

How Women Decide

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Photography: Courtesy of George Cott

Artwork: Janet Echelman, Line Drawing, 2006–2007, high-tenacity multifilament polypropylene, 36-degree ellipsoidal spotlights, colored dichroic glass filters, 408' x 56' x 33', Tampa, Florida

In 2005 seven partners and senior staffers at Deloitte (including the male coauthor of this article) prepared for a meeting with a prospective client, a large hospital undergoing an exciting transformation. Aware that a multimillion-dollar piece of business would be won or lost on the basis of their pitch, the key presenters pored over their slide deck, crossing the t's and dotting the i's. They reviewed everything they knew about the hospital and rehearsed their case for why Deloitte was the ideal choice. Their proposal would emphasize Deloitte's view of projects as collaborations; the team would walk in the client's shoes.

During the meeting, the partners covered all their talking points. They came away certain that they had addressed every concern outlined in the client's request for proposal and hopeful that Deloitte would win the project. But they also felt that something had seemed off during the presentation. The consultants and client representatives never quite got on the same wavelength. What could explain the lack of rapport in the room? One aspect of this high-stakes meeting was different from the partners' usual experience: Half the client attendees were women. The consultants had known this would be the case ahead of time, but it hadn't occurred to them to alter their pitch in any way because of that. In the end, the hospital did not choose Deloitte for the job.

Stories like this were becoming increasingly frequent, so we decided to look closely at what was going on. In response to an internal survey, 70% of our senior managers told us they perceived that selling to women was different from selling to men. This was interesting. We knew that women, as a group, experienced work in a professional services firm differently, and we had a women's initiative (known as WIN) whose mission was to drive marketplace growth and create a culture where highly talented women would choose to work. Could the same initiative shed light on the growing population of female buyers and influencers, and perhaps reveal selling approaches that would work better for them?

Today women occupy about half of all managerial and professional positions in the United States, including 37% of management jobs and 60% of accounting and auditing roles, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They also make up 41% of employees with authority to make purchasing decisions. Recognizing that the majority of our partners and managers, including those who were female, had honed their skills selling to men, and that a rapidly growing percentage of our potential clients were women, we realized it was time to reexamine our assumptions about how to explore opportunities and close deals.

Women hold about 50% of all managerial and professional positions in the United States and account for 41% of employees with authority to make purchasing decisions

A Fair Suspicion

The findings from our internal survey reinforced other evidence of gender differences in decision making. Insights from brain research are especially fascinating. According to a study conducted at the University of California, Irvine, men's brains have approximately 6.5 times more gray matter than women's, and women's brains have nearly 10 times more white matter than men's. Because gray matter characterizes information processing centers and white matter facilitates the connections among those centers, scientists theorize that those differences might explain why men tend to excel in tasks that depend on sheer processing while women show relative strength in tasks that call for assimilating and integrating disparate pieces of information. What's more, the cord connecting the left and right lobes is 10% thicker, on average, in female brains. And women have wider peripheral vision than men do. In case you're wondering, neither brain type performs better than the other on broad measures of cognitive ability such as intelligence tests. The differences, however, have implications for how decisions are made.

We know from decades of research that women tend to behave differently than men as shoppers in business-to-consumer (B2C) settings. Take as one small example "Gender differences in information search strategies for a Christmas gift," a study published in 1984 in the *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. It found that "females appeared to comprehensively acquire in-store information, whereas males appeared to heuristically limit their search to a smaller subset of in-store information." The typical man, in other words, is mission- and task-oriented. Having determined that he needs black slacks, he will go directly to a store, pick out a pair within a half hour, and perhaps even buy two of the same item to avoid having to make the same purchase again too soon.

The typical woman, on the other hand, is a discovery-oriented shopper. Starting out with the same idea of purchasing a pair of black slacks, she will more typically approach the search with an open mind. What she really needs, she realizes, is a professional look for an upcoming conference. Not impressed by the slacks selection, or pleasantly surprised by something else, she readily adjusts her goal. The process might take significantly longer than 30 minutes, but it is more likely to result in a satisfying outcome.

Does this kind of difference carry over to how senior women make business-to-business (B2B) decisions? We were surprised, given such rich reserves of gender-related B2C studies, to find no significant research to provide an answer. So beginning in 2006 we set about conducting our own, interviewing experienced buyers of professional services, both men and women. They came from 18 large organizations, including Amvescap, Blue Shield of California, Hewlett-Packard, and Jones Lang LaSalle.

The insights provided by that research, combined with the growing literature on gender effects in cognition and consumption, support our observations in meetings with hundreds of prospective and existing clients. Along the way, we have assembled a substantial body of knowledge about the differences between men and women in the role of key organizational decision maker. On the basis of our discoveries, we have set about methodically teaching our partners to be more aware of differences in decision-making styles and to adapt their own styles, while remaining authentic, to those differences. By recognizing that they have relied on one way of selling, which might not serve them as well when a woman is on the other side of the table, they gain a perspective that allows them to be more effective in any client-facing situation.

Of course, forays into the territory of gender differences are always fraught. So let's be very clear: When we talk about male and female styles, we are talking about tendencies, not absolutes. While hopeful that we would discover attitudinal and behavioral patterns in female business buyers, we resisted generalizations in the style of "men are from Mars, women are from Venus." Every individual falls somewhere on a spectrum and brings traits associated with both masculinity and femininity to the relationships and tasks of everyday life. The more you know about the individual, the less it makes sense to rely on general findings about a group of which he or she is part. That said, if the most salient fact you have about a prospect is that person's gender, it's good to know what tendencies are associated with it.

Understanding the Differences

We'll start with a finding that perhaps should have been obvious. Most women who are senior executives today have experienced and seen plenty of gender-based inequity and are sensitized to the micro-level signaling that goes with it. They are more likely than men to see things through a gender lens and to bring to new interactions their accumulated experience of dealing professionally, academically, and personally with men. Their antennae are particularly raised toward anything that smacks of male condescension. "Men tend to have a fairly patronizing, pat-your-head approach," one female executive told us. "They say, 'Don't worry, we'll take care of it.' For me and for many other women, this is a problem. I suspect they don't take this approach with male clients."

We also learned that women see a big meeting with a potential service provider as a chance to explore options in collaboration with an expert resource, while men see that event as a near-final step in the process, when they are narrowing down and choosing among options. "I think sometimes women are so much more difficult, and even fickle, in business dealings," one of our male partners observed. It is easy to see how a woman's willingness to reevaluate or modify her original request could be construed that way. Men tend to end a conversation once they connect with a good idea or solution, while women are inclined to be more inquisitive, wanting to hear everyone's thoughts before deciding. They spend more time finding the ideal solution. Indeed, even the partner who called women fickle went on to say, "They are so much more rigorous in the way they explore possibilities and evaluate vendors."

This variation in style shows up in the approach to a request for proposal. For men, the RFP is a tool for bounding the scope of an engagement and for clarifying needs and decision criteria in advance; it outlines the rules of the game, and sellers take their best shot at winning by those rules. For women, an RFP is more like a map. It's a useful guide, but once you get into the territory, the real exploration begins.

We encountered this difference in a proposal that a Deloitte team made to a large technology company in 2007, just when we were starting to rethink our approach to female buyers. The project was a large ERP installation worth tens of millions of dollars. As usual, we did our homework prior to the presentation to three men and two women on the client side, and we made sure we covered everything stipulated in the RFP. After the presentation, our partners felt it had gone very well. But once more, we lost the project. Why? Because, the decision makers told us, they wanted to work with a consultancy that had a significant presence in the Philippines.

This puzzled the team for two reasons. First, we had offices in the Philippines; second, this factor had not been mentioned anywhere in the RFP. Had our people been more attuned to the buyers' discovery process, they might have recognized the moment when the Philippines presence became not only a factor but the deciding factor. When presenting to men, we find that they look for holes or weaknesses in our arguments. Again, it's part of the winnowing process. But women continually seek a creative solution—listening for ideas, adjusting their understanding of what is important, and asking for relevant details.

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So today, while interacting with prospective clients, we know to keep asking ourselves, “What’s the deciding factor?” And we make this explicit in our presentations. “We understand you are on a journey to find the best partner,” we tell prospects, “and we recognize that your perspective will evolve as you speak with us and our competitors.”

Another difference we heard about is that traditional male buyers want the buyer’s power over the seller to be acknowledged. Thus, high-ranking people from the seller organization make appearances at meetings to signal the importance of the project; the CEO might even fly in to treat the decision maker to a steak dinner. Women are less likely to see the value of such rituals. The “honchos” are welcome to join the discussion, but for their experience and insight, not their obeisance. It’s more important to female buyers to meet the people they will be working with. “We don’t want to see the top person and not the rest of the team,” one told us. “I want to be able to introduce my fourth-tier lawyer to that person’s counterpart.”

This difference was driven home when we proposed a seven-figure advisory project to a large technology company in northern California. Again, the audience was mixed; there were three women and two men on the client side. They insisted that only three people from Deloitte be present at the meeting. We chose not to include our sector leader (the honcho) and instead flew in a top manager from India, where our U.S.–India office conducts the bulk of the kind of work we were bidding to do. This turned out to be a good call. The client later told us that having the Indian manager present in the meeting was critically important and that it was great for the client to meet her counterpart on our team.

Prior research has established that women attend more to relationships and to the challenge of balancing multiple stakeholders’ interests. A March 2013 study of more than 600 corporate board directors published in the *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics* bears this out. It finds that female directors are more likely to consider the rights of others and to take a cooperative approach to decision making in order to arrive at a fair and moral decision that benefits all parties. They also engage in more collaboration and consensus building, not only to make sound decisions but also to elicit support for a course of action. The study’s authors also observed that female directors engage more effectively with the multifaceted social issues and concerns that increasingly confront corporations. Research findings like this support our observations of how women preside over large project decisions.

There are more differences worth noting, some of them quite subtle. We found that women’s body language does not mean the same things that men’s does. For example, men often nod when something the speaker has said is familiar to them or they agree, and they want the discussion to move on, whereas women tend to nod to signal interest in what is being said and to encourage the speaker to elaborate. While a male client might prefer sitting next to a consultant to confer about something, women more often choose a seat across the table, wanting to speak face-to-face. Few people think about gender when choosing a seat at a meeting, but it deserves a moment of consideration when work requires the rapid development of mutual understanding and trust.

Making Adjustments

Drawing on our own and others’ research, we thought about the selling behaviors that should be flagged and changed in our own organization. Today partners and senior managers participate in a rigorous training process designed to make them more aware of why certain behaviors might not be so effective with female executives. We first share research-based insights about the differences between men’s and women’s decision-making, communication, and interpersonal styles. Then we put our client service professionals through an intensive simulated experience.

If you are a senior manager undergoing this training, you work on a simulated proposal for a client. Along the way, you have the opportunity to interact with actors who have been trained to play the parts of the client executives. During the simulation, we watch carefully to see what you've learned. Here's what we look for:

What do you notice?

Do you absorb the staged clues about the female client: the books on her shelf, the magazine on the table, the picture on her desk? Do you establish a rapport by commenting on those things, such as the people or settings in her photos, in your initial greeting? If she says she likes your tie, do you simply say "thanks" or do you tell the story of how you happened to buy it? She wants to know about the person she will be working with, and your usual approach might not reveal that kind of information.

During training sessions, the failure to establish rapport is the most frequent mistake our male professionals make. In most cases, the male team members go directly to the purpose of the meeting and work through their content agenda. They may be unaware that the female client sees the meeting as a way to get to know the people she is being asked to trust with her business. Or they may not know how to respond to that objective. So the listening challenge is to discover what she wants to achieve and what she feels is the most comfortable way to do so. A good place to start is to use the time it takes to get settled in her office to strike up a conversation and establish rapport.

Can you adapt?

In her meeting with you, the female executive is aware of you as a knowledgeable resource on her organization's problem and as a useful sounding board for novel ideas. She is also sizing you up as a creative collaborator. If she deviates from the line of thinking you are presenting, do you go with the flow or try to force the conversation back to your agenda? The key is to watch and listen for clues that your client is engaged in a discovery process and adapt your behavior and style accordingly. Be nimble and prepared to shift from what you rehearsed.

Are you gender-aware?

Men often engage in playful one-upmanship. They default to sports metaphors. They gravitate to discussions of "things and theorems" rather than the social dynamics and personalities that make organizations run smoothly (or not). Generally speaking, women don't respond as warmly to the conversational gambits that work with men, and they expect you to know that. If the approach you are using seems to be falling flat, stop, listen, and find your way to common ground.

How thorough are you?

Because of their cognitive strengths, men often attack problems by isolating components and *optimizing* point solutions, whereas the female brain's integrative advantage can lead women toward *maximizing* solutions that aim for greater, more holistic outcomes. Are you prepared to discuss the broader context in which your proposed initiative must succeed? Do you have the system-level perspective to evaluate alternative ideas for achieving more-successful results overall? The female client's scope of consideration might also encompass desirable outcomes beyond simply solving the business problem. Can you spell out the benefits of partnering with you not just for her company but also for the members of the team she is responsible for developing? If questions she raises seem unrelated to the proposal on the table, assume that she is probing for information that could be instrumental to her decision.

Training our presenters to examine and adjust their habitual behaviors has value beyond gender situations. Our partners and managers have improved their emotional intelligence and their ability to deal empathetically with all prospects and clients (and with teammates and family members). In teaching men how to sell to women, we're really teaching them how to understand people as individuals. And we're reinforcing the importance of respecting diversity in our internal interactions—a win all around.

A Change in Style

As women increasingly populate the ranks of management, it makes sense to gain a clearer understanding of the role that gender plays in B2B selling and service delivery.

In our efforts to raise awareness and change behavior in our own organization—all underwritten by Deloitte’s women’s initiative—we found that framing can make all the difference. Presenting the topic of gender differences as a way to boost client satisfaction and generate revenue gave us a decided edge in the marketplace. What’s more, it accelerated our internal diversity efforts. Information that some had viewed as pro forma, human resources “sensitivity training” became a critical business tool. On the basis of that experience, we’re tempted to generalize: Perhaps the most effective way to build respect for diversity inside your organization is to focus on your customers. Anecdotally we believe our change in approach has helped us win more projects. Despite the lack of hard ROI data, we’re convinced the training has paid off. It has been vital to raising the awareness that not every businessperson in a high-level influence or decision-making role is male or exhibits the buying behavior we’ve historically experienced and learned to expect. Seven years ago, we know Deloitte was losing opportunities because we treated buyers with a one-size-fits-all approach. Today our male and female partners alike tell us that our women-as-buyers tool kit has helped them work better with female decision makers. That’s good for our clients and for us.

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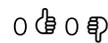
4 COMMENTS

Candice Burch 4 years ago

Thank you for the great article! There is not enough training such as this out there, so I wanted to take a minute to thank you for posting and to ask you to please post more articles such as this. I enjoyed it thoroughly. Although I would challenge that we are not entirely enjoying the "paid off" part of this training as yet.

<http://socialcargal.weebly.com/socialcargal-blog/introduction-1>

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