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Driving her way to success: Women don't just buy cars... they make them!

—Kenya McCullum

Anyone who has seen a car advertisement knows this story all too well: A man — who may be a little bit reserved and unsure of himself — gets a sleek, shiny new car, and with it some newfound confidence that so impresses a scantily-clad, busty beauty that she simply can't resist him. In these ads, the message is usually the same — boy buys hot car, boy meets hot girl, and boy and girl drive off together into the Freudian tunnel of love.

Based on this Madison Avenue construct, it's easy to assume, quite erroneously, in fact, that when it comes to car purchases, it is men who hold the purse strings. But the fact is, according to AutoTrader.com, women buy more than 50 percent of the new cars sold in the United States (including 20 percent of new cars that cost over \$30,000), and have influence in 85 percent of overall car purchases.

With these statistics in mind, it makes good business sense for automotive companies to make a stronger connection with members of the fairer sex and their purchasing power.

And that is exactly what General Motors (GM) is doing with its 2008 Chevy Malibu. This affordable luxury car, which was styled by a team of female designers, incorporates features specifically chosen to appeal to the tastes of female drivers.

“We designed the vehicle with women in mind, and in doing that we started out with a diverse team of designers and engineers. When you design with women in mind, it really helps you to really increase your level of awareness and your level of detail, so it benefits all customers,” says Crystal Wyndham, the General Motors Design Manager who led the team that created the interiors for the new Malibu.

Among the benefits of the Chevy Malibu are LED Blue Lagoon ambient lighting, which is meant to appeal to drivers on an emotional level; a dual cockpit that makes the car more airy and open; seats made from UltraLuz Sheer Suede and Tipped Leather to give the car a warm and inviting feeling; and bold colors that make the Malibu look fresh and trendy. And — because GM has taken notice of the buying power of women — the car even includes a space for women to store their handbags.

Recently, there has been an encouraging trend in the industry that has allowed women to take a more active role in this line of work. “I am seeing a lot more women in the executive, the director, and the

lead designer positions at GM,” says Heather Scalf, a creative director at General Motors who worked on the 2008 Malibu. “More and more there are women moving up and getting promoted into these positions, which I think is a great accomplishment and definitely shows that women do have a role here.”

But this trend is not limited to Detroit car manufacturers —from the Motor City to the City by the Bay, women are carving out their role in the automotive industry and meeting much success for their efforts.

One such success story is Galina Fedorova, who worked her way up from the sales floor to finance director during her eleven-year tenure at Toyota 101 in Redwood City. She says it’s no surprise to her that women are getting more involved with cars, because the female touch is exactly what the automotive industry needs in order to maintain a sense of balance.

“I think women give equilibrium to the industry,” she says. “We have to address women’s issues, and a lot of times men are more rough and tough so women can smooth things out. I think that’s needed in a predominantly male industry, and it works really well.”

But how can a woman survive, or even break into, such a rough and tumble old boys’ club? Fedorova said that although it’s not impossible for women to get into the automotive business, they should be aware that it won’t be an easy ride.

“You’ve got to be tough and you’ve got to know it’s not easy,” she says. “Dealing with customers is very draining, and dealing with the hours is very draining, but it’s also very rewarding. There is a saying that once you are in the car business you can never get out. And that really makes sense because the pay is good, you don’t have to travel, and you don’t have to be in an executive position to make good money being in the car business.”

And, of course, like in most industries, women in the automotive industry must face a certain amount of sexism as they work their way up the ranks to those higher salaries and higher positions.

“As a woman you’ve got to really put yourself out there and show people that you know what you’re talking about because you might get ‘Oh, you’re a woman, you probably don’t know about this kind of stuff,’” says Jamie Steward of Jumpstart Automotive Media, an advertising network that focuses solely on the automotive industry.

As a manager of digital advertising, Steward is regularly in close contact with car dealerships and, while she has found much acceptance from her colleagues, she does have the occasional unpleasant sexist encounter.

“I had one customer that I just could not figure out what I was doing wrong with. Then I met another woman in the automotive industry and she said, ‘Don’t worry, he won’t talk to me either. It’s not because you’re bad, it’s because we’re women.’ I was blown away. It was disappointing,” she says.

Although there is still a certain amount of discrimination in the automotive industry, Steward says she is confident that, just as more and more women are purchasing cars, women will become more visible and will enjoy a great ride of success.

“Doing things like what GM is doing with the Malibu, and understanding the purchasing power that women have is definitely going to help us form a role,” Steward says. “I definitely think there’s going to be more women in the automotive industry. Our impact is going to be greater than what it’s been, and the men in the industry are going to start respecting that the women are there and actually take them

seriously.”



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