



Apple: The World's Most Discreetly Feminine Brand?

Bridget Brennan, 07.24.09, 04:00 PM EDT

Their products have feminized the formerly dude-driven world of technology.

I just returned from visiting my mother in Texas, where she proudly showed me her new flat-screen television. Sleeker and smaller than the one she had before, it looked tasteful and didn't dominate the entire living room wall. Well done, Mom.

I congratulated her on her great taste. She smiled. Then she tried to turn it on.

This involved holding two remote controls--one in each hand--and pressing buttons simultaneously on each one. She squeezed the buttons. Nothing happened. This went on for several minutes, during which time she vigorously shook the remotes.

"I hate it when they don't work!" she yelled. I looked over at the coffee table and noticed there was yet another remote. This one was for the DVD. We fiddled with it, pressed a lot of buttons on all three remotes, and finally the TV burst into life. We looked at each other in frustration. "Whatever happened to the on/off button?" she asked.

My mother is a smart woman who runs her own business. She values her time and has no desire to spend it configuring devices that should be elegant and easy to use, given their high cost. I couldn't help but think: Why does the consumer electronics industry make things harder the more advanced technology gets? And then my thoughts turned to fantasy: Why doesn't Apple (AAPL - news - people) make remote controls?

You ask: Why Apple? Because if any company could improve one of the world's most user-unfriendly electronic devices, it would be Apple. And then there's this: Apple just may be the world's most discreetly feminine brand.

I've been paying attention to the tech industry's latest attempts to target female consumers. And target them they should: Women are the engine of the global economy, driving nearly 80% of all consumer purchases. Even in what's considered to be a "male" industry, women influence 61% of consumer-electronics sales and buy nearly 50% of all consumer electronics products.

Which brings me back to Apple.

Earlier this week, Apple reported in its quarterly earnings call that it had outrun the rotten economy. The company reported net income of \$1.2 billion for the quarter, compared with \$1.1 billion for the same period the year before. Meanwhile, sales rose to \$8.3 billion, up from \$7.5 billion for the same period the year before.

Is it too much to attribute at least some of Apple's success to its female-friendly approach to product design? If women are indeed influencing nearly two-thirds of consumer electronics sales, surely that says something.

Here's how Apple does it:

Apple has feminized the formerly dude-driven world of stereo equipment. Consider the iPod; small, elegant and curvy, it's everything that stereo equipment never was. Traditional stereo shops seem as out of date as vinyl, and stand in contrast to Apple stores, which are light, bright and bursting with women. Though pink is offered as one of many color choices, women buy iPods because of their performance. Apple seems to understand that bringing women en masse into a category--as Nintendo (NTDOY.PK - news - people) has done with gaming and Callaway is starting to do with golf--is boon for business.

Apple products don't need manuals. Too many consumer-electronics products put the burden of configuration on the purchaser. They often come with instructions that are poorly written and hard to understand. Not so with Apple's famously intuitive products, which are loved by techies and non-techies alike.

Apple offers face-to-face service. At a time when retailers are cutting back on staff, the world's most technologically advanced company staffs its stores with living, breathing employees, and lots of them. From Apple's Genius Bars (tech support stations) to the free classes taught daily in its stores, Apple understands the power of the human connection. It even offers a One-to-One program, which gives customers a weekly, personal tutorial with a "genius" for \$99 a year. Great service is an important differentiator that has huge female appeal in virtually every industry.

Apple should be viewed as a leading light for manufacturers and retailers seeking the business of women. Yes, I know they already get so many things right, but appealing to the world's alpha consumers is critically important and more proof of just how smart Apple is. Moreover, Apple's success also demonstrates that when you make women happy, you make everybody happy. Now if you'll excuse me, my iPhone is ringing. It's probably my mother.

Bridget Brennan is CEO of Female Factor and author of the new book, "Why She Buys: The New Strategy for Reaching the World's Most Powerful Consumers" (Crown Business).