

Marketers are not keeping up with the changing attitudes of women

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Study by Research International shows how marketers are not keeping up with the changing attitudes of women
By Simon Harrop - 02 Nov 2005

According to a recent study, "Communicating with modern urban women in Asia", by leading market research agency, Research International, brand owners are failing to engage female consumers with their communications. Women are feeling "smarter", more discerning and more confident as individuals, but advertising has been slow to respond. Marketers are continuing to present women in traditional roles and to focus on old clichés, resulting in the alienation of many female consumers.

Research International met with 80 female consumers in Mumbai, Shanghai, Bangkok and Singapore in addition to 15 "experts" - educated women drawn from a range of professional fields. The aim of the study was to determine what works or didn't work when communicating with women in order to help marketers find fresh perspectives when engaging with this important consumer group.

"Communicating with women" shows how women's attitudes towards femininity and how their aspirations and personal ambitions are changing, particularly in the case of women under 35 (both married and unmarried) who have an above average level of education. Of the markets included in the study, Singapore takes the lead as the least "traditional" and hierarchical and as a place in which women believe they have been very successful. Women in Thailand and India also spoke about a strong desire for greater independence and individual expression. This attitude is illustrated by one of the experts from India who says, "Woman can be confident on her own today; now you see young women asking themselves: 'what is it that I can do beyond being married.'". For women in China the notions of family and "social responsibilities" dominate and a desire for independence was less than in other Asian countries. However, this is changing. A Chinese expert taking part in the survey said, "Women aged 20 - 25 are the first only child generation; they are thinking very differently; they'll be more self-dependent and will (value more) self improvement."

One of the most important aspirations is to be financially independent from men. Many respondents spoke about how "things may not be forever" and about an inherent risk in relying entirely on a (male) partner's income. Women in Thailand and India said that they hide money away "for a rainy day". There is less evidence of this behaviour in China, but the desire is clearly expressed. In Singapore women are already relatively financially independent and are freer to consume as they please.

The study also shows how there has been a rise in women's self-confidence that has influenced their view of femininity. Femininity is now about self-expression, happiness and a sense of purposefulness. Their feminine ideal is based on strong character and achievement rather than obedience and sacrifice. There is a common trend across the markets of women rejecting past icons as being relatively superficial. Women today look towards female role models who display a different kind of beauty based more on intelligence, real accomplishment and a strong sense of individuality.

With women seeing themselves more as freethinking, modern individuals who will make their own decisions, they are turning away from communications that patronise them and feature male authority figures. While some advertisers are aware of the shifts in attitude and are attempting to make real connections with women, many are not.

Consumers in Thailand talked about the contrast between advertising that tries to treat them as "stupid" and that which appeals to a smart discerning woman. Women across Asia appear to reject being portrayed as being unable to solve problems or ads which over claim their benefits, for example ads for household cleaning or beauty products. One respondent said, "A soap cannot help you to become a better daughter, mother or wife; only you yourself can help you become all of those." There is a constant rejection of claims that are beyond the realm of believability or those that raise questions on ethical issues and about the actual delivery of promises in ways that are safe and dependable. Advertising for slimming products, body enhancement products and those for skin improvement were singled out for particular criticism. Women also spoke negatively about the over-reliance on clichéd "Cinderella" plots in advertising. Advertising which shows women celebrating their newly found identity in images that are optimistic, confident and energetic appeals to modern Asian women. Women in China spoke positively of the Nike ad that portrays a modern, confident and successful woman. In India women in the survey highlighted advertising that presents a positive spirit of independence within the domain of a housewife's life. The "Whirlpool mum" in Whirlpool advertising is regarded very positively: "The Whirlpool mum gives you the feeling, don't worry, I am there; She is bubbly and has a bag of answers to all problems."