

Connecting with women

Women make the overwhelming majority of family purchases, yet many don't feel marketers understand them. That creates an 'opportunity gap' that WomanWise aims to fill.

By Gita Sitaramiah
Pioneer Press

Dori Molitor thanks low-fat cookies for transforming her business a decade ago.

Nabisco SnackWell's sales were declining as competitors flooded the marketplace with other low-fat cookies. Molitor's firm, then called WatersMolitor, was hired to re-position the once-popular brand.

Molitor discovered that SnackWell's cookies were a guilt-free indulgence that women allowed themselves in lives filled with duties at home and at work. "Here they were hoarding their cookies," she said.

That led her Minneapolis firm, which in September changed its name to WomanWise, a WatersMolitor Company, to recommend that SnackWell's develop a marketing strategy of acting on behalf of women with efforts such as mother-daughter workshops and promoting sports for girls.

What does all that have to do with selling low-fat cookies? To get women to purchase a product takes appealing to their emotional connection to it, said Molitor, chief executive of WomanWise. For SnackWell's, that meant understanding that the cookies were more profound to women than as simply a snack. After a 23 percent decline the year before her agency was hired, sales went up 3 percent.

"Women care about more than a product purchase," Molitor said. "They look at a purchase in a more multidimensional way."

For one, they consider the company making the product. How are they to deal with? What is their follow-up service like?

"In the end, if the radio doesn't work in six months, she tends to be the one who's going to have to do follow-up service," Molitor says.

Energized by the SnackWell's project, she used it to take her firm in a new direction of focusing on marketing to



Pioneer Press Photo by John Doman

"Women care about more than a product purchase," says Dori Molitor, above, chief executive of WomanWise. "They look at a purchase in a more multidimensional way."

women. They are a formidable economic force: Women make 83 percent of all family purchases and spend some \$1.6 trillion annually in the United States.

"Women are handling all these family purchases and finances and yet don't feel understood by marketers," Molitor said. "That's an opportunity gap. This misunderstanding of women is the biggest unleveraged opportunity and why much of marketing today is failing."

Molitor and her staff — which is 90 percent female — conduct "girlfriend groups" to hear how women discuss products when they're chatting with friends. They have women play money games to see what they'll actually purchase versus what they say they'd be interested in buying. They go into homes and videotape how women and their families use products. They consult with a psychologist to understand the emotional issues involved in purchasing products.



From left, account manager Jennifer Willenbring, creative director Sherry Gray and CEO Dori Molitor discuss a project in the "Great Room" at WomanWise, a Minneapolis firm that specializes in marketing to women.

She got her first taste of women's issues in 1976 as a legislative assistant on the subject for the U.S. Congress soon after graduating from Rocori High School. A few years later, she attended the University of Minnesota, where she graduated with a marketing degree. Molitor then worked at General Mills for four years. Eventually, she decided that something was missing and that she wanted to run her own business.

She and her husband, Todd Waters, who remains a partner though is less active, founded WatersMolitor in 1988. Clients have included Crayola, Dunkin' Donuts, U.S. Bank and The Schwan Food Co.

Despite a growing reputation for the marketing-to-women niche, the agency has faced tough times.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, advertising agencies nationwide saw dramatic declines in business as their clients faced slashed budgets. Molitor watched many of her competitors lay off 30 percent of personnel. She faced the same pressures but decided she couldn't afford to lose any of her small but loyal staff.

"I agreed to have less profit," she said.

She made some cuts, including switching to a cheaper delivery service and skipping the elaborate Christmas party. Although she avoided layoffs, Molitor left a few positions unfilled when employees left. The coffee service was dropped, and employees started brewing their own java.

When the economy rebounded, so did the company's business and the interest of companies in women's buying behavior.

The agency's research in 2004 helped guide Marshall, Minn.-based Schwan's transformation of its Pagoda frozen snacks into Asian Sensations. Tom Bierbaum, a marketing director for Schwan's Consumer Brands, said the company wanted to gain some consumer insights about the snacks.

"What they really brought to the table is this understanding of women," he said. "They're the primary purchasers in grocery."

Through Girlfriend Groups and home research, Molitor's agency found that teens enjoyed the snacks as much as parents and often drove the purchases of their boomer moms. As a result, Schwan's marketing team made sure that slogans and colors in ads appealed to both groups.

"That insight was the premise of everything that followed and they do that very well," Bierbaum said. Sales of the renamed Asian Sensations line went up 13 percent in the year after the debut.

As companies like Schwan's take advantage of women's buying power, Molitor sees her agency poised for future growth. "We're not new and jumping in and saying, 'We understand women,'" she said.

But Molitor also expects more competition as internal corporate marketing divisions and much larger advertising agencies start developing expertise in marketing to women. Molitor points to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty as an example of a company trying to emotionally connect with female consumers by replacing ultra-thin airbrushed models with real women in ads.

To set WomanWise apart from the competition, Molitor plans to give more public speeches as well as continue to research new tools for understanding the emotional connection between women and their purchases.

As there's more noise, we need to be on center stage," she said.

COMPANY SPECS

Name: WomanWise, a WatersMolitor Company

Business: Consultancy specializing in marketing brands to women.

Founders: Dori Molitor and Todd Waters

Website: www.womanwise.com

Founded: 1988 as WatersMolitor. Name recently changed to reflect expertise in

marketing-to-women niche.

Challenge ahead: More competition as others develop expertise in women's buying behaviors to market products.