

PRAISE FOR *WINNING HER BUSINESS*

“Bridget Brennan provides us with a wonderful guide to navigating the world of women consumers. In *Winning Her Business*, Brennan gives readers valuable insights that can be leveraged from the corner office to the sales floor.”

—INDRA K. NOOYI, Chairman, PepsiCo

“In an era of unmatched speed, convenience, selection, and price, winning her business requires mastering every element of the customer experience, including human interaction. Brennan’s Four Motivators Framework® is a smart and scalable road map to actionable changes that every business can leverage to succeed with one of the world’s largest growth markets.”

—TOM BARTLEY, Head of Retail, Google

“At a time when a great customer experience is the expectation, Bridget Brennan’s book is right on target. Her research and insight offer a practical guide to providing a tailored customer experience for the largest growth market—women! Her logical approach is intuitive and actionable for both men and women alike. This book should be required reading for all leaders, in order for their business to succeed in a modern economy.”

—PEGGY TURNER, Vice President, Guest Retention and Satisfaction, Lexus

“Bridget Brennan is opening up our eyes to a compelling reality and to a significant business opportunity. Brennan’s new book is visionary and at the same time pragmatic and practical. It is a must read for anyone interested in enhancing the customer experience and looking for new business opportunities.”

—LAURENT FREIXE, Executive Vice President
and CEO, Zone Americas, Nestlé S.A.

“*Winning Her Business* is a powerful resource for any business leader who aspires to create inclusive customer experiences, stay relevant, and forge authentic bonds with America’s new consumer. The book is chock full of highly actionable insights, and Brennan’s Four Motivators Framework® should be leverageable for any business, regardless of industry, across all dimensions of difference, including gender and beyond.”

–SANDY CROSS, Senior Director of Diversity and Inclusion, PGA of America

“Few know more about female customers than Bridget Brennan. In *Winning Her Business* she shows how to transform the customer experience for women by engaging their whole selves. If you want to tap into an increasingly powerful customer base, this is the book for you.”

–FLORIAN ZETTELMEYER, Nancy L. Ertle Professor of Marketing, Chair, Marketing Department, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

“An insightful perspective on how women drive consumption and how they see buying. The book is an easy-to-read, practical guide for modern sales and customer service leaders, and it is relevant to many categories and contexts. Considering the female perspective is a global business issue, accelerated in the digital age and relevant across all the world.”

–FABIO VACIRCA, Senior Managing Director – Products, Africa, Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Accenture

“If your business is aiming to win with women, then this is the book for you. Bridget Brennan doesn’t just provide powerful ideas on how to connect with women, but also the directive to put insight into action for meaningful impact on your business.”

–INGA STENTA, Head of Global Business Growth, Reebok

“Women have been instrumental to the growth of the snowboarding business and lifestyle. Brennan shows us that winning is all about inclusivity. Spend an hour with this book, and watch your customer communication skills grow.”

–ELYSA WALK, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Americas, Burton Snowboards

“Brennan connects with the reader in the precise way she recommends we reach the female customer: with inspiration, confidence, and appreciation of your time.”

–CHRISTINE WEIL SCHIRMER, Head of Communications, Pinterest

“Bridget Brennan’s point is clear: focusing on the female consumer will have deep, economic benefit. Her tactics and best practices for knowing and understanding the customer are crucial for anyone seeking to grow their business.”

–CALVIN FIELDS, DIRECTOR, Thrifty Brand, The Hertz Corporation

**WINNING
HER
BUSINESS**

WINNING HER BUSINESS

HOW TO TRANSFORM THE
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FOR
THE WORLD'S MOST
POWERFUL CONSUMERS

BRIDGET BRENNAN



HARPERCOLLINS
LEADERSHIP

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To Erik, for everything

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INTRODUCTION

It was a cold, rainy day as I walked down the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey, taking a break from a conference I was attending nearby. I looked at the string of empty stores and felt sorry for the shop owners, wondering how they made a living in this decaying retail district.

Imagine my surprise when I walked into one of the stores, looking for a souvenir to bring home, and was ignored by the lone employee who stood just a few feet away, leaning against the counter and staring into his phone. Since I was the only other person in the store, I thought he'd be thrilled to have a customer. I was wrong. He didn't even look up.

The minutes ticked by, and I started to wonder, *How long will it take for this guy to acknowledge me?* The store was so small that our silent impasse felt awkward. After several minutes, I gave up

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and left the store empty-handed and irritated. In my head I was shouting, *Hey, I was doing you a favor just by coming here!* Then I walked back to the conference I was attending and took the stage to deliver a presentation I'd been hired to give. The topic? How to create great customer experiences.

The timing was ironic, but my experience in the store wasn't shocking. Bad service is everywhere, at every price point, in every industry. And yet, many businesses still don't seem to recognize the link between the quality of service they give and their customers' buying decisions. They search and search for the newest idea for winning business and end up overlooking the most obvious strategy of all: create an experience so satisfying that people will want to spend their time and money with the company, and refer it to everyone they know.

Common sense? Yes. Common practice? No. Just ask any woman.

Women are on the receiving end of most customer experiences, good and bad, because they control the majority of the world's consumer spending. It's estimated they drive upward of 70 to 80 percent of consumer spending in the United States alone through a combination of buying power and influence.¹ Earning their business is the key to winning in the modern economy. Yet most sales training programs overlook the simple question of whether the buyer is a man or a woman. This is both a blind spot and an opportunity: a blind spot because outdated stereotypes about women are pervasive and can stop a sale in its tracks, and an opportunity because understanding women's perspectives is a serious competitive advantage for anyone in sales.

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Men and women can view sales interactions through different lenses. As a researcher on women's buying decisions, I routinely hear stories about poor sales experiences that drive women away from buying products and services. Many women report being

- treated with less respect simply because of their gender,
- judged on their appearance in ways that men are not, and
- ignored, overlooked, or underestimated when shopping with a male partner or companion.

The last one is a frequent issue. Countless women have told me about not receiving eye contact or attention when shopping with a male partner, even when a salesperson was told that the product was for her. Casual sexism is commonplace (“Tell your husband he should buy this necklace for you.”), and so is unconscious bias and stereotyping (“I’m surprised a woman wants a stick shift. Are you sure?”). In customer interactions, all kinds of things happen to women that would be inconceivable if they were men. Consider the experience of a customer we’ll call Rachel, a woman in her late twenties whose loyalty to a major hotel brand was tested by an unfortunate experience during a business trip.

“My (older, male) boss and I got in line separately to check in at a hotel in Miami,” Rachel begins. “This was a big hotel, part of a well-known chain. While we were standing there, the hotel associate looked over at me, then back at my boss, and said, ‘I don’t have your rooms available yet, but I do have one available for an hour,’ and winked. I was new at my job and mortified that someone had assumed I was my boss’s escort.”

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Rachel's story isn't from some bygone era: it happened today, to a highly educated, well-paid executive with an active social media presence (in other words, a megaphone), who can afford to take her business—and loyalty—elsewhere.

The business-to-business (B2B) world is no different. I've heard many stories from executive women who've been mistaken for assistants and asked to fetch coffee and snacks by male vendors who were in the room to sell to them. Often, these women shrug their shoulders at the vendors' mistakes. They've seen it all. But they don't forget. Is it any wonder so many women approach sales interactions with their guard up?

Just as we continually upgrade our software to stay current, we must upgrade our customer experiences to stay relevant. In a consumer economy dominated by women, new skills are needed. Selling is no longer about conquest and combat, as it was when sales strategies were largely based on men selling to other men. Nor is it about ignoring people, like the sales associate I almost met in Atlantic City. Today, it's about inspiring people to buy from you. And learning what that looks like with women customers is opportunity number one. You're about to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives, life experiences, and communication styles of the world's biggest consumer market. Many of the strategies we'll cover in this book will enhance your male customers' experience too. Winning the business of women isn't about excluding men; it's about excluding stereotypes and elevating the customer experience.

These perspectives will help you stay one step ahead of millennial (born approximately between the years 1980 and 2000)

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and Gen Z (born after 2000) customers of both genders, since many values that have historically been associated with women—like wanting to buy from companies that make the world a better place in some way—now apply to the younger generations.

In the same way that women's needs have driven changes for men in the workplace (for example, maternity leave is fast becoming parental leave so that men can take it too), women are driving changes in the consumer marketplace that younger generations of both genders not only appreciate but also expect. A good rule of thumb is this: if you want to know where the market is going, follow the women. Women are the leading indicators for what people want.

THE “G” WORD

Gender is a topic we don't discuss in the context of sales and customer experiences very often, so allow me to take a moment to clarify how we'll talk about it. All women—and men—are individuals, and should be treated as such. Women are not all the same, just as men are not all the same. Yet, each of us is born into a society that recognizes two primary gender “cultures”: the male culture and the female culture. The gender culture in which we grow up impacts how we're socialized and interact with the world, including the communication styles we use.² The descriptions in this book should be viewed as tendencies, not absolutes, that are based on the aspects of female culture that can affect women's perceptions of sales interactions.

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Here's an analogy for gender culture: Imagine you were planning a vacation to Italy and decided to learn everything you could about Italian culture. You study Italian history and modern society; you practice helpful tourist phrases in Italian; you learn expectations for customs such as tipping and hailing a cab. You're happy to put in the work because you know the knowledge will enrich your experience. And yet, when your plane touches down in Rome, you would never expect every Italian to behave the same way. After all, it's a nation of 60 million personalities. However, your preparation has provided you with a valuable foundation that allows you to communicate more easily, confidently, and ultimately, successfully. That's the spirit in which this book is written. It's a guide to the cultural conditions of modern women that will help you exceed their expectations as customers. But it bears repeating: every customer is an individual, first and foremost, and should be treated as such.

Let me also clarify the language I'll be using so we're on the same page. I use the term *sales professional* to describe all of us who work with customers for a living. I recognize that few people use that title in real life. However, whether you manage a sales team, run a dude ranch, work in retail, or are an independent business owner, your success depends on customers agreeing to pay for your products and services. Hence, we're all sales professionals.

For the sake of simplicity, I will use the word *customer* to refer to women consumers in general, though depending on your industry, you may call them guests, patients, clients, community members, fans, or something else altogether.

THIS ISN'T A WOMEN'S ISSUE—IT'S A STRATEGIC ISSUE

Now that we have our language squared away, let's set the stage for our discussion. The economic opportunity with women buyers is often viewed as a “women's issue” and not a business issue. This is a mistake. I've seen many companies—and sales professionals—limit their growth potential by thinking this way. Hosting an event for International Women's Day, for example, is laudable and important, but it's not a substitute for a long-term growth strategy. That requires a longer view, and the tools and techniques in this book are designed to help you get there. You'll find:

- Practical strategies to increase your customers' emotional engagement
- The Four Motivators Framework for creating experiences that appeal to women customers
- Communication “watch-outs” to avoid
- Best practices from leading brands, businesses, and sales professionals
- A road map of the biggest trends driving women's buying patterns
- Activities at the end of every chapter to help jump-start your growth (also included as an appendix)
- A Monday Morning Action Plan to create a long-term strategy for your business

Winning women's business is about creating *inclusive* customer experiences that incorporate the perspectives of the people who

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drive most of the buying. Our world is changing fast, but one thing remains constant: women's domination of consumer spending. That fact alone provides a valuable compass for navigating, and winning, the future. So as we move forward, keep in mind that this is not simply a women's issue—it's a strategic issue, and it's huge. Let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

**YOUR BIGGEST
GROWTH MARKET
IS ALREADY HERE**

If I were to ask you to name the world's biggest growth markets, what would you say?

China?

India?

You'd be right with either of those answers, because they're both major growth markets. But there's another massive one that's right here at home, no matter where you call home, and that's women. Thanks to women's increased educational attainment, labor-force participation, and earning power, women are now considered one of the world's largest growth markets. A *Harvard Business Review* article put it this way: "In aggregate, women represent a growth market bigger than China and India combined—more than twice as big."¹

I've dedicated most of my career to studying women in the consumer economy. It's not a typical job, and you can imagine the jokes I hear when I tell people what I do. They usually revolve around the idea that women's spending is trivial and even frivolous, as if women were only interested in shoes, handbags, and sparkly things. While there is nothing wrong with any of these purchases, this stereotype does a disservice to women and is a potential lost opportunity for sales professionals.

"You should see what my wife does to my credit card!" is a comment I hear often. When someone says this to me, I just smile,

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and then tell that person the real reasons women drive so much consumer spending. That's when the jokes stop, and the conversations get a lot more interesting.²

In virtually every society in the world, women are primary caregivers for both children and the elderly. Are there exceptions? Sure, but this is a role that remains overwhelmingly female. As primary caregivers, women typically assume responsibility for buying on behalf of everyone in their households. They're the chief purchasing officers for their families. You already know that mothers buy on behalf of their children and that women buy for spouses and partners. That's just the beginning. Women buy on behalf of their older parents, their in-laws, their businesses, and often, friends, neighbors, and community organizations, since women volunteer at higher rates than men do across all age groups and educational levels.³

Adding up all this spending and decision-making on behalf of others is how we arrive at the reality of women's buying power and influence, which is felt across industries. For example, women make 80 percent of the health-care decisions for their families.⁴ When you earn the business and loyalty of one woman, you have an opportunity to reach the other people in her household, as well as her social and business networks, because she is buying on behalf of so many others. Women are the gateway to everybody else.

WELCOME TO THE WOMEN'S MULTIPLIER EFFECT

As gateways to other people, women have what I call a *multiplier effect* on sales.⁵ Even when a woman isn't paying for something

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with her own money, she is typically a strong influencer—or veto vote—behind somebody else’s purchase. All around us, we see examples of how this plays out. For instance, if a husband and wife look at a model home and the woman doesn’t like it, the couple is unlikely to buy it.

This multiplier effect has several dimensions that can impact your sales success. One aspect of it, for example, is the way women are prime drivers of word-of-mouth publicity (which now includes social sharing online) for the people and companies with which they do business. This is because in female culture, women tend to talk about their buying experiences with one another, routinely discussing topics such as what they bought, where they bought it, what kind of deal they got (if they got one), and what kind of service they received, if it was memorable. Typically, men don’t talk to their male friends about these topics with the same frequency and depth that women do.

Women talk about these subjects because they know their female friends usually have the same responsibilities they do in terms of provisioning and procurement for the household. Women also share the same pressures to meet cultural standards for grooming, personal appearance, meal preparation, home cleanliness, and child-rearing, to name just a handful of society’s “gendered” expectations. As such, they often feel that it’s nothing less than their duty to inform their friends about great resources and warn them away from bad experiences, in the spirit of being helpful. This is one reason a happy female customer can generate a huge rate of return in word-of-mouth publicity. She represents a broad range of other potential customers.

Another aspect of the multiplier effect is that women often assume responsibility for marking life's milestones within a household or family—or even an office—and all the celebrations, events, and gift giving that go along with them, from baby showers to birthdays to funerals. These milestones are catalysts for spending and marketplace engagement.

Women also perform huge amounts of emotional labor. This phrase has more than one definition, but for our purposes I'm using the term *emotional labor* to refer to the invisible activities involved in caregiving and maintaining social relationships. These include actions such as anticipating and accommodating other people's emotional needs; organizing social activities that bring people together; remembering other people's appointments and whereabouts; keeping track of other people's sizes, favorite foods, and general likes and dislikes; and demonstrating a sustained interest in the well-being of others.

Emotional labor is a woman saying to her partner, "Next Thursday is the first anniversary of Tom's wife's death. We should invite him over for dinner so he's not alone that night." This sentiment sounds simple, but when you break it down, it's like a five-act play in which a woman is directing, producing, and starring. The first act is remembering the anniversary of the death. The second act is making a plan to invite Tom for dinner. The third act is reaching out to Tom and inviting him. The fourth act is deciding what's going to happen that evening (dinner at home or in a restaurant). And the fifth act is executing the evening's activities. Many women will tell you they have several mental checklists in their heads running at all times, and while they

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won't call these checklists *emotional labor*, that's often what they are.

All of this means that even if your customer doesn't tell you how busy she is, you can assume she has a lot going on and will be grateful if you make it easy and convenient to do business with you. Do men engage in emotional labor too? Yes, of course. However, studies show that women engage in substantially more of these activities throughout their lives, and moreover, it is a cultural expectation that they do so.⁶ From a buying perspective, the implication is that women's "radars" are permanently scanning for products and services that the people close to them might need or want, and this impacts how they approach the marketplace. I sometimes think entire industries would collapse overnight if women stopped being so thoughtful. Consider the impact to the greeting card industry alone!

AN ECONOMIC SNAPSHOT

While women have long held the role of gatekeepers for their households, they've unleashed a tidal wave of change in our economy in a very short time. When you consider that as recently as 1974 it was difficult for an unmarried woman in the United States to get a credit card in her own name—until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed—the pace of change in two generations has been nothing less than astonishing. Let's look at a few eye-opening stats that provide context for how your business and sales strategies can adapt.

Women Dominate Higher Education. Women earn the majority of associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and even doctoral degrees in the United States.⁷ This is part of a global shift: women are outpacing men's higher education participation in many world markets.⁸ Education has catapulted women into fields that were traditionally dominated by men, like law, medicine, and science, to name just a few.⁹ If we consider that someone's educational attainment is a good predictor of his or her future earning power, the data on graduation rates shows us that women's status as "alpha consumers" will likely continue for the next two to three decades at least. This means women aren't just the customers of today; they're the customers of the future. Here's how the numbers break down in the United States:

- bachelor's degrees: 57 percent earned by women
- master's degrees: 59 percent earned by women
- doctoral degrees: 53 percent earned by women

Women in the Workforce: The Biggest Revolution of Our Time. Women's participation in the labor force has been one of the most sweeping and peaceful revolutions in modern history, impacting every facet of society. Stereotypes to the contrary, most mothers of young children now work outside the home. In fact, 70 percent of women with children under eighteen participate in the US labor force, and the overwhelming majority of these women (75 percent) work full time.¹⁰ This is an enormous change from 1975, when less than half of all mothers with children under eighteen were in the labor force. Despite the numbers, employed women

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still perform more unpaid household chores and caregiving responsibilities than employed men,¹¹ which means that providing them with convenient ways to conduct business with you is crucial to staying relevant with this market.

At the other end of the age spectrum, more people than ever are working into their later years. Because women have a longer life expectancy than men and typically shoulder more eldercare responsibilities, we can expect they will be a significant part of this growing population of older workers, which will have an impact on both their consumer needs and time constraints.

More Women Are Breadwinners. What does a breadwinner look like? If you're thinking of a man in a suit, it's time to update that image and make it more inclusive of women. Mothers are the primary or sole earners for 40 percent of households with children under eighteen.¹² This represents a sea change in our society, and there are several factors behind it. Not only are women earning more degrees and engaged in the labor force in large numbers, but there are more single-parent households in our society, and women overwhelmingly dominate these households.¹³

Women Control Wealth. Women control 51 percent of personal wealth.¹⁴ They are wealth creators due to their workforce participation and entrepreneurialism, and wealth inheritors because of their longer life expectancies. Both of these factors impact women's decision-making and financial needs. Forty percent of new entrepreneurs are women,¹⁵ and women-owned businesses account for 39 percent of all US firms.¹⁶ We will hear from women business owners throughout these pages and learn the innovative ways they serve their own customers.

Women Hold Most Management and Professional Positions.

Women account for 52 percent of all workers employed in management, professional, and related occupations.¹⁷ One implication of this number is that B2B sales are now increasingly inclusive of women. Many forward-looking businesses are fielding more diverse account teams to reflect the customer bases they serve.

Women Dominate the Big Social Networks. Females are the dominant users of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest,¹⁸ and Snapchat.¹⁹ We all know that social sharing has never been more important for businesses in terms of publicity, reputation, and sales. What we don't often hear is that women are the primary users on most of the biggest social networks. This is another key aspect of their "multiplier effect" on businesses.

Caregiving. Globally, women undertake the majority of unpaid care, including housework, childcare, and eldercare.²⁰ The numbers vary by country, but overwhelmingly, women's unpaid work functions as a second or third job that must be maintained along with any paid work outside the home. This is one of the biggest differences in life experience that women bring to the table as customers: they're often evaluating the wants and needs of other people as they make buying decisions, and juggling multiple caregiving responsibilities.²¹

These stats paint an extraordinary picture of women's economic impact. Yet women are still absent from leadership positions in the corporate world. While women make up the majority of consumers, men make up 95 percent of CEOs for S&P 500 companies, and they almost always lead male-dominated management teams.²² Women-founded companies (in which all founders are

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female) receive only 2 percent of venture capital funding.²³ As these numbers show, there's still an enormous gender gap between women buyers and the leadership of the companies that market and sell to them. My philosophy is that whenever there's a gap, there's an opportunity to fill it. That's why we're here. Closing this gap with insights and information will help put you one step ahead of the competition and create more satisfied customers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women are one of the world's biggest growth markets, and meeting their needs as customers is key to succeeding in the modern economy.
- Women have a multiplier effect on the businesses and sales professionals that serve them well.
- Understanding the pace of women's educational and economic progress is fundamental to staying relevant with this market.

ACTIVATING YOUR INSIGHTS

- If you were to rank your business on a scale of 1 to 10 on its effectiveness in connecting with modern women consumers, with 10 being the highest, what number would you give? Use this number as a benchmark for future progress.
- How have you seen differences in gender culture play out in

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your own customer interactions? What did you learn from these experiences?

- Categorize your customer data by gender. Can you identify specific buying patterns and preferences by examining the information this way?

CHAPTER 2

**WHAT SELLING
LOOKS LIKE NOW**

Quick: think of a buying experience you've had with a salesperson that was so great you told people about it.

Still thinking?

Chances are, you're drawing a blank, because from a customer perspective, sales experiences are generally bad. Maybe not outrageously bad, but *lackluster*. Ineffective. Forgettable. And this has created an enormous opportunity for anyone who isn't.

In my work, I spend my days asking women (and many men too) how they buy, what they buy, from whom they buy, and why they buy from certain people and businesses but not others. When I ask people to share a story with me about a great customer experience with a sales professional, I'm often met with a blank stare. "Give me more time," they'll say. "I'm sure I can come up with something."

Usually, they don't.

E-commerce has changed our perspective on buying in real life (IRL). It's become the unlikely new benchmark for flawless, *personal* service, to the extent that some women feel their online buying experiences are higher quality than their face-to-face purchase interactions. Partly, this is because e-commerce transactions eliminate many of the variables encountered in traditional sales situations. Consider a routine retail transaction: a woman

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is in the market for a new weatherproof jacket. She searches on Amazon.com and finds the exact color and size she needs. She reads the customer reviews of the product and feels confident enough to place her order. Once she does, she gets an immediate email confirmation with a thank-you message, and she's notified when the product leaves the warehouse. She gets the jacket conveniently at home, followed by a message asking for her feedback after the purchase. Later, she receives personalized recommendations for other items she might like, based on her selection of that jacket.

Now, imagine this woman walks into a store looking for the same jacket. The variables she encounters are endless. She may or may not be greeted; she may or may not get eye contact; she may or may not be actively helped; she may or may not work with an associate who has any knowledge of the product she's interested in; the jacket she wants may or may not be in stock; and she may or may not be followed up with, even when she asks an associate to tell her if the jacket can be found at another location in her size. She never hears from the store again. She buys it somewhere else instead.

It doesn't need to be this way. Here's what should have happened if the traditional store were more competitive with the online customer experience: the customer walks into a store looking for the weatherproof jacket. A sales associate gives her a friendly welcome and starts a conversation by asking about her needs. She tells him she's about to go on her first hiking trip and that she wants the right gear. The associate finds out more about her plans and learns that she will be camping too. Before you know it, he's

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recommended a jacket with thicker insulation, as well as wool socks and a backpack large enough to accommodate her supplies. The weatherproof jacket is out of stock in the color she wants, but he orders it for her and has it shipped directly to her home. The customer learns about products she didn't even know she needed and walks out of the store with more than she had intended to buy. The jacket arrives at her home a few days later, and she feels not only satisfied with her purchase but also thrilled with the retailer that provided help beyond what she'd asked.

In this scenario, the traditional retailer was able to sell more products than the online retailer because the sales associate was proactive with questions and suggestions, and provided the help and attention the customer needed. The power of asking "why" and not just "what" is a key advantage for anyone selling IRL.

Unfortunately, this is too often the exception. Some women avoid the in-person customer experience altogether due to the mere thought that an IRL sales experience might not go well, might not be efficient, might not be productive, or might even be offensive in some way. As one woman told me, "In some places, you wouldn't know who worked there if they came up and bit you—you feel like you're on your own." This explains the growing reliance on crowdsourced review sites, and it's upped the ante for every human being who earns a living by engaging customers. For sales professionals, it's critical to maintain such a strong reputation for consistently great service that people seek you out because you've eliminated a variable for them: They know they'll have a great experience with you.

Chances are, whatever you sell, there's a cheaper and/or more

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convenient option available somewhere else. This is why it's more important than ever to provide memorable person-to-person engagement. Research shows that 77 percent of consumers will choose a human over a digital capability when seeking advice.¹ And yet it seems that many companies have invested in technology while letting the "human side" of selling wither. This is one reason great IRL customer experiences are still the exception and not the rule, despite our state-of-the-art communication tools.

From a woman's standpoint, many sales experiences still fall into one of two extremes:



"Do you even want my money?"

"Stop bothering me."

The sweet spot is somewhere in the middle. At the risk of stating the obvious, people flock to businesses that hit the sweet spot with great customer experiences. Think of all those friendly people in the colorful T-shirts at Apple stores. Are they selling? Sure, they are. Does it feel like they're selling? No. It feels like they're helping. They're educating. They're offering suggestions, fixing problems, answering questions, and generally making you feel great about improving your life with their products. Visiting their stores is so enjoyable that the Fifth Avenue location in New York City is open around the clock, because why should anyone have to wait to get a shot of Apple inspiration?

One young woman told me that she loved visiting Apple stores because, "I am surrounded by people who are so knowledgeable,

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I feel empowered.” This is quite a statement when one considers how easy it would be for Apple to make its customers feel stupid, since few people know how the products work and their customer service people have the title of *geniuses*.

No matter. People walk out of an Apple store feeling smarter than when they walked in, and that is a feat of emotional engagement. The world’s most technologically advanced company has embraced the human side of selling to phenomenal effect. Apple generates more sales per square foot in its stores than any other retailer. Yes, this is partly because their products are expensive, but no one can deny that customers flock to the company’s brick-and-mortar experience as they do to few other retailers.

SELLING: WHAT’S CHANGED AND WHAT HASN’T

Engaging women consumers as powerfully as Apple connects with its customers begins with understanding some important ways the selling landscape has changed:

1. *The balance of power has flipped.* The internet has fundamentally altered the balance of power between buyers and sellers. The company or sales professional no longer “owns” all the information about a product or service. Some customers feel they know more about the products they’re interested in than the people selling them.
2. *Fast and easy have been redefined.* E-commerce, Amazon Prime, in-home digital assistants, voice technology, augmented

reality, apps, and on-demand businesses are just some of the innovations that have changed people's perceptions of convenience and speed, forcing sales professionals to compete with a differentiated offering.

3. *People need a reason to get off the couch.* In brick-and-mortar environments, such as stores and sales offices, the new imperative is to deliver the kind of personal, sensory-rich, and service-oriented experience that inspires people to leave their houses to seek it out.

The medical profession offers an interesting analogy for how things have changed for sales professionals. Imagine a physician whose patient walks into the exam room holding a stack of online research about her symptoms. Before the doctor has a chance to conduct her examination, the patient tells her she's come up with her own diagnosis, based on her research. The doctor listens to the patient before delivering her own point of view, which is based on years of medical training and practice.

In this scenario, the patient possesses information, while the physician possesses knowledge, subject-matter expertise, and the professional experience of working with thousands of other patients who've had similar symptoms. Yet because the patient has access to so much information, the conversation is different—and potentially longer and more dynamic—than it would have been pre-internet.

For sales professionals, the scenario is relatable. Often, women have already conducted some research before they meet with you.

WHAT SELLING LOOKS LIKE NOW

They may have conducted extensive research if what you're selling has a high price tag or is "high stakes" from their point of view. They've read the reviews. They've looked on social media. They've watched videos made by other customers. They've compared options, checked prices, and maybe even learned all about your professional background on LinkedIn or your company website. In this new environment, the challenge is to add value to a process that the customer feels she has already partially, or wholly, completed. This can be a difficult adjustment to make, to be sure. And, yet, it feels good to know that many fundamentals have not changed:

1. *People will always want and need to buy things.* The need for selling is not going away any time soon; success means inspiring customers to buy from you instead of someone or somewhere else.
2. *It's exciting to buy from someone who believes in what he or she is selling.* This explains the happy "buzz" at Apple stores and the high frequency of employee/customer interactions within them. There's nothing more contagious than buying from someone who has passion for their work and believes in their products.
3. *Strong interpersonal skills go a long way.* As we have seen, our definition of good service has changed because of the new standards set by e-commerce, apps, and algorithms. This means that effective communication skills are more important than ever.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women's societal roles and increased education and wealth means that they are not only the primary consumers of today, but also the primary consumers of tomorrow.
- E-commerce has changed our expectations for buying IRL and increased the importance of strong interpersonal skills and customer engagement.
- Great sales experiences are still the exception and not the rule. This creates an enormous opportunity for those who can deliver valuable experiences to customers.

ACTIVATING YOUR INSIGHTS

- Think about the best buying experience you've ever had with a sales professional. What did that professional do well that made the experience so memorable? What lessons can you apply to your own business based on that experience?
- Write down your favorite places to shop/buy/be a customer, including both e-commerce companies and traditional businesses. What are these companies doing well that you could adapt for your own business?

CHAPTER 3

**THE FOUR
MOTIVATORS
FRAMEWORK**

You want your customers to tell a story about their experience with you. What's the best way to ensure it's the story you want them to tell? Reverse engineer the customer experience to create a positive emotional outcome.

You don't have to look any further than the stock market to see how positive emotional outcomes can lead to positive financial outcomes. Generally speaking, when people feel positive and optimistic en masse, the stock market goes up. When they feel anxious, negative, or threatened en masse, it goes down. At an individual level, this happens during our customer interactions. It's how you make people feel that makes them want to work with you and buy from you.

Emotional outcomes are so essential that luxury automaker Lexus now measures them through a survey instrument. "Emotion is an important measure for loyalty," says Peggy Turner, vice president of Lexus guest retention and satisfaction. "People talk about customer satisfaction, but that's a given. We want to know: *How did we make the guest feel?*"

So, how does one reverse engineer a sales experience for a positive outcome? While every buyer is different, a good start is to recognize that customers often fall into two distinct buying styles: transactional and holistic. Transactional buying is known

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colloquially as the surgical strike. This is when you have a customer who thinks, *I know what I want. I just want to get it from you and get on with my life.*

Holistic buying refers to a “big picture” buying style in which the customer is engaged in multiple aspects of the experience beyond product and price.¹ These elements include such things as their enjoyment working with you, the appeal of your sales environment, and long-term considerations, such as service after the sale. Here’s a snapshot of transactional versus holistic buying styles:

Transactional vs. Holistic Buying

Transactional Buying	Holistic Buying
Shop for a single item	Shop comprehensively—what else goes with this item?
Evaluating the product only	Evaluating the product <i>and</i> the sales experience, including the salesperson interaction
Thinking, “ <i>Will this work for me?</i> ”	Thinking, “ <i>Will this work for everyone else too?</i> ”
Lower expectations for attentive service	Higher expectations for attentive service
Information seekers	Information and <i>inspiration</i> seekers

Someone can be a holistic buyer one moment and a transactional buyer the next. What “mode” that buyer is in when she’s

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with you can depend on everything from how busy she is that day to how emotionally invested she is (or isn't) in your product. Frequently, women find themselves in a holistic buying mode for two reasons. First, because their role as chief purchasing officers for their households adds layers of complexity to their decision-making.

Women may be thinking about factors such as time constraints, due to the “second shift” of unpaid work they perform in their households and for their extended families. They're often considering other people's wants and needs and view buying decisions through those lenses. They may be thinking about the potential that they will have to return a purchase if something goes wrong—even when the product is for someone else in their household—and what that will mean in terms of further time expended, and perhaps a negative experience after the fact. So as they approach buying, women want their purchases to go right the first time and will look for ways to make these responsibilities as pleasant and productive as possible.

The second reason women are often holistic buyers is that from an early age, women are taught a “big picture” buying style. For example, a woman may think about buying not just a shirt, but an outfit; not just a main course, but side dishes and dessert; not just a bedspread, but matching sheets and pillows. This is why many women will be interested in learning about other products or services that “go with” what you're selling. This buying style has a highly practical aspect: it's more efficient, and often more satisfying, to buy complementary products together, rather than make separate trips or multiple transactions. Women also may

perceive that the value of such purchases is higher, because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

If you master the experience for holistic buyers, you'll naturally please your transactional buyers too, by giving them an experience they may not have been looking for or expecting, but are happy to receive nonetheless. Appealing to holistic buyers means adjusting your style accordingly, with an approach I've developed called The Four Motivators® Framework.

INTRODUCING THE FOUR MOTIVATORS FRAMEWORK

There are so many things you can't control about your work. To name just three: the economy, the pace of technology, and the weather. You could probably come up with fifty more. Happily, you are in control of what is arguably the most important factor of all: your customer's experience.

Based on more than a dozen years of consumer research, I've identified four key motivators that influence women's buying decisions. Following the framework of these four motivators will help you develop strategies to appeal to women consumers more effectively. Ideally, your customers want to feel:

- *connected* to you, your brand, and your business,
- *inspired* to buy from you,
- *confident* in their buying decision, and
- *appreciated* for their business.

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These motivators can serve as your guidepost for winning women's business. While you may never hear a customer use these specific words, they are the positive emotional outcomes that can help you earn more sales and referrals when they're achieved. Throughout the rest of this book, you'll find dozens of strategies for activating the four motivators, which you can consider your "toolbox," to mix, match, and add to at will.

As a professional, you already know there is never one way to win someone's business. Sales is a different job every day, every hour, and with every customer. Success involves a combination of knowledge, savvy judgment, and your own personality and style. With that in mind, I've included tips and best practices from big businesses, small businesses, and individual sales professionals, all designed to inspire your creativity. To get your ideas flowing, let's start with a best practice from an unexpected source: a professional football team.

BEST PRACTICE

Minnesota Vikings

Champions of Emotional Engagement

Most people may not think of a professional football game as a *customer experience*, but the Minnesota Vikings sure do. In 2016, this National Football League team completed construction of U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, which was the site of Super Bowl 52 in 2018. In addition to building an architectural marvel,

the organization made it a priority to create an inclusive fan experience at every touchpoint. A look at how one professional sports team delivers an experience that encompasses all four motivators is a compelling example for any business.

Most professional sports fans will never set foot in a stadium, which poses an interesting challenge for teams with global fan bases. “Only 4 percent of all the people in the world who call themselves Vikings fans will ever come into U.S. Bank Stadium,” says Kevin Warren, chief operating officer for the Minnesota Vikings. “So when we are fortunate that a fan decides to spend their resources and come support us, we have to make sure that we capture their mind, their spirit, their heart and their soul by over-servicing them, because that might be the only time they ever enter our building. We need to create an experience that lasts for the remainder of their lives. It is an incredible responsibility.”

Warren thinks big about the fan experience. He strives to make every game day at U.S. Bank Stadium so remarkable that it could inspire someone from out of town to move to Minnesota. He has what I would call radical empathy for fans. “When someone comes into our stadium, it is not only *them* coming in,” says Warren. “They are bringing all these other people with them, in spirit, who are not physically present. When they go back home, they are either going to say, ‘This was the best experience of my life,’ or they will say it was an awful experience.

“That said,” he continues, “we need to make sure that we have the proper food; that the seats are comfortable; that we accommodate any fan regardless of their income level or background; that we accommodate families; that we have merchandise and ap-

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parel for everyone, and that the apparel fits right; that we have places where women can breastfeed their children in privacy. We have built a sensory room in the stadium for young people who are dealing with autism and other sensory challenges. We want to make every member of our diverse fan base feel comfortable and enjoy what it means to be a member of the Minnesota Vikings.”

The Vikings do an exceptional job of engaging with the various demographics within their fan base and, in particular, their female fans. Women make up 45 percent of the National Football League fan base² and nearly 50 percent of Vikings ticket holders.³ It makes sense, then, that there is an emphasis on delivering experiences that delight this group and cater to their needs. For example, the Vikings made history by becoming the first team in the National Football League to place Mamava lactation pods in their stadium to provide private nursing areas for breastfeeding women. The pods were a hit: demand was so strong that the initiative was expanded to include a dedicated mother’s room in the stadium. “Having witnessed the positive response and increased demand for the lactation suites, we strongly believed the addition of the Mother’s Room was another critical step in building a family-friendly environment at U.S. Bank Stadium,” says Warren.⁴

The organization has also been intentional about elevating the voices and participation of women within its business operations. In 2016, a women’s advisory board of leading female executives (yours truly is on it) was formally created to maximize the team’s engagement with women fans. The Vikings organization counts women among its senior leaders. A twenty-one-year veteran of the Vikings, Tami Hedrick, has a director-level role dedicated to

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driving full inclusiveness of women throughout the organization, both internally and externally, through an initiative called “Vikings Women.” “It’s a holistic approach to engaging women, who are integral to the Vikings’ success,” says Hedrick. There are Vikings Women events held regularly throughout the year; Vikings Women merchandise and apparel fills the team stores; and there are on-going social media efforts to reach women fans. Hedrick and her team also run a year-round calendar of engagement and leadership activities for women in the Vikings organization.

The result of the Minnesota Vikings’ inclusive strategy is the four motivators in action: women fans feel *connected*, *inspired*, *confident*, and *appreciated* because the organization

- **connects** through the visible way the team reaches out to women in the stadium, the community, and internally within its organization,
- **inspires** by creating an inclusive fan experience,
- **instills confidence** that attending a game will be worth the ticket price and effort to get there, and
- **shows appreciation** by offering amenities and accommodation for every type of fan . . . even newborns!

BRINGING THE FOUR MOTIVATORS FRAMEWORK TO LIFE IN YOUR PHYSICAL SPACE

The Vikings activate the four motivators in multiple ways throughout their business, but one key focus is the intentionality they

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take with their physical space. This is something every business can work on. Stadiums notwithstanding, there are plenty of ways your physical environment can bring the four motivators to life, whether you operate a retail space or work in a professional office that customers visit.

The décor in professional offices is often overlooked, but it can make an enormous impression on how you're perceived. Scratched-up metal desks, bulging file cabinets, and bare walls can leave customers feeling that a business isn't current, or even competent. For proof of how much office design matters, look no further than the success of the co-working company WeWork. It's achieved a \$20 billion market cap⁵ (as of this writing) by not only tapping into the desire for flexible workspaces, but also by elevating the décor, ambiance, and community feel of shared offices, creating spaces that are so appealing people are willing to pay a premium to sit in them all day.

Everything in your physical space is either a customer-experience builder or a detractor. Consider stores: at their most basic, they're four walls and a ceiling. What makes some of them so enticing that we want to experience them again and again, while others we only visit under duress? It's the environment, of course, that stew of ambiance created by lighting, textures, colors, merchandise, scent, cleanliness, sound, comfort, and the energy given off by employees. Women especially tend to notice and value the details in retail environments.

As one woman told me, "When I walk into Whole Foods, I feel an immediate reaction. I'm not sure if it's serotonin or dopamine. The store is so colorful and organized—it's a total 360-degree feel-good experience."

With so much of our time spent staring at devices, compelling physical environments are more important now than ever. Just as movie-theater owners are creating new experiences by providing amenities such as restaurant-quality table service and pre-reserved reclining seats, every business with a physical environment must evolve its space so that women feel connected, inspired, confident, and appreciated. How do you get started? Here are four important principles to follow:

1. *Provide a sensory experience.* For the most part, it's still difficult to touch, taste, or smell anything through a screen. This means brick-and-mortar businesses have what I call a "home-court advantage": the opportunity to engage all five senses within a physical environment.
2. *Bring your brand to life.* Research shows that a strong brand and physical environment make a significant contribution to converting sales, even when a transaction is eventually registered online.⁶ People who feel inspired by a great in-person experience may ultimately decide to execute their purchase at a company's website after they've left the physical store or place of business. This brings a new imperative for stores and professional offices to become the physical embodiment of a brand experience, more than simply a place to buy things.
3. *Demonstrate hospitality.* Physical acts, such as having staff members walk a customer down an aisle (instead of merely pointing them in a direction), offering refreshments, and engaging them in conversations that help them make better

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buying decisions, leave customers with an indelible memory of appreciation, long after the purchase was made.

4. *Facilitate show-and-tell.* Most of us learned about the power of show-and-tell as kids. The concept can be applied successfully across all kinds of physical spaces. Sephora is a great example of a brand that leverages show-and-tell. The brand's stores are a playground for experimentation and a radical departure from a century of locked-behind-a-counter beauty experiences. In an industry where trial is such a crucial part of the purchasing decision, the experience at Sephora leaves customers feeling confident about committing to a purchase in a crowded category. We'll learn more about how Sephora wins women's business in chapter 6.

Maybe you're thinking, *Well, sure, Sephora can create an engaging experience for women, because they sell beauty products. I don't sell female-specific products. What can I do?* Let's look at the transformation of a truck stop for more insights into the value of strategically incorporating the four motivators in a physical space.

BEST PRACTICE

Pilot Flying J

When a Truck Stop Is Worth the Stop

When I say the words “truck stop,” what image comes to mind? I guarantee it's not the one you'll see when you visit the newly

redesigned travel centers from Pilot Flying J. Pilot Travel Centers LLC, better known as Pilot Flying J, is the largest operator of travel centers (also known as truck stops) in North America. Many people started paying closer attention to the company in 2017, when Berkshire Hathaway, led by Warren Buffett, announced that it would be making a significant investment in the firm.⁷ The Tennessee-based company has 750 locations spread across forty-four states and six Canadian provinces that cater to both professional truck drivers and “four wheelers”—regular car drivers like you and me. Most of us “four wheelers” don’t think about making a roadside stop until we need one. But what if a travel center was so appealing that you looked forward to stopping in?

Pilot Flying J recently embarked on a five-year, \$500 million customer-experience makeover to broaden its appeal to a growing customer base that includes more women and “four wheelers” than ever before: traveling families, married truck-driving teams, and business travelers. I toured one of the company’s newly redesigned Pilot travel centers in Lebanon, Tennessee, and what I saw was the four motivators in action.

“People want to emotionally connect with how they feel in your store,” says Whitney Haslam Johnson, chief experience officer for Pilot Flying J, who served as my tour guide. Haslam Johnson is a member of the Haslam family that founded, and still runs, the business. “We don’t want it to feel like a truck stop,” she says. “Life is hard enough, busy enough, crazy enough. How can we make it easy and efficient for you?”

Like U.S. Bank Stadium, the refurbished Pilot Travel Centers are designed to create a positive emotional connection with every

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customer who walks in the door. However, unlike a football stadium, Pilot Flying J stores must cater to the needs of transactional buyers—people who want to get in and out quickly so they can get back on the road—as well as holistic buyers—people who might come into the store to engage in the only relaxing break, hot meal, and social interaction they’ll have all day (these are often professional truck drivers). For our purposes, we’ll focus on the changes made in the store to enhance the experience for the four-wheel crowd, which increasingly includes women.

Throughout history, food has been a conduit for emotions, and in the new Pilot Flying J stores, food offerings are front and center—only not the kind you would imagine from a “truck stop.” The first thing you see when you walk in the door is a “chef,” an employee wearing a chef’s smock, who is standing in an open kitchen, stirring large pots on a stove and personally serving hot meals to customers. After absorbing that pleasant surprise, you hear the unmistakable sound and notice the scent of coffee bean grinders. Pilot Flying J has installed bean-to-cup coffee machines, which means that every cup of coffee is made with freshly ground beans. During each morning’s rush hour, a “coffee host” stands nearby to assist customers in making selections.

Fruit and healthy foods, such as salads and wraps, are in prime position at the store’s entrance, under the brand’s label, PJ Fresh. LED lighting brightens the display cases and makes the merchandise pop. The lighting sounds like a small thing, but it’s a big thing: it makes the store feel bright, modern, and fresh.

The attention to detail extends to the restrooms, which are a critical amenity for women. “If the restroom experience is bad,

we may lose a customer,” says Haslam Johnson. “It’s their first impression. When we look at customer feedback, we know that the bathroom is really important for women and people traveling with children.” I toured the bathroom and saw a warm, immaculately clean space filled with Italian glass and tile, a full-length mirror, hooks for hanging bags and purses, and child seats. I noticed the sign for the women’s bathroom wasn’t a sign at all: it was a large photo of a woman at the wheel of a car, hair blowing in the breeze.

Another element Pilot Flying J has invested in is LED lighting in both its parking lots and its canopies to create a well-lit atmosphere and increase safety and comfort. The company has also invested in buying real estate near highway exits. As Haslam Johnson puts it, “No one wants to exit and then drive for miles in the dark.” These are the kind of innovations that show women that you’re committed to providing them with a positive experience. When you incorporate insights from women, such as safety concerns, you elevate the experience for everyone. After all, men want to be safe too.

To complete the customer experience, Pilot Flying J has the goal of sending off every customer with a personal goodbye. The store’s general manager, Hunter Brock, describes it this way: “We make sure there’s a greeting when you walk in, a departing comment when you leave, and a conversation in the middle.”

The newly redesigned stores at Pilot Flying J are an example of the four motivators in action. Through their physical space, Pilot Flying J

- **connects** by having staff members greet customers as they walk through the door and say goodbye as they leave,

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- *inspires* by providing an unexpectedly high level of food and drink choices, cleanliness, and in-store ambiance,
 - *instills confidence* by lighting travel centers well and locating them close to highway exits, so customers know they won't have to drive too far off the road to get there, and
 - *shows appreciation* for its customers by providing healthy food options, immaculate restrooms with thoughtful amenities, and women-specific merchandise on store shelves.
-

By looking at practical examples from industry leaders like Pilot Flying J, you'll be able to use your creativity to infuse the four motivators into your own business. The next four chapters will provide you with dozens of tools and techniques to make your customers feel more connected, inspired, confident, and appreciated.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Customers often fall into two different buying styles: transactional and holistic. By aligning the buying experience for holistic buyers, you're likely to increase the appeal to women consumers, who often find themselves in this mode. You'll also be giving transactional buyers an experience they didn't expect but are happy to receive.

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- The Four Motivators Framework can serve as your guidepost for creating positive emotional outcomes for your customers. Ideally, customers want to feel
 - *connected* to you, your brand, and your business,
 - *inspired* to buy from you,
 - *confident* in their buying decisions, and
 - *appreciated* for their business.
- The Minnesota Vikings and Pilot Flying J show us that providing an inclusive experience for women enhances the experience for every customer.

ACTIVATING YOUR INSIGHTS

- Thinking about your own business and sales style, which motivators are your greatest strengths? Which need the most work?
 - My ability to connect
 - My ability to inspire
 - My ability to make customers feel confident
 - My proactivity in showing appreciation
- Imagine your customer is talking to a friend. Your customer tells her friend, "You *have* to work with [YOU], because _____." What are the reasons you'd like the customer to give? How many can you come up with that don't involve price?

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- Evaluate your business environment by seeing it through the lens of women customers. Answer the following questions, which reflect some of the things women may be noticing when they enter your place of business:
 - Does this place feel bright and modern?
 - Is the space clean?
 - Did I get a friendly welcome when I walked in?
 - Do the people here make me feel comfortable (i.e., are they polite and respectful)?
 - Are there any women working here?
 - Is there a place for me and/or my companions to sit down?
 - Do they cater to people with kids?
 - Do they show an interest in helping me?
 - Do the people here seem knowledgeable and trustworthy?
 - Do they offer good value for the price?
 - Can I count on them if something goes wrong with my purchase?
 - Would I want to come back here?
 - Do I feel compelled to tell my friends they need to come here?

CHAPTER 4

MOTIVATOR #1: CONNECTED

*Create an Emotional Connection
with Your Customers*

As a sales professional, you're a crucial part of your customers' buying experience just as much as, or even more than, the products and services you represent. Our first motivator, *connected*, is all about creating strong connections with your customers.

I've never once met anyone who has said, "My goal is to alienate my customers." Everyone I meet has the best intentions to treat customers equally well and believes in their heart that they do. But misunderstandings can happen that are sometimes rooted in the different life experiences men and women bring to the table. What follows are composites of three classic connection "killers" I've heard repeatedly from women buyers. As you read them, ask yourself: *Would these situations happen with male customers?*

THE UNWANTED COMPLIMENT

A young woman walks into a small furniture store to look at a sofa she's spied in the window. The place is empty except for a lone employee, who stands up and greets her by saying, "You just

made my day. I love it when a beautiful woman comes into my store.” The salesperson thinks he is establishing rapport by paying her a compliment. He assumes all women want to hear that they’re beautiful.

The compliment has the opposite effect on the customer. She freezes and is immediately uncomfortable. In her view, a comment on her appearance from a male stranger in an empty store is inappropriate and unwanted. It has nothing to do with buying a sofa. She leaves the store, and he tells himself she wasn’t serious about buying. She gets a new sofa somewhere else.

What went wrong: The sales professional lost his customer at hello. He was trained on the features and benefits of every product in the store, but in the end it didn’t matter. He failed to connect with this customer because he mistakenly believed that flattering her looks would be a good icebreaker. Understanding how to use compliments in customer interactions is important. It’s not that compliments in general are unwelcome; it’s that context, judgment, and language matter, particularly for women buyers. Did the sales professional intend for his comment to make her uncomfortable? No. But he hasn’t spent a lifetime as a woman, being judged on appearances; thus, his perspective is completely different from hers. In this context, it would have been wiser for him to compliment her great choice of sofa instead. When in doubt about whether a compliment may be received well, take the “When in Doubt” test on page 50.

THE OVER-SHARER

A woman walks into a luxury car dealership to test-drive and buy (she hopes) the car she's been researching online. She feels great when she realizes a female salesperson will be taking her on the test-drive. While she's driving the short distance, the salesperson establishes that they're both mothers of young children and starts talking about her recent divorce and her ex-husband's unwillingness to pay childcare. The customer is not interested in the sales associate's personal life and resents being forced to listen to her problems while in the car. The sales associate feels she is creating a bond with a fellow mother by sharing her personal story. She thinks, *Bonding is what women do, and now this customer has a reason to relate to me.*

By the end of the test-drive, the sales associate is still talking about her ex-husband, and the client is so exasperated she doesn't buy the new car because it would mean spending hours with the salesperson to execute the contract. She leaves and doesn't come back to the dealership. The salesperson wrongly assumes this woman was a "tire kicker" and doesn't realize her poor interpersonal skills drove her to a competitor, where she bought the very same car—no test-drive needed.

What went wrong: The customer was looking for a new car, not a new friend. This salesperson failed to walk the line between connecting with her customer by finding something in common and chasing her away by over-sharing personal information. We'll cover how to walk that fine line between "too much" and

“not enough” through what I call the “boomerang strategy” on page 70.

THE “NO QUESTIONS ASKED” BAD LISTENER

A mature woman sits down for an introductory phone call with a prospective financial advisor. Right off the bat, the advisor talks nonstop about his experience, his perspective on the market, and the pros and cons of specific financial products. He talks so much she can't interject a word, and after what feels like forever, she starts to tune him out. He has yet to ask her a single question about her goals or what she's looking for, and he is talking about products that are irrelevant to her needs. She cuts the call short and hangs up the phone, and he never hears from her again. He is left with the impression that she wasn't serious about engaging an advisor. She was.

What went wrong: This advisor spent too much time talking about himself and not enough time listening to his customer. Little did he know, this customer had decades of investing experience. His intention was to establish his credentials, but by dominating the conversation for so long and not asking questions early enough, he conveyed that if he were her advisor, she wouldn't be listened to or taken seriously. Active listening is key to winning in the women's market for any sales professional, and we'll cover multiple strategies for demonstrating this skill.

Each of these well-intentioned professionals had hoped to connect with his or her customers, and the customers had hoped to

MOTIVATOR #1: CONNECTED

buy something. The sales professionals were unable to engage—and subsequently earn the business—because their ideas about how to connect with women were based on stereotypes, such as the idea that complimenting a woman on her looks is sure to win her over, or that aggressively displaying one's expertise is more important than listening. To effectively engage with modern women, we need to drop the stereotypes and learn what it really takes to connect. Here are some old assumptions to avoid:

- *Don't assume your customer is married, no matter her age or motherhood status.* Marriage rates are lower than they've ever been, due to factors such as high divorce rates, the cultural acceptance of cohabitating, and the increase in diverse, nontraditional family structures.
- *Don't assume that if your customer is married, she has the same last name as her spouse.* Many women keep their maiden names upon marriage.
- *Don't assume your married customer is not the breadwinner.* As we see in the numbers mentioned in the previous chapter, women are increasingly the primary income earners for their households.
- *Don't assume her partner or spouse is a man.* In the United States, same-sex marriage is legal in all fifty states.
- *Don't assume that all married women are mothers.* There are more adults than ever who do not have kids; there are also many who have them later in life. I've interviewed women who were mistaken for their children's nannies or even their grandmothers.

WINNING HER BUSINESS

To help you in this area even further, here are some of the conversational “watch-outs” to avoid:

- When you find out a woman is childless, don’t probe for reasons why, unless the information is needed to help her make a buying decision. Otherwise, respect her privacy in this area. Some women are childless by chance, and others are childless by choice. One way to respectfully learn about your customers’ lifestyles—male or female—is to address topics such as what a typical day looks like for them, who lives in their households, or who else might use a product they’re interested in buying.
- Don’t say, “I guess you’re more of a career person, right?” to a woman who doesn’t have kids, for the same reasons as above.
- If you meet a woman who tells you she has one child, do not ask, “Don’t you want your child to have a brother or sister?”

Regardless of your good intentions, do your best to avoid making comments that your customers could interpret as judgments about their personal lives.

TAKE THE “WHEN IN DOUBT” TEST

All of these comments fail my “When in Doubt” test for personal remarks: this is an inclusivity test in which you ask yourself, *Would I say this to a man?* Our furniture salesman from the beginning of this chapter would fail this test, because it’s unlikely he

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would ever comment on a male customer's attractiveness. It's also unlikely someone would say, "I guess you're more of a career person" to a man with a job. While there are no definitive rules on these matters, here's a helpful guideline: *If you wouldn't say something to a male customer in a million years, think twice before saying it to a woman.* Of course, there are exceptions—especially when it comes to appearance-related compliments in the fashion and beauty industries—but the bottom line is that your customer wants to feel that you're helping her make the best choice and not judging her on aspects of her life that have nothing to do with what you're selling.

Now that we've covered some of the "watch-outs," what should be done instead? What are the modern protocols for connecting with women buyers? The pages ahead will give you strategies for enhancing your connection, and best practices from some of the individuals and companies that do it best. There's no end to the possibilities for creating deeper and longer-lasting customer connections. For instance, let's look at how one extraordinary Chicago dental practice connects with its patients.

BEST PRACTICE

Always There Dental Care

Connecting Against All Odds

Everyone remembers being afraid of going to the dentist as a kid. For many people, that fear never goes away. Imagine what life

must be like for dentists, whose livelihoods depend on building such strong connections with patients that they're willing to overcome their fears to come back on a regular basis.

Women make 80 percent of health-care decisions for their families.¹ The decision to settle on a long-term health-care provider, like a dentist, is based on many factors, from insurance acceptance to office location, reputation, and, naturally, the quality of the patient experience. Scott Stiffle, DDS, founded the Chicago-based dental practice Always There Dental Care in 1983. It's a practice that doesn't just have patients; it has *fans* who sometimes stop by to hang out at the office—even when they don't have an appointment—because the atmosphere and people are so much fun. Is this typical? No. Do *you* hang out at your dentist's office?

Stiffle, known to his patients as Dr. Scott, connects in a unique way—through music. Specifically, rock music. Walking into his practice is like entering a party in which everyone is glad you came. Dr. Stiffle and his business partner, Jeffrey Wojno, DDS, use music, art, humor, and even clothing to connect with patients, to help them overcome their fears and put them at ease. Rock songs play throughout the office at a low hum. Modern art and black-and-white photographs of musicians hang on the walls. The staff wears black T-shirts under their lab coats that feature playful, dental-meets-rock themes, such as “Plaque Sabbath,” “Gums & Roses,” and “For Those About to Floss, We Salute You.” The T-shirt slogans were started by Dr. Stiffle but now come from patients. There are always contests for new ones, and the patients seem to wear the T-shirts as much as the staff members do, because the

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practice gives them away. Longtime patients aspire to collect new ones as soon as they're "issued."

As people lie down in their dental chairs, television screens above them flash pictures of patients wearing their Always There Dental Care rock 'n' roll T-shirts, smiling and waving at the camera. In one picture, a patient is wearing her T-shirt over her wedding dress. Another picture captures a patient wearing his T-shirt underwater, with a snorkel in his mouth. The photo caption is always the same: "We have the world's best patients." Dr. Stiffle takes patients' requests for songs. He makes playlists. He sings along as he bounces from chair to chair. You can hear his laughter across the office.

The informal atmosphere is all part of a strategy designed to connect with patients and exorcise fear. "We cure people of anxiety," says Dr. Stiffle. "Formality is a barrier, so we have a casual atmosphere to make patients feel good. We show you that you're not alone. We honor your anxiety and the fact that you're here in the office and made it through our door. Once you walk through it, we're going to take that anxiety away. I'm going to own it, not you," he says.

If you're guessing Dr. Stiffle must be a millennial, he's not. He's in his sixties.

Dr. Stiffle and his team reinforce the connection by making patient education a priority. The philosophy that "a healthy body begins with a healthy mouth" is emblazoned throughout the office and constantly reinforced. The staff enthusiastically uses show-and-tell models of teeth to explain the *why* behind dental procedures. "It's amazing how many people have been patients in other

offices for years, and they don't know anything about the *why* behind their treatments," says Dr. Stiffle. "The consequences of not knowing the why are huge. Our view is that we're not just saving teeth; we're putting years on your life. This is why education is paramount in our office. We don't tell our patients what to do; we empower them with information so that they can make sound choices for themselves. And owning that information allows the patient to distribute it to their friends and family outside the office. It's our greatest marketing tool."

Always There Dental Care's five-star online reviews would be the envy of any small business. Behind the casual atmosphere is a practice that runs with the precision of a military operation. The staff is rigorously trained, appointments start and end on time, and the practice constantly invests in the latest technology, so much that new patients are routinely given tours of the firm's latest acquisitions. The team has mastered the art of connecting with patients through both the physical environment (place) and staff interaction (people). Like true professionals, they do it so well they make it look easy. But if it were, there might be fewer people afraid of visiting the dentist.

MASTERING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CONNECTION

Connecting with customers can be done any number of ways, and you should feel free to get creative, as Dr. Stiffle and his staff have done. But first, let's address some straightforward

techniques and strategies that can help build a strong foundation for connection.

Give a friendly welcome with eye contact every time.

I know what you're thinking. *Really? You have to spell this out?* I wish I didn't. It's so obvious, but I challenge you to count how many times a week you receive a friendly welcome and eye contact as a customer, whether you're at the grocery store, your local bank, or the reception desk at someone's office. Friendly greetings and eye contact are common sense, but not common practice. So often, customers are simply ignored.

Women in particular associate eye contact with listening and respect. Eye contact doesn't mean staring, of course. It's more about acknowledgment. In a world with so much choice and competition, few people need to spend a single minute (or a single dollar) with any person or business that makes them feel unwelcome or unappreciated. When you're working with couples, be sure to distribute your eye contact evenly.

From a retail standpoint, I've interviewed countless women who've told me that they've entered a store to buy something, only to leave empty-handed because they couldn't find what they were looking for and no one acknowledged or helped them. They invariably say the same three words: "I gave up."

Be wary of opening a conversation with price.

When you meet a customer and your very first question is, "How much do you want to spend?" it can box you both into a corner before you've had the opportunity to learn about her needs.

Asking questions about needs is often the ideal starting point for conversations, and it allows you to position yourself as a resource and guide. Then the customer is likely to mention her comfort with price as you demonstrate options and ranges. *It's important to recognize that for women, the concept of value doesn't necessarily mean the lowest-priced option; it means that whatever they bought was worth more than they paid for it.* This is where service elements can play a huge role. As one research participant told me, "If something makes my life easier, I will pay for better service. For instance, if I was buying furniture, I'd ask, 'Will you haul my old sofa away? Will you help set it up?' If nothing is different, I'll go for the lower price."

Ask icebreaker questions that invite conversation.

If you're in a retail environment and see a customer looking at a product, one way to open up a conversation is to say something like:

- "Unusual, isn't it?"
- "Interesting, isn't it?"
- "[*Insert other adjective here*], isn't it?"

Even though these are technically "closed-ended" questions, they offer a simple way to start a dialogue and connect. They can feel less intrusive to the customer because the commentary is directed at an object and not the person.

Incorporate elements of hospitality where you can.

I recently walked into a small, independent shop in which I was asked, "Would you like a cappuccino?" It was a delicious surprise.

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Yet, when you consider the proliferation of single-serve coffee machines, it's simple enough to offer. Even the shop owner's use of the word "cappuccino" instead of "coffee" conjured up an image of luxury, and also subtly communicated, "I won't be serving you coffee that's been sitting in a carafe for three hours." Most importantly, it set the tone for me to stay in the store and linger. There's no doubt: refreshments, comfortable seating, and a warm welcome are simple ways to enhance the customer experience at all kinds of business and retail environments. It's worked for human beings for thousands of years. What can you do in your own space?²

Don't let your teammates sabotage your good impression.

For better or worse, your coworkers are a reflection of your company, your brand, and by extension, you. Ensure that everyone in your office or sales environment knows the importance of treating—or at a minimum, acknowledging—customers as you would, whether or not the employees are personally working with them. All staff are an important part of the cumulative impression being made, particularly for holistic buyers.

Double down on the experience for first-time customers.

Every first-time customer is like a small miracle: out of all the things they could be doing that day, out of all the places they could be, out of all the companies they could buy from, they're buying from you. What can you do to make that first-time experience so satisfying they'll want to return again and again? Marshal

your resources, for one thing. Take a cue from businesses such as high-end restaurants, where managers often create visual cues to alert staff about first-timers. These cues might be a different-colored napkin at the table, a different centerpiece, or a special order code. The idea is to make sure that every team member recognizes the first-time customer and does their best to make a positive impression. Can you do something similar with your first-timers?

Don't just welcome—welcome back.

If you work with returning customers, using the words, “Welcome back,” instead of simply, “Welcome,” is a powerful form of recognition. It's human nature to want to be recognized. I once worked with a woman who went to her favorite restaurant every week for half-price wine night. She eventually stopped going because, despite making a weekly appearance for an entire year and loving the food, she was never recognized by a host or server. She couldn't take it anymore. She told me, “What is the point of being a regular if no one recognizes you?”

**“Nice to see you” is often better than
“Nice to meet you.”**

This is especially true if you think you may have met the person before. It's a safer choice.

Clarify name pronunciations and spelling.

If your customer is Erika with a *k* or Jazmine with a *z* or has an unusual name, you'd better believe she will notice and be impressed

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when you spell it and pronounce it right. Some people feel embarrassed to ask customers how to pronounce their names, and then won't use the customer's name in conversation to avoid making a mistake. This is self-defeating. When you ask for clarification, you can simply say, "I want to make sure I'm pronouncing it properly." Your customer will appreciate that you care about pronouncing it right. Clarifying name spelling is always important, even with names you feel you know well. For example, a name might be spelled Michelle or Michele. Spelling a name correctly sounds like a small detail, but if you don't do it, women may think, *If they can't get my name right, what else are they going to get wrong?* On the flip side, when you get it right, they're likely to think, *Wow, this person is really on top of things.* For women, the little things are the big things. When you get the small details right, it signals that your customers can trust you with the bigger things—like their money.

Find an easy connection.

There's a reason so many hotel front-desk staff wear name tags emblazoned with the person's hometown or state. It's an easy point of connection with customers. "You're from Arizona? I love Arizona!" Wearing a name tag that advertises where you're from may not be appropriate for most jobs, but the idea behind finding commonality is a good one. Typically, women are looking for what they have in common with someone. If you have an office, strategically place plenty of material your customers can connect with—memorabilia, pictures of nature or family, an interesting piece of art, and so on. I interviewed one young sales professional who doesn't have kids, who reported that she keeps a photo of

herself with her nieces and nephews on her desk because it gives a point of connection with customers who enjoy talking about their children and grandchildren. Keeping up with current events is another great way to make easy connections.

Find a connection through business profiles of your customers and prospects.

In B2B sales, there's almost no excuse for not knowing something about an individual before you engage with her, if she has a business profile online. In addition to finding people and interests you may have in common, reading someone's business posts can give you an opportunity to connect in a more natural way than might not otherwise be possible. "Even something as simple as, 'I really enjoyed that article that you shared on LinkedIn; here are a few of the things I liked about it' means that suddenly you're in a conversation that has relevance to that person," says Justin Shriber, vice president of marketing for LinkedIn Sales and Marketing Solutions. Business profiles typically contain information on someone's education, career history, interests, and awards, giving you plenty of fodder with which to connect.

"On time" means a few minutes early.

No one ever intends to be late, but we've all heard that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Being late by even one minute is noticeable to everyone now, since all our mobile phones are synchronized. In an ideal world, customers will never wait for you. Arriving early to appointments and meetings is one of the most important ways to demonstrate respect for someone's

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time. The same rule applies for conference calls. Make it your practice—if you don't already—to dial in five minutes early, and try to be the first on the line every time. Don't trip out of the starting blocks by showing up *after* your customer. Another good rule of thumb is to reconfirm how much time your customer has at the start of a call or meeting, and check in with that customer—"How are we doing on time?"—as you near the end of the time she's allotted. If you've sent someone a calendar invitation for a call from 10:00 to 10:30 a.m., it's a good idea to verbalize at 10:25 that, out of respect for her time, you'll begin wrapping up. If you need more time, ask if she's willing and able to go longer.

I'll never forget the time I mystery-shopped a mattress retailer, and the salesperson said to me, "How much time do you have to look around?" I replied that I had ten minutes. We started chatting about products and, before I knew it, she said, "According to my watch, you have three minutes left of your ten minutes. How are we doing on time?" I was blown away. I thought to myself, *This woman respects my time more than I do!* As a result, I willingly gave her more of it. Asking, "How are we doing on time?" is a technique that's especially useful for phone calls and conference calls, where you can't physically see your customer's level of engagement.

Let customers know you're looking forward to seeing them.

People like people who like them . . . so show it! Companies in the travel industry do an excellent job of sending customers messages in advance of trips that not only remind them about

their departure and arrival dates, but tell them that they're looking forward to seeing them and preparing for their arrival. It helps to drive an emotional connection, and it could be replicated any number of ways in other industries.

Ask discovery questions with purpose.

We all know that discovery questions are meant to uncover someone's needs and qualify them. While it's important to ask such questions, you don't want your customer to feel as if she's being interrogated. A way to avoid this is to make sure every question has a purpose, so you can tell your customer why you're asking. Context is important to holistic buyers.

Focus on the future.

When you're talking with a prospect or client, you may be firmly in the present—or, as they say in yoga class, *in the moment*—but she may be drifting off into the future as she listens to you. Even if she doesn't mention it, she's probably thinking about what buying your product will mean to her future state. Will it help her sleep better at night? Will it solve a nagging problem? Will it earn her more money, more prestige? Will she look like a hero for choosing it? Will it make her happier? Will it make the people close to her happier? Will it improve her quality of life? Save her money? She wants your product or service to do something positive for her future; otherwise, she wouldn't be buying it.

So there she is, with her mind in the future and her body in the present, either physically in front of you or at the other end of a phone/email/text or chat screen. If she's in the future,

that's where you want to be too. You can travel there by painting a picture of what her life would be like if she owned your product. Think about ways to use future tense in your conversations, to help your customers visualize ownership. We'll dive more deeply into how to do this in the Lexus best practice on page 118.

In B2B settings, give your customer a chance to speak first.

In B2B sales meetings, potential vendors are often scheduled to pitch for long stretches of time: from thirty to sixty minutes, or even longer for complex deals. After introductions and before launching into your pitch, consider taking a moment to pause and ask the clients, "Is there anything you'd like to say before we begin?" This important question may elicit new information that affects the way you position your offerings.

Feel free to take notes.

When was the last time someone took notes when you started speaking? I bet it made an impression. I know it always does for me. While it may not be appropriate for every sales environment, taking notes shows your customer that you're actively listening and that her words are important enough to write down. This simple act serves a dual purpose, because it also allows you to record all kinds of customer details. Later, your customer will be impressed that you "remember" these details. If you have access to a good customer-relationship management (CRM) system, leverage it to the fullest.

Find out your customer's most important priority.

Asking your customer her most important priority can help make your conversations more efficient, and, if the customer is responsive, guide you on how to serve her best. For example, I speak at a lot of conferences, and my top question for meeting planners is always, “What would make my presentation a home run for you?” Their answers provide me with an important blueprint on how to meet—and hopefully exceed—their expectations.

If you look at a screen, it's helpful if your customers can see it too.

It's likely that most of your customers are carrying a phone on their person, perhaps visibly in front of you. Looking at screens is now a part of our common “language.” If you have a customer sit at your desk while you're using a computer, try to angle the screen so she can see it too—if the information is appropriate for her to see—or risk having her turn on her own screen and focus on that instead of you.

Turn up your empathy.

The term *mirroring* is used frequently in sales-training programs, but I believe *empathy* is the more appropriate word to describe adapting your manner to the person or people with whom you're interacting. It's a matter of paying attention to your customer's body language, eye contact, energy level, and words. When you do this, it makes it easier to approach your customer in a way that connects.

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For example, if you're working with a customer who has a low-key demeanor, don't turn her off by overpowering her with personality. As an extroverted person, this is a constant challenge for me. But I've learned that if I can start at my customer's energy level, I can slowly dial it up from there.

Whether you realize it or not, your place of business has an energy level too. One funeral director I spoke with told me she's had to instruct her busy staff to never run through the funeral home as they move from one office to another, because running and looking stressed can be disruptive to grieving people who are seeking and expecting a peaceful atmosphere.

Consider the energy level of your sales environment. Customers pick up on it, and it can either help connect with them or alienate them.

Humor can diffuse stressful situations.

Depending on the business environment, light humor can also help a customer feel better about a negative experience. I interviewed a woman named Courtney, who works in the service department of a car dealership and routinely serves customers who've had car accidents that were their own fault. When she meets customers, they are often "devastated and embarrassed," says Courtney. "I tell them, 'Welcome to the club. You aren't the first person this has happened to.' Or I'll use humor: 'The curb attacked you!' I'll make them laugh, put them at ease, tell them it happens to the best of us. I try to take the tension down a notch."

Identify “absent influencers.”

Sometimes the most important person in a sale is not the customer standing in front of you; it’s the person your customer is thinking about. For example, I once interviewed a woman who was in the market for a new bed for her guest room. Even though the bed would only be used a few times a year, she was willing to pay for a quality product that would meet the criteria of her most frequent visitor: her mother. Because her mother lived in another state, she did not accompany this woman on her shopping trips for a new bed. Her mother was an “absent influencer” on the sale. This scenario is fairly common, especially with women, since they buy on behalf of so many other people. It’s your job to discover who these absent influencers are, so you can address any concerns they may have and increase your chances of making the sale.

Use politeness strategies.

Etiquette is a primary aspect of female culture, and it’s something that women value in sales interactions. Women often notice when they *don’t* hear politeness from sales professionals. You may find a more responsive audience when you increase polite language, for example, asking questions such as “May I?” instead of “Can I?”

When communicating with customers, ask; don’t assume.

I once had an introductory lesson with a new tennis coach, and as part of my registration process, I had to fill out my phone number on a form—*No big deal*, I thought. After my first lesson—and before I had decided to commit to more of them—I was texted

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frequently by the coach about all kinds of things unrelated to his programs. I found these texts intrusive, because although I had given my phone number, he had never asked permission to text me and did not identify himself, leaving me to figure out who had sent the first few messages.

When you follow up with customers, be sure to ask for their preferred method of communication. Everyone is different: some people love email, some people still like phone calls, and others only want to receive texts. Always include your name on texts, until you know you've been added to someone's contact list. There are many regulations governing text-message marketing. Make sure you're aware of the ones that are relevant to you.

Approach "friending" with caution.

As much as you may enjoy meeting a new customer and feel as though you hit it off, think twice before friending someone with your *personal* social media accounts if she is a new customer or prospect, and you don't know her well. It's often better to stick to your professional accounts to stay connected, at least until you consider yourself to truly be friends. There are a few important reasons for this. First, you want to avoid putting your customer in an awkward position; for example, she may not want to "friend" you on Facebook and may view the request as presumptuous at best, unprofessional at worst. Then, even if she does friend you, there's a chance she might form a different opinion of you based on your personal posting history. So unless you have truly become friends with a customer, approach personal social media connections with caution. Instead, use or create separate, professional

accounts exclusively for your business, which you can invite your customers to follow. You can also maintain your connections on professional networks, such as LinkedIn, which are designed expressly for that purpose.

Don't undermine your credibility by saying phrases such as "I promise" too early.

I once walked into a store in which the sales representative greeted me by saying, "We have financing options, but I promise not to bring up money until I'm sure you're happy with your selection." I found this conversation far too premature and a little jarring because it actually *did* bring up money. Phrases like, "I promise not to bring up money," or "I promise not to sell you something you don't want," or "I promise not to overcharge you" can undermine your credibility, your pricing strategy, and the customer's trust.

Ask customers what they hate.

If you work in an industry that offers a staggering number of product choices—like home décor or fashion accessories—it can be easier to curate options by asking your customers what styles and colors they hate instead of what they like. It's an unexpected and energizing way for customers to connect with you and begin the process of elimination. This strategy also automatically puts you on their side, as you provide reassurance for their choices. This strategy can work in almost any kind of environment. For example, if you're in B2B sales, asking your prospect what she didn't like about her last service provider can be enlightening. It also might position you as a hero because, hey, at least you aren't *those* people.

Don't gossip about other customers.

This is just a reminder: don't be tempted. It only reflects poorly on you, not them. If you do this, your customers will wonder what you say about them when they're not in earshot.

Handle multiple customers with finesse.

The inability to handle multiple customers well is a common problem in both retail and busy office settings—anywhere with low staff-to-customer ratios. How many times have you stood in front of an employee who ignored you while you patiently waited for him or her to deal with someone else, without the person even looking up to acknowledge your existence? This kind of behavior can make customers' blood boil. Most of the time, people will have patience as long as they're briefly acknowledged with eye contact and an upheld index finger that suggests the person will be with them shortly, or a whispered, "I'll be with you in just a moment." Basic acknowledgment is the simple solution.

Be kid and companion friendly.

Your customer may be shopping with other people, such as children, who are unenthusiastic about being in your place of business. Make her life easier by welcoming and accommodating her companions, so she can complete her mission. Though this goal can be accomplished in many creative ways, one simple solution is to place chairs in your sales or retail environment.³ Since smartphones have eradicated boredom as we know it, sometimes all people need is a place to sit down and use their devices. This

is smart business: few things can stop a woman's shopping trip faster than bored or cranky companions.

Remember: clothes don't make the customer.

Many women tell me they feel profiled based on their dress when they interact with salespeople—and not in a good way. There's a famous scene in the 1990 movie *Pretty Woman*, starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, in which salespeople at a boutique on Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive refuse to help Roberts's character because of the way she is dressed (they think she looks "cheap"). They don't realize she has serious money to spend. Ultimately, her character drops loads of money at other stores, then goes back to the place where the salespeople ignored her. "Do you remember me?" she asks. "I was in here yesterday. You wouldn't wait on me?" Then, lifting her huge shopping bags, she says, "Big mistake. Big. Huge!"⁴ Given that we live in an extravagantly casual society, where black yoga pants can be paired with a jacket and classified as formal attire (I've done it myself), it's an understatement to say that judging your customers on what they're wearing can result in missed opportunities. As they say in the movies: Big mistake. Big. Huge. I once interviewed a woman who felt that she was negatively profiled for her casual clothes. She said, "I wanted to scream, 'I have two master's degrees!'"

**Use the boomerang strategy to avoid TMPI:
too much personal information.**

When you find great points of connection with customers, it's important to avoid going down a rabbit hole of talking too much

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about your own experiences instead of your customers'. The reality is that, unless you're already friends, customers often won't be interested in your personal experiences unless they're relevant to the product or service you're selling. Many a sale has been killed through a salesperson sharing TMPI—*too much personal information*. Self-awareness is critical here. I've been on the receiving end of salespeople sharing experiences that range from their digestive problems to bunion pain, with the occasional *let me show you my scar* thrown in. These people were perfect strangers.

That, of course, is not you. But it's easy to go down a rabbit hole of personal stories, even with benign topics. The smart strategy is to say just enough about yourself to establish something in common with the customer, or to emphasize why you are the most knowledgeable person for her to work with, *and then not dwell on it*. I recommend what I call the "boomerang strategy." This is a technique in which you acknowledge what you and the customer have in common and then throw the conversation right back at the customer so she can keep telling her story. Here's how it works:

Customer: I just got back from Disney World.

Sales professional: You're kidding! I just went to Disney World a few months ago! Wasn't it fantastic? I loved it. What was your favorite ride?

Customer: My kids really liked Space Mountain. In fact, the line was really long, but then we saw . . .

At this point, the topic has been safely boomeranged back to the customer. Remember this strategy throughout the course of

customer conversations, and keep throwing that boomerang right back. You will be viewed as a great conversationalist.

An important exception to this rule is when you have personal experience with the product or service she's interested in. In these situations, share your experiences and firsthand perspective. It's a great way to make a connection.

Leverage team selling for awkward situations.

Through no fault of our own, we may often find ourselves working with a customer with whom we just don't connect. In these situations, don't hesitate to bring in a teammate to help you work with the customer to make the experience better for everyone.

Avoid "friendly fire."

Don't talk badly about your coworkers, your management, or your job. From the customers' perspective, it reflects poorly on you and can undermine your credibility.

BEST PRACTICE

Innovative Office Solutions

Creating an Emotional Connection in a Commoditized Business

Selling both paper clips and high-level business strategy to the same clients is a triumph of customer connection. It's all in a day's work for Jennifer Smith, CEO of Innovative Office Solutions, the largest women-owned, independent business-products dealer in

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the country. Headquartered in Minnesota, this \$130 million office supply and furniture company is thriving in a famously price-driven, commoditized business that has long served women as buyers and decision makers. The company's guiding principle is "Relationships Matter," and its customer retention rate is in the 90 percent range. How it's achieved this rate is instructive for anyone looking to deepen his or her connections with customers.

Innovative sells every kind of product you would ever need for an office space, from the bathroom soap to the desks. The office products business has been greatly impacted by the digital world. "People are using less paper, file folders, filing cabinets, staplers, and toner," says Smith. "We've had to reinvent ourselves to stay relevant." Finding new avenues for growth and earning the loyalty of customers who could easily buy from big-box competitors has been a priority. The company has succeeded by implementing strategies centered on customer connection. Let's look at three of them.

1. *Offering solutions, not just products.* The most foundational strategy for Innovative was expanding the company's offerings beyond transactional products, such as pens and toilet paper, into more emotionally engaging territory, like corporate culture consulting and workspace design. "Our industry is totally commoditized, and we knew we had to take it to the next level by offering solutions and not just products," says Smith. Innovative added office furniture, interior design, and corporate branding capabilities, which opened the door for its sales team to talk with customers on topics such as corporate culture and talent

recruitment. When the conversations expanded, so did the customers. Innovative moved from selling primarily to administrative staff to C-suite executives, because a company's office environment and culture are important aspects in the war for talent. "When you can help a company bring their corporate culture to life, that takes the customer relationship to a different level," says Smith. Innovative's ability to help clients with corporate-culture strategy is remarkable when you consider the firm also sells toilet paper to those very same customers.

2. *Creating relationship-management teams.* "The number one pain point for customers in our industry is reaching out to call centers and talking to someone who doesn't know them," says Smith, "and then dealing with a different person for every product group they buy." To solve this pain point, Innovative created relationship-management teams, called studios, that are dedicated to each customer and provide support across product categories. "Not only does this make things easier for our customers, it allows us to sell on the basis of simplifying their supply chain and reducing their soft costs, because they can move from having seven different vendors to just one."
3. *Empowering employees to solve customer issues.* A third strategy was to implement a program that enables every person at the company to fix a customer problem on the spot, called "Make It Right." "Whether it's a driver or an accounting person, if a customer is not happy, every employee is empowered to fix a situation immediately to make it right, without waiting for approval from someone else." The company holds monthly internal events in which everyone who's had a "Make It Right"

MOTIVATOR #1: CONNECTED

moment shares their story to help their colleagues prevent future mistakes. “In the beginning, no one wanted to admit they’d done something wrong,” says Smith. “It took us a long time to create a culture in which people look at the experience through a different lens, in terms of owning the customer relationship, doing whatever they need to do to make things right, and then paying it forward by talking about it in front of their colleagues. That’s where our own corporate culture comes in. If your whole team is on the same page and they know what their purpose is and how they contribute, your customers can sense it and they think, *I want to work with this company.*”

Innovative’s success shows the power of staying laser-focused on customer connection. Smith believes the company’s strong customer relationships will sustain them through future disruptions. “Now, even office furniture is commoditizing, so it all comes back to having amazing relationships with your clients so that they trust you and want to buy anything that you come out with.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There is no end to the creativity you can use to deepen your customer connections. Dr. Stiffle uses rock ‘n’ roll, patient education, and an informal atmosphere, which are reflections of his personality and interests. Innovative Office

WINNING HER BUSINESS

Solutions expanded its product offerings with emotionally engaging solutions like corporate-culture strategy.

- Connecting with women buyers at an interpersonal level means finding common ground, avoiding outdated stereotypes, and demonstrating that you're actively listening through words and eye contact.

ACTIVATING YOUR INSIGHTS

- Imagine that someone felt so strongly connected to your business that she wanted to get a tattoo of your logo. (Work with me here—it's a brainstorm! And don't forget, people already do this with brands such as Harley-Davidson and Nike.) What are the kinds of things you could do to generate that kind of loyalty and connection? Create a list of ideas, and pick the top one or two to execute.
- What are the three top ways that you connect with customers currently? How can you expand on these efforts to create even deeper connections?