



## Design and Gender: Thinking about Sex

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*How to please a woman?  
The Femme Den explores  
the underdeveloped  
opportunity for good  
design that speaks to  
the emotions, desires, and  
lifestyles of today's female  
consumers.*

Why is gender important?  
Women's continuing evolution combined with their increasing buying power has created an explosive business opportunity in the consumer products industry.

Over the past 100 years women have evolved from powerless to powerful. Today's women have tremendous clout. In a recent study conducted by Growth Strategies, American women were found to buy or influence 80% of consumer and business goods and services. This includes 80% of household goods, 75% of over-the-counter drugs, 65% of new car purchases, 61% of major home-improvement products, 66% of all

home-computer purchases, 80% of all health-care services, and 81% of consumer electronics.

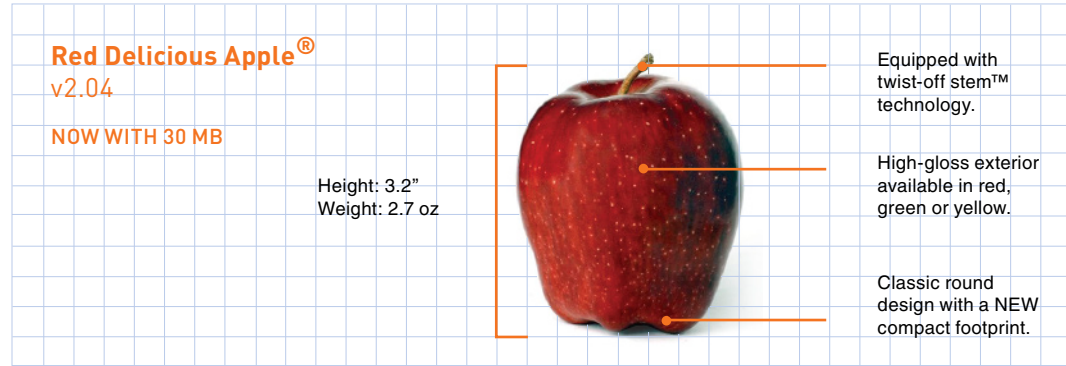
Social and cultural evolution has caused boundaries between gender roles to blur. The New York Times reports that in 2005, for the first time ever there were more American women living without a spouse than with one. Married couples have become a minority. As a result, today's women often engage in traditionally male tasks; they purchase homes, mow the lawn, and set up computers to name just a few. As they take on new roles women frequently must adapt to products that were not designed with them in mind. Women have changed a great deal, but products and services have failed to keep up.

Despite cultural shifts products and services are consistently designed without women in mind. And although many companies have recognized the female market to be a significant opportunity, they are failing to connect with this sizeable segment. Their product development teams are having

**[Figure 1]**  
American women  
make or influence  
80% of product  
purchases.



**[Figure 2]**  
The “features” approach is common in consumer electronics.



difficulty understanding what women want. Making this task especially challenging is the fact that women are underrepresented in the design industry. According to a report by consultants Nancy Ramsey and Pamela McCorduck, titled “A Different Gaze”, only 20% of industrial designers are women. In order to capitalize on this market, we as a collective have to make an effort to find the female perspective.

The Femme Den is an internal movement at Smart Design, founded by four international women – Erica Eden (American), Agnete Enga (Norwegian), Yvonne Lin (Chinese-American), and Gina Reimann (British). We are a special team dedicated to discovering the changes in design that are necessary to satisfy the unmet needs of women consumers.

**How To Please A Woman.**

The Femme Den has developed five guidelines to help designers connect to women. These guiding principles remind us to keep subtle gender differences in consideration throughout the design process.

**① Give Her Benefits, Not Features**

Today’s women are busy. Not only do many of them work, but they are also primary caretakers for their children and household. These are essentially two full-time jobs! And women find themselves so busy that the last thing they want is to invest time or energy in anything beyond their already-overloaded life. This means women are intolerant of time consuming and unintuitive product experiences, which we often see rolled out as innovations, particularly in the consumer electronics industry.

In response to a survey conducted by the Consumer Electronics Association at the 2006 Consumer Electronics Show (CES), only 1% of women felt that consumer electronics manufacturers have them in mind. Women want technology to simplify their chaotic lives. They want to see real benefits and how products fit in with their lifestyle. They are less concerned with a pervasive focus on feature sets, specs and gadgetry. By making the real life benefits of technology clear, companies can expand the consumer electronics market.



**[Figure 3]**  
Women consider everyone when shopping.

## ② The Whole Experience

When women are shopping, they are not only buying for themselves but often for the whole family. Andrea Learned, a marketing expert and author of “Don’t Think Pink: What Really Makes Women Buy” identified that in addition to judging a product at face value, women also consider several other factors. Who will use the product, will it be useful, will it fit in my house, will it be safe for my kids, or will my spouse like it? She is responsible for buying for others and always has her eye out for products. When men shop, they are generally on a mission. A male will have one product in mind to purchase for himself and is interested in the face value of the product. Is it the newest, latest and fastest model?

These different shopping approaches between men and women affect the way that products entice them. Kelly Mooney, President of Resource Interactive further supports this insight through conclusive research that men are enticed first by product and then by lifestyle. Women on the other hand are enticed first by lifestyle and then by product.

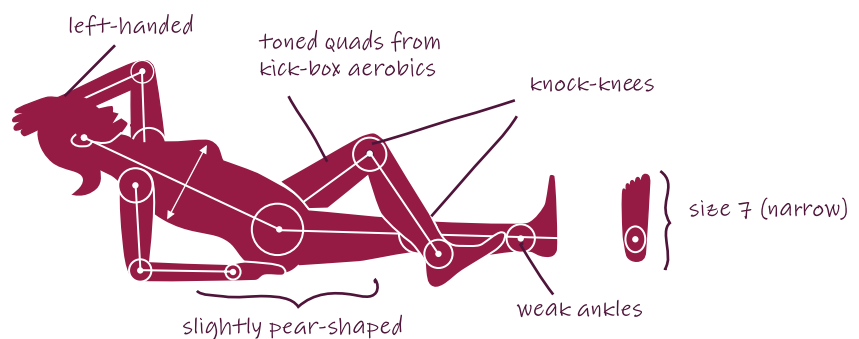
Merchandizing strategies can be rethought based on these findings to capture the women’s market. One component is merchandising, but another important aspect is the very atmosphere of a store. A product becomes more powerful when we consider the full

purchasing process. Some store environments are unappealing to women, especially electronic stores that are filled with loud music, a barrage of information, and the focus on bigger and better. We see an opportunity to design a complete experience that tells a cohesive story that women can buy into which includes the website, advertising, product, packaging, retail environment, and especially customer service. It’s important to keep in mind that women don’t buy a product; they look for a relationship with the brand.

## ③ Consider Her Body

Women’s bodies are different. But it is not as simple as size and strength differences. Women’s bodies are built differently, and therefore function differently than men. The female form is celebrated in art, yet often overlooked in product design!

More and more women are participating in historically male dominated areas, such as home improvement and sports. However, the products used in these areas are still being designed for the male body. Female do-it-yourself enthusiasts have difficulty using power tools because they are designed for male hands. Female soccer players have a higher risk of knee injuries than their male counterparts because equipment is not designed for her unique bone and muscle structure. And where exactly is the chest strap on a hiking pack supposed to go? An understanding of physical ergonomics is on the critical path to connecting with female market.



**[Figure 4]**  
Her body is different.



**[Figure 5]**  
Her needs change over time.

#### ④ Consider Her Lifecycle

Women, for instance, have babies. This seems like an obvious statement and yet it is often overlooked. Having children is one of the most influential experiences in a woman's life. As soon as a woman discovers she's pregnant, her interaction with products begins to change. Throughout her pregnancy she prioritizes the needs of her growing belly. Often her desires take a back seat. We need to consider what she wants – she wants what is best for the bump!

Being pregnant is one thing, but being a parent is another story. Mothers become virtually disabled for the first few years of their child's life. First, a mom loses the use of one arm because she often needs to carry her child, or hold a small hand. Second, she is distracted - her focus is usually on the child. We see many products intended to appeal to mothers. This is great, but do we really understand how it feels to be one-armed and distracted?

**[Figure 6]**  
Women may not be feminine all the time.



#### ⑤ Consider How It Makes Her Feel

Women's roles are changing. Some roles fit the traditional framework of being feminine and some do not. Therefore women can't be viewed one dimensionally. Targeting the "soccer mom" can be over-simplistic and detrimental to the cause. Even individuals will vary. The same woman who wants to be feminine may also want to be masculine in an alternative scenario. She is in a different mindset when tackling different tasks. For example, she may not want to be feminine when she is rock climbing, or fixing the sink.

Many products intended for women target an over-feminized stereotype. Little is designed for women that don't fit this mold. Product companies try to appeal to women by "shrinking and pinking" male oriented products. Instead let's move on, forget about stereotypes and look deeper into who, really, are today's women.

#### Getting it right

More and more companies are recognizing the potential opportunity to connect with women. Few are succeeding. These five principles are a crucial start to developing products that women can relate to – embodying qualities that they appreciate and are willing to pay for. The Femme Den is exploring not only the female consumer – we are also changing the way we approach the entire design process.

The most successful products are the result of expected performance combined with unexpected positive experiences. For us, the mission is accomplished the moment a woman becomes excited and realizes "Whoever designed this product really thought about me!"

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