (Empty Nester Woman)

"There isn't any pressure." (Family Woman)

"It's browsable." (Empty Nester Woman)

Men, on the whole did not see pictures as a useful aid to decision making. They thought of the pictures as a waste of time.

"I would prefer a non-picture approach. I don't feel I need to be sold it like that." (Empty Nester Man)

The exception to this was cars and leisure products, where men considered photographs to be a necessity. However, whilst a picture creates a mood for a woman, for a man the look of the machine or the location (for example a golf course) was considered a vital piece of information.

Features of a mailing which appeal to men

The clarity of the message is the most important thing for a man in his decision to open the envelope and to read what is inside. The male decision making process (i.e. the decision to bin the mailshot or the decision to purchase what is offered) appears to be a quicker, less emotional process. The most effective methods for conveying a clear message are: bold factual headlines; concise first paragraph of a letter; bullet points; graphs.

Bold Factual Headlines

A man's first reaction when confronted with a mailshot is to scan for facts. A bold headline will catch his eye and be easily digestible.

"You want it short and sweet. Make up your mind." (Dinky Man)

Concise first paragraph

Because men appear to make fast judgements about the content of a mailshot or about the image of the company sending it then a letter which contains important information has to get a man's attention very quickly.

Each group of men volunteered, quite unprompted, that the first paragraph of a letter determines whether or not the mailshot receives serious attention.

"If the first paragraph is crap you are not going to read anything else" (Single Man)

"It (female letter) would be binned after 3 lines because it's pie in the sky." (Retired Man)

"If I am interested in something I need it to be short and sweet. If it grips my interest I do not like going through reams of paper." (Empty Nester Man)

Bullet Points

Again, because of the male scanning tendency, bullet points aid a swift decision.

"I like the bullet points. All you need are the facts." (Family Male)

"Straight to the point." (Dinky male)

"Cuts out the waffle." (Empty Nester Male)

"Easy to read." (Single Male)

Men assimilate the information they need and make a decision and find anything not strictly relevant to the decision as an irritant.

Graphs

Only one of the mailshots actually contained graphs, but the difference between men and women was clear:

"I prefer the graphs and charts - it's the facts and figures I like." (Empty Nester Man)

"Graphs and charts could be misleading" (Dinky Woman)

Implications and Conclusions

Overall, then men and women do react differently to certain features of written communication. Women respond well to bright colours, photographs and images and men respond well to bold headlines, bullet points and graphs. These findings were true for all age groups and in all areas of the UK. The exception to these findings is that for cars and leisure products, men also respond well to pictures - though not in the sense of communicating mood as was the case for women, but rather as communications vehicles for information.

Responding to direct mail appears to consist of a series of 3 decisions:

- 1. Shall I open the envelope now, or put it to one side, or bin it immediately?*
- 2. Shall I read the contents now, or put them to one side, or bin them immediately?*
- 3. Shall I take action (e.g. place an order to-day), or to put it off for a bit or bin the mailshot after all?*

It would seem that the decision-making process for men and women is different. Men will make all three of these decisions on the basis of less information and therefore much more quickly. Men will scan literature for factual messages which they can use to aid a rapid decision. When women make a decision they are influenced by the "feel" of the information as well as the facts. Thus the decision-making process is more involved. If a mailshot succeeds in evoking emotion in a woman then she will be much more likely at least to open the envelope and read the contents.

A surprising finding is that wordy, chatty prose in a direct mail letter does not always appeal to a woman and can, in fact, be a counter-productive technique. In face to face conversations women constantly gauge the reactions of the person they are talking to. It would seem that when women receive direct mail they try to see behind the written word to the intentions of the sender. Women look for cues in a mail shot. The research showed that mailshots using imagery as cues to intention are more successful than mailshots which rely on the reader's correct interpretation of the tone of words used in a letter or brochure.

Women are searching for meaning and intention and if they interpret the meaning as patronising or inappropriate they react very negatively and very forcefully. Men may find wordy, chatty prose a bit annoying because it is not conveying straight facts, but they will not be aroused to anger. Wrong tone will anger women because they have looked for a rapport with the sender of the letter and feel let down.

An exception to this finding is the case of sports and leisure products. In this instance, both women and men responded well to a longer letter. However, their reasons for the preference were different. For men the length of the letter was the most important factor. They wanted a lot of information about sports and leisure products. Women, on the other hand felt it appropriate that someone selling such a product should adopt a familiar tone.

The qualitative findings from 10 focus groups cannot be said to represent the views of the whole UK population. The next stage of the research is, therefore, to conduct quantitative research to test the reliability of these findings. The test will be via the Royal Mail Panel (Mailmonitor) of 1350 household (2700 individuals) who are recruited on a nationally representative basis according to sex, age, social class, size of household and TV region.

A new set of male and female packs for the same campaign are being created, but as far as possible, the packs will only vary in one key "gender-specific" feature. E.g. The female pack will differ from the male pack only in the inclusion of pictures on the envelope and brochures. Each household will receive a male and a female version of the same mail shot. Each member of the household will be asked to state which one they prefer. In this way it will be possible to say that any differences in opinion by sex are driven by the inclusion or exclusion of a

specific "male" or "female" feature. Thus, this next phase in the research will be a robust test of the theories which have been developed as a result of the qualitative research reported here.

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