

# GENDER BENDER BRAND HIJACKS AND CONSUMER REVOLT

## The Porsche Cayenne Story

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**Larson tells you that he bought his new Ford Mustang because of its performance characteristics, touting its 4.6 liter V8 engine that generates 315 horsepower and torque power like he's never felt before. He and his dad spent years in their garage rebuilding old Mustangs from the 1960s when he was growing up.**

**The crowd is thick at the bar and John has to shout so that the bartender can hear. As John yells, "A cosmopolitan with Stolichnaya Razberi," the crowd surrounding him goes quiet and then erupts into laughter. John quickly adds, "...for my girlfriend. And a Jose Cuervo tequila shot for me."**

**Carlo laughs when you ask him whether he smokes Marlboro cigarettes in order to be a cowboy. He tells you that Marlboros generate the densest smoke, thick and syrupy, just like he likes it. He's always smoked Marlboro because that's what the older boys in his neighbor smoked when he was a teenager.**

**Walking out of the theater, Dalton just shakes his head when you ask him whether he liked the movie he has just seen, Confessions of a Shopaholic, starring Isla Fisher as a Manhattan writer with a shopping addiction. Smiling, he points to his girlfriend who gushes about the movie. While she is speaking, he rolls his eyes and pretends to slit his own throat.**

### Brands are Gender Identity Markers

In today's world, the things we buy serve as identity markers, communicating who we are or who we would like to be to others around us. People who know us use our consumption as clues to understand who we are, and they judge us based on what we buy, use, and do. Our consumption communicates a lot of different things about who we are. Think about how the clothes someone wears helps tells us whether they are rich versus poor, conservative versus liberal, old versus young, yuppie versus bohemian, urban versus rural, showy versus modest, hip versus mainstream.

One central part of who we are is our gender identity—our sense of ourselves as women or men. Larson, John, Carlo, and Dalton are typical guys and they choose products, brands and consumption experiences that reflect who they are. What these consumers have realized is that the products and brands they use and the consumption experiences they choose contribute to their identity as men. Their masculinity is judged by the cars they drive, the drinks they order, the cigarettes they smoke, and the movies they like. Buy the wrong thing and one's masculinity is questioned; buy the right thing and one's masculinity is secured. Across many different product

categories, things are gendered. Think about how easy it is for you to match the following products with either men or women:

- Harley-Davidson motorcycle vs. Vespa scooter
- Mountain Dew vs. Diet Coke
- Chevy Corvette vs. Volkswagen Cabriolet
- Jack Daniels whiskey vs. Turning Leaf chardonnay
- Entourage vs. Sex in the City

### Marlboro vs. Virginia Slims

Throughout history, marketers have created gendered brands, creating their brands and the stories they crafted about them in their advertising to appeal either to men or to women. One classic example comes from The Altria Group, formerly known as Philip Morris. The Marlboro cigarette brand, known today for its rugged American West imagery, actually began life as a cigarette targeted towards women. Early advertising for Marlboro from the 1920s featured the tagline "Mild as May." It was only in the 1960s that Marlboro created the Marlboro cowboy and the mythical place he inhabits, "Marlboro Country," which has fueled the masculine image the brand enjoys in the marketplace today. Today, the Marlboro brand team hosts smokers at the Marlboro Crazy Mountain Ranch in Montana to let them live out their cowboy fantasies. At the same time that the company was giving the Marlboro brand a masculine make-over, it introduced Virginia Slims, a cigarette targeted to women, that featured taglines like "It's a woman thing" and a more elegant, narrow shape, tapered to mimic a woman's fingers.

### Diet Coke vs. Coke Zero

A more contemporary example comes from The Coca-Cola Company. For years, Diet Coke has reigned as the top selling diet soda in the marketplace. However, Diet Coke's sales have been fueled almost entirely by women. Why? Consumer research told marketers at Coca-Cola that men, increasingly conscious about their weight, would like less calories in their soda, but that they were turned off by Diet Coke and other diet sodas because of their ubiquitous appeal among women. It was only when Coca-Cola in 2005 introduced Coke Zero that men flocked to the category. Coke Zero was launched in a black can, which starkly contrasted with Diet Coke's white and silver can, reflecting, as Coca-Cola's marketers claimed, the fuller flavored, bolder drink inside. Coke Zero's irreverent launch advertising was also designed to pull in men, as was its sponsorship of the 2008 "Coke Zero 400" NASCAR

race. With the launch of Coke Zero, today's men can finally drink diet soda with impunity!

### High Tech Does Gender

Even in product categories normally thought of as gender-neutral, gendered products are emerging. In today's world, it is tough to find a college student without his or her cell phone or laptop computer—these devices have increasingly become extensions of ourselves. These tech gadgets are increasingly becoming gendered, shedding their androgynous designs for masculine or feminine elements. The new HP Mini Vivienne Tam Edition is an example. Touted as “The World's First Digital Clutch,” this new, ultrathin and ultralight notebook computer is sleeved in a gorgeous design featuring peony flowers designed by fashion designer, Vivienne Tam. The notebook contains a “tech-chic” virtual experience inside which allows users to walk on a virtual fashion catwalk and customize their computer with Vivienne Tam wallpaper, screensavers, and games. A recent post to an Ask Slashdot web forum illustrates how technology is becoming increasingly gendered and the trouble this presents for men who have bought the wrong product:



HP Vivienne Tam

**“I recently purchased a 10 inch white MSI wind. As you can see it's a small computer and it's good for what I use it for. I get a lot of comments from women saying it is 'cute' or 'adorable.' Not the good kind of cute that will get me the attention I want though, the kind of cute that says they think I have a different presence than I actually want to portray. So how can I make my netbook more manly, or at least have some witty line to respond to the their comments?” (basementman)**

### Why Do Marketers Create Gendered Brands?

Gendered brands deliver value to consumers, and therefore, deliver value to marketers. A brand has identity value for consumers if it helps them create their identities. Consumers will pay more for and remain loyal to a brand that has symbolic value that they can use to shape who they are. Brands with high levels of identity value derive a great deal of their brand equity from what the brand says about its users rather than what the product itself actually does. Given that our gender identity is so central to who we are, brands that help us be more masculine or feminine are especially prized by us as consumers. That is a reason why marketers are so anxious to create gendered brands.

However, creating a gendered brand also has its downsides. Whenever you have a brand that targets one gender, you are leaving half of your potential audience untapped. Marlboro could potentially double its sales

if it could appeal to women as well, couldn't it? Gillette, “The Best a Man Can Get,” now tells women to “Reveal the Goddess in You,” managing a full line of men's and women's shaving products. This is the trap into which many marketers of gendered brands fall. Once they have become successful in penetrating the market associated with one gender, they look longingly at the large market populated by the other gender and think, “What if...?”

### Gender-Bending Brands

Stagnant sales in many mature product categories are causing managers to look for new ways to increase their business. **Gender-bending**—taking a brand that has historically been targeted to one gender and now targeting it to the other gender—is becoming a more common occurrence. Many times, managers who want to gender-bend their brands merely adjust their brand names to include the opposite gender; for example, Procter and Gamble uses “Gillette” for its male products and “Gillette for Women” for its female products to distinguish them from each other. This helps clarify to a woman that the traditionally male brand is now making products for her and also helps protect the products men use from feminine intrusion. Other marketers create separate brand names for men and women; in the deodorant category, for example, Procter and Gamble offers a brand for each gender: Secret targets women while Old Spice targets men. Unilever sells body wash for women under the Dove brand name and body wash for men under the Axe brand name. Consumers don't know both brands are developed in the same laboratories and manufactured on the same lines. But some marketers do not adjust the names of their brands at all; instead, using the original brand names, they just launch new brand extensions targeting the opposite gender.

This is when the trouble can start. When a consumer is using a brand to create a certain type of identity (including a gender identity), changing the brand's identity meanings is risky. Consumers rely on these identity meanings to communicate who they are and feel threatened when the brand begins to mean something else. The identity signals the consumers were using to communicate their gender identity to others begin getting all mixed up and the brand becomes less attractive to its consumers because its symbolic value is diluted. Consumers' response to changing identity meanings is particularly negative when the new identity meanings coming in are undesirable. Many luxury brands that have tried to launch lower priced product lines under the same brand have experienced backlash from their



Gender-bending of motorcycles

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