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The Venus files - Selling IT to women execs

By: Naunidhi Kaur

IT World Canada (30 Mar 2006)



A decade ago, author John Gray wrote his bestseller 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' on the differences between the expectations and beliefs of husbands and wives. Today, high profile IT giants acknowledge the profundity of his observations.

Companies such as IBM and Microsoft - to name just two - are realizing that selling products and services to woman business owners and executives is a whole new ball game, with its own success principles, prospects and pitfalls.

Author Leslie Grossman insightfully delineates some of these in her new book *Sellsation! How companies can capture today's hottest market:*

Women business owners and executives. Grossman is co-founder of Women's Leadership Exchange, a New York-based multi-media company founded by and for female. She is also president of B2Women, a consulting firm that helps companies craft and implement effective marketing and PR initiatives that effectively reach out to women executives.

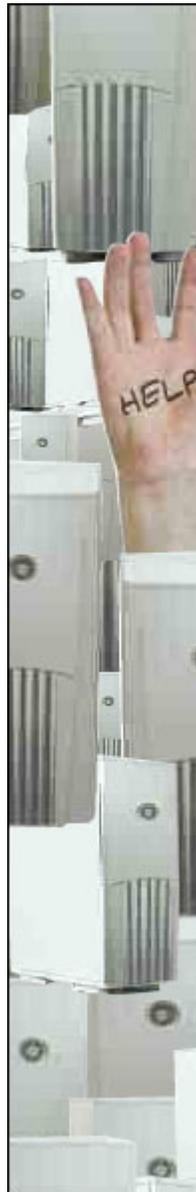
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I like to use this term [hyper-task] to explain how women multi-task at different levels. They have to manage children, husbands, aging parents and pressures at work.

”

Marilyn Johnson

vice-president, market development, IBM Corp.



The underlying theme of Grossman's book is women execs and

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business owners think and buy differently from average working or non-working women and men. The most salient difference: female execs don't get swayed by traditional advertising and marketing techniques.

And there are other differences. For instance, Marilyn Johnson, vice-president, market development at Armonk, N.Y.-based IBM Corp. said - as opposed to men - women business owners and executives 'hyper-task'. "I like to use this term to explain how women multi-task at different levels. They have to manage children, husbands, aging parents and pressures at work. Web technology comes in handy to simplify some of their work, and we try and market it to them in a language they understand."

Meanwhile, Canadian companies are realizing they can no longer ignore women business owners and executives.

Royal Bank of Canada acknowledges women entrepreneurs are one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian economy, and represent a growing economic force. Women-led businesses generate 1.7 million jobs, compared to 1.5 million jobs provided by Canada's top 100 companies. There are more than 821,000 women entrepreneurs, who annually contribute in excess of \$18 billion to economy.

Grossman has a message for companies who want to get their products and services across to women entrepreneurs. Women, she says, would be willing to invest in a company that makes working with them "fun as well as productive".

Fun and productivity were the twin goals of a spa retreat organized by Microsoft Canada for a group of 25 women CEOs, GMs and CIOs. Held last November at the Hyatt, Park Plaza in Toronto, the three hour retreat turned into a networking session in which women spent hours chit-chatting, discussing the challenges of single motherhood, and bake-day sales for their children at school.

Aisha Umar, director, unified communication group at Microsoft, said this event brought her company more business than any customer loyalty program. "At the end of the day, I saw these high-powered women sitting in the spa in their bathing suits, with no make-up on, bonding with each other. We presented our products to them through discussions, and won their trust and friendship."

“

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According to Grossman, busy business owners hunger for real-world, in-person communities. IBM says it recognizes this, and has been supporting women business organizations. IBM's Johnson said her company understands that women like to participate in panel discussions, conferences and in-person communities.

and won their trust and friendship.



Aisha Umar

director, unified communication group, Microsoft Canada

"This is the reason we like to sponsor such events." Microsoft is in touch with several women organizations including Canadian Association of Women Executives and Entrepreneurs.

According to Grossman, women like to invest in companies that try and build a relationship with them. She enunciates the "golden rule" of marketing to women: "Companies that help women learn, will score points, and build credibility."

And that principle - said Umar - is something Microsoft's marketing folk are acutely aware of. She said their emphasis is on first getting to know women clients before offering them products and services.

"They (women execs) are pioneers in their fields. Most of them don't get time for themselves." Microsoft organizes events for women executives, including golf training. "We realize, unlike most men, they would prefer a training session at golf rather than a 'golf-day' in which they would be playing against each other competitively."

Microsoft, said Umar, has been also been concentrating on gaining the trust of women by helping them share and expand their knowledge. She cited the speaker series for CIOs that Microsoft Canada plans to hold. "These will include discussions, and women executives will be able to share [their] knowledge."

However, both Umar and Johnson emphatically state that it does not necessarily take a woman to understand what women want. Johnson said, "It takes someone who listens to, and observes women well. Some men are good at that."



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