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## Buying Without Guys

*Cleanliness, safety and, please, no salesmen on commission.*

By MEGHAN COX GURDON

On a recent road trip, I took a shower at a roadside Best Western. Given that motel bathrooms are never luxurious, my expectations were low. Still, as I stepped into the tub I was conscious of being distinctly pleased by the shower curtain. Hung from a curved rather than straight rod, it billowed pleasantly outward. It even gave the grim little tiled room a faint whiff of spa. A happy accident of design? Not a chance, says Paco Underhill. In "What Women Want," Mr. Underhill explains that bowed shower curtains reflect the growing sensitivity among hoteliers to the unarticulated but deeply felt demands of female travelers. Chief among these demands is cleanliness. "With an old-fashioned, straight-across shower curtain, there's always the perception it's been touched, or contaminated somehow, by countless other guests," Mr. Underhill writes. "By never touching you, the bowed shower curtain deftly sidesteps the gross-out factor."

In the pages of this chatty if rather unfocused jaunt, Mr. Underhill goes on to reveal many similar adaptations that companies are making, or woefully failing to make, in order to win female customers. Mr. Underhill once studied with the urban anthropologist William H. Whyte, and he has made his name as a purveyor of retail insights—those little (and sometimes large) strategies that companies can pursue to turn idle browsers into active shoppers. He revealed some of his discoveries in "Why We Buy" (2000), which drew on his two decades of observing the in-store traffic patterns and buying preferences of consumers. Among that book's lessons: Most shoppers turn right when they enter a store; and women find narrow aisles rather creepy. Mr. Underhill also runs a consulting firm, EnviroSell, which advises clients such as Target, Wal-Mart and Estee Lauder.

In "What Women Want," Mr. Underhill argues that the female dollar has never been as strong as it is now and that it is simply good business to figure out how best to sell to this broad demographic. In 2005, he says, "for the first time in history, young women under the age of thirty in the largest American cities overtook men in earning power."

So: What *do* women want? Cleanliness, as we've learned. Also control, safety and considerateness. Give women these intangibles and a few others, Mr. Underhill suggests, and they will give your business their custom. As a case study, he invites us into Best Buy, the chain of cavernous electronics stores with the big blue-and-yellow sign. While its competitors Circuit City

and Comp USA have disappeared into bankruptcy, Best Buy has survived, Mr. Underhill says, by adapting itself in distinctly female-friendly ways. Digital cameras are laid out on tables that are curvy and organic-looking rather than hard-edged and angular. Employees reassure the customer that they don't work on commission (women dread being hustled). Giant photos on the walls show people warmly enjoying the store's products. The central concept that Best Buy gets, Mr. Underhill says, is this: "Men buy instruments of technology, whereas women buy instruments of relationship."

That has the ring of rightness. If the bow of a shower curtain can make a woman feel more at ease, why wouldn't cozy images of a snuggling couple watching television make an electronics store somehow more hospitable? Mr. Underhill has advised a client in Japan to shift women's hair-removal products away from the men's razors and put them into the lingerie section, "so that the act of smoothing and moisturizing a pair of female legs is detached from machismo and utilitarianism, and realigned with sensuality." His firm helped a beer maker expand sales in Brazil by replacing the buxom young women on labels and signs with images of families celebrating together.

Mr. Underhill notes approvingly that, in Holland, female-friendly parking lots feature spaces defined as boxes, not simply parallel lines. "Perhaps because of biological imperatives, Dutch designers have found that females are more comfortable positioning themselves—and their small cars—*over* something rather than *within* two defined lines."

Not all of "What Women Want" is quite so informative. Mr. Underhill is an observer, not a historian or a theoretician, and sometimes he gets a bit giddy. When discussing exercise, for instance, he brings up Bikram yoga, which is also known as "hot yoga" for the super-heated studios in which it is practiced. "The body sweats out roughly 750 calories as a no-nonsense instructor barks out orders through a miked headphone," he writes. "The moans, groans, and sighs you hear around you are animalistic, almost sexual in nature." More men than women are drawn to this version of yoga, Mr. Underhill asserts, adding helpfully, "but there are a whole lot of female Bikram warriors, too." And in a chapter that considers women's feelings about their hair, Mr. Underhill launches into a startling digression about merkins, or pubic wigs, and his own response to a famously explicit Courbet painting.

It isn't entirely clear what the author means by including such passages, nor how some of his quirkier observations would help a marketing executive trying to attract more female buyers (unless he's in the merkin trade). Still, in "What Women Want," Mr. Underhill shows himself to be both an amiable and a knowledgeable guide to the shifting retail landscape. He is certainly spot on about motel shower curtains.

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