

Ladies' Choice for Electric Cars: a Different Marketing Approach

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Abstract

It has been shown that women, at least in Central Europe, have a decisive role in the purchase of a car, as they mostly have the final choice. It is also known that women do not look mainly at power and performance, but more at safety, costs and energy consumption, which are also the strengths of electric vehicles. This considered, electric car marketing should address women in order to better succeed, instead of appealing only to men. This paper explains this approach and proposes possible measures to implement it, pointing out at the same time what should be avoided to prevent a failure. In short, it is necessary, from one side, to continue thinking at men's needs and interests when developing an electric car, in order to make it appealing and not gender-exclusive, but on the other hand, it is much better to keep women as a target when marketing it, by "simply" having a women vision of the world in mind when planning the marketing strategy. In our opinion, this strategy could help increase the chances of electric vehicles to succeed, by proceeding from the small numbers of the *innovators* and *early adopters*' phases, to the large market shares generated by the *early majority* and subsequently the *late majority*. Switzerland, having already reached the first two phases, is probably ready to be used as a test field where to verify the idea of a women-oriented approach for the promotion of electric vehicles.

Keywords: EV (electric vehicle), marketing, sales, promotion, communication

1 Introduction

Women are probably the most frequently used subject for advertising cars, as the most typical presentation of a premiere matches the car with good-looking winking girls. However, this is often the only implication of women in a car's promotion; and this implication is rather targeted having a male's audience in mind, precisely because cars have always been considered as belonging to the men's world. Without intending to discuss ethical or sexist questions, we will analyse here the subject only from a marketing point of view. We will consider the following question: can a women-oriented marketing approach, help promoting electric cars (EVs) -

which are nowadays not generally preferred by the majority of car-buyers?

1.1 Men versus women in car marketing

The idea to consider cars as belonging to men's world is obviously not a simple gender choice, based on a sexist segregation, but is a logical consequence of the usually in-born differences of men and women towards cars. It is obviously not possible to determine the characteristics that describe in absolute and binding terms all women, respectively men, – it is also not the intention of this paper to do so –, because there are many variables which contribute featuring every single personality. However, it is useful to recall the main

characteristics that in general terms tend to differentiate men and women in regard with marketing and cars.

Men are tendentially gifted for technology and therefore they are usually interested in understanding the functioning of machines and in testing new technologies. Therefore watching, testing and talking about cars are a common male pastime. Moreover, men often like competing and cars can easily be associated with racing and powerfulness, as a consequence, men tend to like considering, or at least dreaming of, buying the most powerful or the most gaudy car in order to feel stronger and to show it as a status symbol. Women, on the opposite, are often less keen on technology and engines, and therefore usually show less interest for cars - apart as locomotion tools they can drive. As a consequence, they are not necessarily interested in buying a new one, as long as the old one works. The logical consequence of these general considerations is a marketing approach of car brands which has always tendentially been men-oriented.

Nevertheless, there are some observations about women that can help considering them as appealing targets when promoting cars. First of all, women are the majority of the population in the industrialized countries and, nowadays, they mostly hold a driver's license (74.4% of Swiss adult women had a driving license in 2005, against 89.2% of Swiss men [1]). In addition a large part of them own their own car (in Switzerland a third of all registered cars are owned by women [2]). It might be objected that women maybe drive or even own the car, but, because they are not particularly interested in it, they bought it following a man's advice or decision. According to different surveys held in Europe and northern America, the opposite is the more probable truth: as a matter of fact, women seem to have a decisive role as consumers for any object, having mostly the final choice. Some researches [3] [4] estimate this as being true for 80% of all purchases, and for 65% of new car purchases [5].

1.2 The assets of electric cars

If considering this percentage in the final choice, a women-oriented marketing for any kind of car seems to be at least a logical approach. This is even truer if EVs have to be promoted. It is actually true that most women are not interested in technology, but women are usually very interested in environmental protection issues, which is the main asset of these cars. More

specifically, a survey of autoscout24 [2] carried out in 2007 in Switzerland – but these results are probably valid all over western industrialized countries – shows how women look mainly at fuel consumption, safety and costs when having to choose a car. A survey in Germany [6] confirms these criteria with percentages¹ of 109% for environmental friendliness, 105% for safety, 104% for low fuel consumption and 103% for price, while finding out that men's top selection features are power (129%), performance (126%), and fame of the brand (123%). Moreover, low maintenance needs and easiness of handling – two other characteristics of EVs - are usually appreciated by women, precisely because not necessarily gifted for technology. These very characteristics and differences between men and women for what concerns cars, are the reason why electric car marketing should rather address women instead of men, in order to better succeed.

On the one hand, EVs do not necessarily have the main characteristics men are looking for: they are technologically interesting vehicles, but powerfulness of electric engines is often not the same as the one of combustion engines and the relatively long recharging time limits the sense of competition and strength. Moreover, until present, several electric cars do not belong to a well established and renowned brand, or if so, they are not a version of a famous model that is currently seen as a status symbol.

Electric cars, on the other hand, have the features praised by women. The most evident and important one is environmental friendliness, which is the most evident asset of these cars that lead the chart on this point, having no local emissions at all and the lowest energy consumption ever, thanks to a high engine performance. Moreover, electric engines need less maintenance than traditional cars. In addition, the recharging system is easier, cleaner and more comfortable than refueling, as it can be done also at home, and does not imply the risk to spill some fuel over hands or shoes. For what concerns safety, it can be proved that electric cars respect all needed standards that currently make a car safe, but have equally an additional asset compared with gasoline cars: they have no exploding potential below the seats. The third important feature for women in a car, always according to the quoted survey [2], is cost. It is true that the purchase price of an electric car is higher than the one of a gasoline/diesel car of the

¹ Multiple answer possible, data in %, ranking on index, basis = 100)

same size, being therefore rather discouraging. Nevertheless, managing costs of an electric car are always more convenient and cheaper, because of the lower energy consumption and the usually much lower cost of electricity in comparison with fuel, but also because – at least in Switzerland – EVs benefit for example from tax reductions or exemptions, discounts on insurance fees and parking places.

Hence, electric cars do not necessarily fulfill the main characteristics usually appreciated by men, but seem to fit ideally with the main features praised by women; therefore, why not propose a women-oriented marketing of electric cars?

2 Lessons learned from history

Taking into account the introductory considerations, targeting women when marketing electric cars seems to be a promisingly successful idea. It is however far from being a simple, safe and straight one. History teaches us that it is an absolutely risky task, because it might obtain exactly the opposite result, by turning a potential success into a final flop.

2.1 No belittling sexual difference

It is not a new idea to associate electric cars with women, as in the early twentieth century electric cars were competitive in the market also thanks to women's choice. As a matter of fact, as pointed out by Victoria Scharff in her essay [7], electric cars – at least in the USA – were initially preferred by women over gasoline cars, especially because of their cleanliness and easy handling in comparison with the early gasoline cars, which still needed to be started from the street with some physical effort. The very limited range and speed of early electric cars allowed accomplishing the majority of mobility needs of women of that time. When Ford introduced mass produced gasoline cars, developing also the electric starter, EVs could still perfectly accomplish most mobility needs of women, but also of men. Nevertheless, they started to be abandoned in favor of gasoline cars, probably also as a consequence of a marketing mistake.

It was probably true that EVs perfectly suited the mobility needs of most women, but marketing of manufacturers and specialists forced too much this connection, turning the technical differences of the two kinds of car, into sexual difference. They claimed – both clearly or underlyingly – that women were perfectly suitable for electric cars, because they were not able to drive gasoline

cars, being less powerful than men, and because they should not have required any need of a greater mobility than the limited one given by EVs of that time. Pointing out such a clear gender separation in terms of skills, potentiality and quality of life did not match with the ambitions and pride of the ever emancipating women of that period. Nobody likes being ghettoized for being different, and even more so, women did and still do not want to be recognized as being less skilled in technology than men, nor to be deliberately confined to a limited freedom. As a reaction against such opinion, women abandoned EVs in favor of the new gasoline cars to show they should not have been confined within this deliberate limitation.

The first risk that a women-oriented marketing has to avoid is, therefore, to underline the characteristics of electric cars, opposed to gasoline cars, as being sexual characteristics that belittle women towards men.

2.2 No stereotyped beauty dolls

Car manufacturers have already tried to create a gasoline car intentionally marketed for women. One of the best examples to be quoted here as a learned lesson is The Dodge La Femme, which was launched 1955, pretending to be designed on purpose for "the modern American woman" [4]. It was intended to suit the new independence of women, who started with World War II leaving the exclusive household tasks for new workplaces, and needing as a consequence a greater independence on the road, as well. The initial intention was probably correct, but the dedicated car was a complete flop, being out of the market within less than two years (and less than 3'000 cars sold). The most obvious reason was the too much stereotyped female look and the detailed accessories which made this car a distinctively women-only product. The Dodge La Femme was mostly pink and it was delivered with accessories such as pink raincoat, umbrella, purse and a makeup kit. These are accessories which many women would have really used, but which stereotyped women as "beauty dolls" who only care for their external look.

It is true that women generally like taking care of their external look, and pink is one of the colors many women like. As a matter of fact the pink cell-phone Motorola RAZR for example has been a great success among women. However, the reason is probably that a cell-phone, even if it is an important object which may be considered as a status symbol, it remains a fancy and glamour 10 cm long accessory, not an overshadowing and enveloping 5 meter long car.

The second risk a women-oriented marketing has to avoid is to stereotype and label women as beauty dolls, which might be understood as having a nice look but no brain.

2.3 No exclusion of men's interest

Electric cars in the early twentieth century and Dodge La Femme, besides having been unpopular among women because they stereotyped or ghettoized them, they were almost totally neglected by men. No explanation is needed for the pink, girlish La Femme, which obviously did not match with men's virility. Also in the case of electric cars most men did not even consider buying or using such a car at the beginning of the twentieth century, precisely because they were labeled so strongly by marketing and public opinion as being cars for women. As the marketing consultant Barletta points out in her book "Marketing to Women" [8], if men perceive that a product is being advertised to women, they would consider it a "girly stuff" and would therefore deliberately avoid it, in order not to lose their manliness. As a consequence, having loosed the female purchasers and more so the men, the market for such a product would be closed, as it happened for instance with electric cars a century ago.

A third and consequent risk of marketing a product to women is to exclude men's interest and close therefore the market. Hence, it is fundamental that the product is nor stereotyped as a girly stuff, nor considered as a toy that would never be dreamed of as a status symbol object, and it should keep at least some of the technical and power features praised by men.

3 A different marketing approach

Electric cars are technically interesting and efficient and their potential could perfectly fit with most of the mobility needs of both men and women. Their assets are praised by women, but they do not exclude men: environmental friendliness, safety and cost are not considered in the first places as purchase criteria by men, but they are arguments that concern the entire population. Moreover, EVs can still be considered an innovation whose technology is interesting. Hence, EVs do not necessarily need to change from a technical point of view, in order to better succeed. The change suggested here is from a marketing point of view: promotion of

EVs seems to have better chances to reach a much higher sales quota if it is women-oriented.

3.1 From Early Adopters to Late Majority

EV buyers are still only a small minority. It might be that buyers are at present mostly men, as the buyers' profile during the large pilot project in Mendrisio a decade ago pointed out: man, with a full time job, higher income [9]. It is a logical data that fits in our thesis, and in the considerations of the previous chapters, because men are tendentially more interested than women in technology, particularly if it is an innovation, and those buyers are actually still of the innovators' kind (brave people pulling the change), or maybe of the "early adapters' kind" (respectable people, trying out new ideas but carefully), if following the principles of the Rogers adoption curve [10] [11]. The problem is that the EV market is stagnating in this "Early Adopters" phase in the last years.

We believe that a different marketing approach could help defuse this situation and let EVs proceed to the "Early Majority" phase, that is when thoughtful people, accepting change more quickly than the average gets interested in those new vehicles, and then to the "Late Majority" (sceptic people accepting the innovation when a majority already adopted it). In our opinion marketing needs to try being women-oriented, as women are the ones that, if properly informed, have the characteristics to play the role of the "Early Majority".

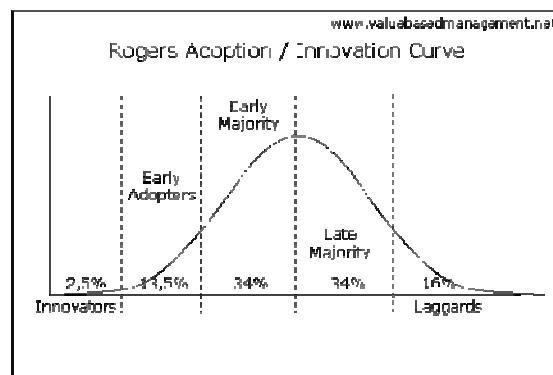


Figure1: Rogers Adoption Curve [10]

The background seems nowadays to be appropriate to implement such a marketing strategy, because from one hand the market is ready with a wider choice of EVs, and from the other hand women are more and more concerned about the need to act in person in favor of environmental protection, in order to prepare a better future for their children.

As a matter of fact, there have been in the last years several women who played an important role in favor of a more sustainable life (for instance Ms. Vandana Shiva). In the automotive world women are still a small minority, but as purchasers there are already women that even try to actively convince other women to choose EVs as they did. There is for instance a young American mother who created and manages a website whose URL already shows the concept: www.electric-cars-are-for-girls.com [12]. She does not mean that EVs are a girlish stuff, but that women should care for environmental protection, by choosing electric cars.

3.2 Marketing to women

Marketing to women is not an easy task as it risks to be wrongly interpreted and obtain thus the exact opposite of the intended goal, that is to obtain a total flop. The lessons learned from history are helpful to prevent the main mistakes. Nowadays there are more and more marketing experts that realized how women are a fundamental and promising market to target for any product. They all agree that a women-oriented marketing approach has to avoid the explained mistakes, so that it does not need special products, but “simply” a different approach that promotes it according to the common woman way of thinking and reasoning. One of the top experts in gender-marketing is Martha Barletta [8] who depicted four basic principles that differentiate women from men in the way of reasoning, which should be kept in mind when preparing a women-oriented marketing strategy. In this chapter we take these statements and observations and apply them to the electric vehicle marketing in order to define a sort of guidelines that could be used to improve EV chances to succeed in sharply increasing the market share.

3.2.1 Collective versus individual perspective

Men generally have a rather individual perspective when considering something, while women seem to look at things more from a group point of view. This is probably the reason why they usually care more about environmental friendliness and fuel consumption, because pollution affects society globally, and particularly it affects the future of younger generations. This can be explained bearing in mind that women usually have an in-born sense of protection towards children and, therefore, are

more sensitive towards the need to act against pollution. EVs’ functioning is absolutely environmental friendly, thanks to the zero local emissions, energy savings and noiselessness, but these assets have a better appeal to women if they are promoted not only as bare characteristics with on-site advantages, but by pointing out the benefits for the whole society and for future generations.

3.2.2 Maximizing versus prioritizing

When considering an object or a situation, men tend to prioritize elements and tasks in order of importance. Hence, they take decisions according to priorities. On the contrary, women tend more to maximize: they do not decide according to the most important features of the object or situation, but according to the possibility of making the most of it. In other words the possibility of maximizing an object or situation underpins the decision. The majority of men tend to focus on range or speed, the most important features in a car for them [6], being therefore rather unable to look further at other features. On the contrary, women tend to consider all aspects at the same time, so that electric cars can be presented illustrating all the different advantages that maximize it. For example, the comfort of having the possibility to charge the car in one’s own garage at nighttime and of finding priority parking in shopping centers and downtown could support the choice. As a matter of fact, the autoscout24 survey [2] confirms that men tend to choose cars emotionally, while women, looking at all possible uses and advantages, choose rather more rationally.

3.2.3 Works versus bare bones

In order to take decisions, women tend to look at all the details as a whole, and therefore need a context, while men consider only the essential and therefore only need data and the object itself. Hence, EVs have greater opportunities to be chosen if they are not presented as stand-alone elements, but are contextualized, showing possible uses and practical examples of their advantages which help inspire the potential customer. It would be useful for example to present the vehicle in a likely and real situation, instead of presenting a showroom setting. In this way some characteristics become evident, like for example the noiselessness and lack of tailpipe emissions which are an advantage also for people – especially children – on the sidewalks, and not only for the environment. Some other aspects are negative if presented as bare bones, but acquire a different consideration with a whole context (i.e. extremely

low running costs, if properly presented, can overcome the high purchase price).

While men often like finding technical data in the promotional description, women prefer to find concrete examples or uses of these data: for example instead of presenting a maximal speed of 120 km/h, it is preferable to present it as having the possibility to use highways. EVs are thus presented as concrete full works in which the positive characteristics stand out and are explained with concrete positive examples, while possible limiting characteristics – namely a limited range – are simply considered as an aspect among many others, which can be evaluated basing on concrete situations.

3.2.4 Affinity versus competition

Always according to Barletta, men need more competition and challenge in order to connect, while most women tend to prefer similarity, affinity and establishing links, than competition. It is a common practice in marketing to combine a product with a famous VIP. Nevertheless, this strategy does not seem to match with women's preference of similarity and affinity. And, according to a Dutch survey [5], celebrities apparently do not effectively influence women (95% of them according to the survey), except partially for younger women. However, everybody recalls many successful products advertised by famous people, like for example Leonardo DiCaprio with the hybrid Prius.

A possible explanation of this contradiction could be that women are less influenced by perfect models who simply match their faces with a product, as they rather arouse competition or differences. Women however naturally rather look for affinity and similarity, but not necessarily only for what concerns the social status or the look, but they also look for authentic testimonials who can confirm the advantages of a product. DiCaprio, owning himself a Prius, is therefore considered an authentic positive example. Marketing of electric cars, in order to appeal to women, should therefore include authentic testimonies, maybe from famous users, but more preferably from common people with which women can easily identify.

3.2.5 Marketing consistent with sales

Besides the above mentioned aspects, marketing of electric cars should be consistent if it aims at appealing to women. D'Innocenzo [3] in her article reports and comments a research of Thomas Yaccato, which points out the fact that

women are usually holistic consumers: marketing helps approaching to the product, but if the product itself dissatisfies the expectancy, or if – in the case of electric cars – the car-dealer's shop, or the salespeople are not trustworthy, all the previous job would have been accomplished ineffectively.

3.3 Outline of a marketing proposal

The hints presented in the previous chapters represent what we consider the main features that should be borne in mind and those that should be avoided when planning a women-oriented marketing strategy for EVs. They can be regarded as guidelines that EV marketing managers can consider when developing an own strategy.

A concrete proposal we would consider can be outlined as follows: a campaign could be developed around the testimonies of different ordinary women – mothers, businesswomen, employees, ... – who tell their experience with EVs using simple but precise terms, ending with an invitation to join them in improving the situation of our world for ourselves, our society and for the future of our children. As a setting, different advantages and assets of EVs need to be illustrated, in real-life scenes that include children and men in a positive relationship. In addition, it should be provided to possible purchasers, the possibility to connect and exchange experiences with users, for example by means of an online forum, or by special events. The whole campaign should be kept rather simple and fresh but concrete, authentic and consistent, from the first advertisements to the sales shop.

4 Conclusion

It has been illustrated in this paper how electric cars have a better chance of succeeding, if the promotion is supported by a women-oriented marketing. It should also be kept in mind that such kind of marketing is risky, if it tends to be gender exclusive and also because women are not a homogeneous class and therefore they do not all think and act the same way. The considerations made here are only based on the trend of the majority of women.

Men should by no means feel excluded by a product, because it would only be counterproductive for both men and women. But if women feel attracted and convinced by a car, this one has a much better chance to be chosen and used also by men. In conclusion, it can be affirmed that it is necessary to think at men's needs and

interests when developing the electric car, in order to make it appealing and not gender-exclusive, but it is much better to keep women as a target in mind when marketing it, in order to increase the chances to succeed.

This paper, basing on marketing principles and history, illustrates a visionary proposal of marketing electric cars to women, with the intention of suggesting to any electric car maker a guideline of a different marketing strategy. As long as we know, such a strategy has not been applied to electric vehicle market yet.

The region of Mendrisio, in Switzerland, could ideally be used as a test field, where to verify this proposal, because the large pilot project VEL and the following evolution VEL2 coincided already with the Innovators' and the Early Adopters' phases [11] of the introduction to the market of electric cars, as new products; after these phases, the market – also due to the lack of vehicle offer – did not explode and develop yet. In consideration of what has been explained in this paper, the women of the region could ideally help defusing the situation, and can be considered as being ready to be addressed in a marketing strategy in order to be the Early Majority for electric vehicles.

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