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What Do Women Really Want?

Nothing more than a little respect—in the global marketplace.

Excerpted from the interview with Jessica Bennett

It may be a man's world, but in the new millennium, it's the women who are controlling the wallets. In 2010, women are the majority of the American workforce, and the breadwinners or co-breadwinners in two thirds of American households. Yet while women in this country are responsible for 83 percent of all consumer purchases, they're often ignored—or misunderstood—by mainstream retailers. (You think I want a pink car? Really?) In his new book, *What Women Want*, consumer researcher Paco Underhill explains what makes a product, place, or service female-friendly—and why the marketplace better listen up. He spoke with NEWSWEEK's Jessica Bennett. Excerpts:

You joke that you're a bald, aging retail wonk. Why write a book about women?

Never in the history of our species has there been more money in the pockets of women who are spending for themselves. Whether we're working on a new Nokia flagship in Shanghai or a Citi branch in Singapore or a shopping mall in Dubai, the issue keeps coming up: what makes us female-friendly? We seem to live in this world that's designed, managed, and owned by men, yet we expect women to be participants in it.

But you're not just talking about girly industries like makeup and fashion.

Women buy everything: trucks, lawn mowers, boats, cars. They are a major force in not just being the buyer but the major influencer in the majority of buying in this country.

How do women consume differently from men?

To give you one example, a woman buys technology as an appliance rather than a technology. So while a guy may think he's got to have the iPad because it's so cool, a woman will think, "Gee, I've been carrying a lot of books around in my purse lately—maybe this will save me some weight." It's just different ways of processing it.

So what do women want?

I think, first of all, they want recognition. They want to be acknowledged as the force that they are. Second, they want respect—and respect doesn't mean selling me a car in Mary Kay pink. And the third, I think, is hygiene—the idea that for female consumers, clean matters. If I walk into a hotel room and see a hair on the bed, it doesn't bother me as much as it bothers you.

And you think most retailers are ignoring that.

Whether we're talking about the check-in process at a major hotel, a dressing room in a prototype H&M, or an ExxonMobil station, [retailers are building with men in mind]. Let's take Exxon: [it's as though] the concept of a woman using a gas pump just [hasn't] sunk in. The pump itself—it's the size, how it fits into the car, and that one of things that will [determine] where women fill up is whether there's a place for them to wash their hands.

Why are you taking up this issue now?

Women now outnumber men in institutions of higher learning 10 to six, from law to medical to college. We passed over a very magic moment over the past couple of years, where if you were an employed American woman under 30 working in a city, you were out-earning your male counterpart. There's no question there's a glass ceiling out there, but the process of how we function within today's world is responding to and will increasingly respond to the changing status of women.

What will happen to businesses who don't recognize women's growing influence?

Well, they'll [be] confined to the dusty heap of history.

Still, people often have a hard time understanding that what's good for women is good for everyone. Do you think men feel threatened by the rise of women?

I can look in the mirror and think, "What's going to happen to guys like me?" I'm not sure in some ways that I like where it's all going, personally. I feel as if I'm cognizant that even within the structure of my own life, there are things that are unfair. Meaning that I recognize that I'm an aging guy—[and it's women who are rising to the top]. On the other hand, it's my opinion that the evolutionary process that women are going through is fundamental for us as a society and species.

Can we survive in the future without capitalizing on women's power?

I think women are our best hope for the evolution of the planet.