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Women's Role In Purchasing Decisions

By Sharon Roberts
For *The News*

Perhaps you've heard this joke that's going around: Married women spend 85 cents out of every family dollar, children spend 15 cents, and men spend the rest.

Amusing to be sure — and, as it is with many jokes, this one has more than a kernel of truth. Contractors cannot afford to overlook this truth.

Consider this compelling fact: We know from recent focus groups sponsored by *The News* that women are the primary influence in all HVAC consumer equipment purchases.

What many find even more stunning is the fact that the women determined who would or would not make the short list. Now that's serious power and influence in the decision-making process.

What's more, this critical part of the decision process is often invisible to the contractor and is therefore never factored into the closing ratio.

The Process

Here's how the process works in many families. Couples independently or together come up with a list of potential contractors from a variety of sources: references from friends, ads on the radio or in the newspaper, trucks they have seen, or scanning the yellow pages or surfing the Web. But, it's the women who actual-



Sharon Roberts



ly make the phone calls to narrow the list to the three or four they will invite into their homes.

Keep in mind, consumer reporters have cautioned consumers to interview a minimum of three licensed contractors who are in good standing with the Better Business Bureau. The person (or persons) this woman talks to is critical to the success of your company in securing a spot on the coveted short list. In truth, the sales process actually begins at this point.

'Ask Sharon' To Appear Monthly In *The News*

Welcome to a new addition to *The News*: Sharon Roberts. Roberts has accepted our invitation to help our contractor-subscribers learn about the important role of women in the purchasing of HVAC products and services. In her estimation, if you fail to recognize the importance of women in the decision-making process, your business is bound to suffer.

"For many it's important for them to know that I'm happily married and have no ax to grind with men," Roberts said.

Roberts began with Lennox Industries in 1986 and was responsible for training staff members throughout the network of dealer-

ships, as well as Lennox employees. That included sales training, customer service, marketing, and presentation skills.

In 1995 Roberts left Lennox to become a consultant and has been presenting keynote speeches, seminars, and workshops throughout the industry. This includes a variety of topics, though selling to women and couples is her most popular topic.

Roberts seeks feedback and questions. You can e-mail her at sharon@r2assoc.com. She will answer your questions and comments in her "Ask Sharon" report each month in *The News*.

If “closing rates” are measured from a later point in the process, the metric boils down to a meaningless manipulation of statistics.

Many times receptionists and salespeople are taught to quickly qualify the potential buyer. Usually they are taught to determine if the person on the phone is the decision-maker.

And, yes, even now in 2005 it’s shocking how many people do not consider women real decision-makers when it comes to purchasing HVAC equipment.

This is a truly alarming point of view given the facts gleaned from the focus groups. When women call into a contractor’s office they are often taken aback by the questions they are asked.

They are commonly asked questions such as, “Are you the head of the household?” or “Are there others who will be involved in the decision process?” Some just jump in with both feet and ask “Are you married?” My personal favorite is, “Are you authorized to make financial decisions?”

For women, these questions shout, “I do not want to talk to you — I want to talk with your husband.” Yikes! You just got scratched off the list. What? But, you say, “That’s not what I meant.”

No matter how wonderful you are and how much you say you love and respect women, the message that was communicated loud and clear is, as funnyman Dave Letterman might say, your business is “not a happenin’ place.”

It Can Get Confusing

Now, that brings up one of the questions I’m most often asked, “Are women just supersensitive these days?” I believe “less tolerant” is a more accurate description. They will not tolerate what they perceive to be inconsiderate or condescending treatment, whether intentional or not. The questions cited above will raise the blood pressure of many an intelligent, capable woman decision-maker, whether she’s single or married. And that can’t be good for business!

But it’s not just a problem for men. Almost every time I speak on the subject “Selling to Women and Couples,” women owners and saleswomen tell me, “I’ve been guilty of the things you’re talking about, and I should know better.”

They acknowledge they themselves would not tolerate this behavior from men or from women. Often they blame the men who taught them and then begrudgingly acknowledge that ultimately they are responsible for their own actions.

I know from personal experience from working and speaking throughout the HVACR industry for almost 18 years, contractors strive to do the right thing.

The vast majority of the contractors and salespeople are men and they confess they are genuinely confused about what words and what behaviors are appropriate with women in today’s modern world. And, no wonder. We’ve sent some confusing signals over the years. With the collapse of rigid, traditional gender roles, women and men continue to seek their way with ever-evolving roles.

Questions, Comments

I urge you to discover how many calls you are getting from women in one week. Take a sheet of paper and title one column “Women” and one column “Men.” Each time a call comes in, simply put a check mark in the appropriate column. Don’t be surprised if calls from women are in the 90-plus percentage range.

I want to hear from you. Please forward your questions or comments about your experiences selling to women and couples. I will respond to each of you, and a selection will appear in next month’s “Ask Sharon” column.

Always remember: Women do not gossip, they advertise!TM

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