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Laptop gender wars: What your netbook (or Toughbook) says about you

by Josh Fruhlinger

April 28, 2009 —If you asked, a lot of tech folks would probably tell you that the gadgets they buy are gender neutral, and that computers and consumer electronics are marketed based on their tech specs, and succeed and fail in the marketplace based on their merits -- or at least that's what they'd like you to think.

This is, of course, not true -- any more than it is for any other industry. And I'm forced to admit that I didn't really give the matter much thought until about a month ago, when I read [an Ask Slashdot post](#) in which a male poster's masculinity was apparently threatened by his tiny laptop: "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 their comments?"

[For more on netbooks see: [My Dream Netbook: IT Pros Describe the Ideal Device](#)]

Was it possible that an inanimate hunk of metal and plastic (and a little one, at that) could cause some poor soul such anxiety? What sort of messages about gender are built (or read) into these little boxes?



Photo by [alisdair](#)

The rise of the marketeer

Another fact that techies probably don't want to deal with is the notion that the gadgets and computers that occupy so much of their days are marketed to begin with. And yet this is a fundamental reality of a business where nearly everything is built from commodity parts in outsourced manufacturing processes. "With little technological differences between their products, marketers are looking beyond speeds and feeds to differentiate their brands," says Denise Lee Yohn, an independent consultant who works on branding issues. "Design, color, form factor, and texture are the new key features for tech products."

And it is into those niches that gender-based marketing can start to get a foothold -- especially as electronics companies began to grapple with the fact that women make more electronic purchasing decisions than they might have assumed. (A [recent survey by Retrevo](#) indicated that women by some measures were more knowledgeable about tech buzzwords than men.) Andrea Learned, gender trends expert and Founder of [Learned On Women](#), explains the path that companies embarked on: "When electronics brands first decided to go after the women's market, the only thing they could think of was literally making it pink, or more colorful, or



thinking of it as an 'accessory,' more than a fully functional tool for a busy woman's life." Gerry Myers, CEO and president of [Advisory Link](#), recalls a move by electronics retailer Best Buy along these lines: "They remodeled the stores spending millions of dollars, but made real missteps by having a pink area, even with pink balloons and pink umbrellas to help women out in the rain."



Photo by [Kai Hendry](#)

The gender trap

You may be surprised to hear that this approach was not well-regarded by most of the consultants I spoke to. "It is tough to reach women effectively, if you start out with gender assumptions," Learned, who has written a report called "[Beware the gender trap](#)" and a book called [Don't Think Pink](#), said. "If any computer company thought color choices were going to be the big ticket and suddenly all sorts of women would come out of the woodwork for that alone, they were wrong. And their assumption may actually have irritated women who are especially savvy about marketing."

Yohn agrees. "Companies should take care not to over-emphasize the gender orientation of their products. To capture the widest appeal and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes that alienate, they should pursue specific styles and aesthetics that resonate with both men and women." Learned echoes that last point: "The challenge for so many consumer electronics companies is to be inspired and guided by the women's market, but not *alienate men*."

From the other direction

You may have noticed that my initial curiosity, about how someone's computer threatened his masculinity, led me to a number of discussions about marketing to women, not men. My initial queries were about "gender" in marketing, and so I was very struck that people came back to talk to me about women in particular. But ChristieLyn Diller, an adjunct professor of women's studies at Towson University, says that shouldn't come as a surprise. "From my educated opinion, this is rooted in the fact that our society, in all spheres, is rooted in the masculine generic, a byproduct of our patriarchal structure. Think of how we refer to everyone as 'guys' or 'mankind', etc. So when gender issues come up, it makes us think of the 'other' category, in this case women, without reference to the dominant group, men, which requires no explanation. Lesser groups require qualifiers to let us know that we are not referring to the dominant group."

"The challenge for so many consumer electronics companies is to be inspired and guided by the women's market, but not alienate men."

Yohn agrees, and believes that many marketers think along these lines -- to their detriment. "In the computer and electronics categories, when marketers think about gender-specific appeals, they think about women -- which is part of the problem. Many try to overcompensate for their natural inclination to target men and so the efforts seem forced or artificial."

Nevertheless, some of the experts I talked to did approach matters with masculinity in mind -- and believed that, in the world of tech, anyway, it was best to go beyond stereotypes. Mandy Minor, [J Allan Studios](#), works on business-to-business IT marketing; she says that "experience has taught me that most B2B IT is still a man's world," but in her marketing efforts, she "never take[s] it to 'football manly' -- I keep my clients' messaging in the 'smart and in-the-know guy' territory." Similarly, Yohn cast a jaundiced eye on a campaign promoting Panasonic's [Toughbook](#) -- "some of their ads are so loaded with testosterone, it's comical."

The best of both worlds

If there's one common thread you'll notice in all of these comments, it's this: don't be heavy handed. Marketing too strongly towards one gender -- women, in most cases -- can turn off both the savvy women you want to reach and men as well. Learned says: "I often cite Apple as an example of a company that very effectively

markets to women without making it obvious -- and who knows if they've ever done any actual 'women's market' research. It appeals to men for some reasons and women for some others, or maybe, just maybe, it appeals to a wide cross-section of people based more on other things, not gender, which makes for very good marketing."

But what about our Slashdot reader, wracked with anxiety over what his tiny, effeminate netbook said about him? It's true that no one technique is going to win over everyone; surely those testosterone-drenched Toughbook ads appealed to some folks. "Obviously it must be working," says Diller. "These companies make a lot of money by expanding to the 'gendered' market." Nevertheless, it's worth noting that a significant majority of the responses to that Slashdot post boiled down to "Women are talking to you because of your laptop, and you're *complaining*?" It seems that most of us, men and women, are OK using a cute laptop.

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