



Avoiding Gender Fender Benders

By Patti Hathaway, Business Advisor & Author

Would you like to gain enlightening, career-building knowledge and the skills that will give you the winning edge when dealing with the opposite gender? Are men and women really that different from each other and how does that play itself out in work situations?

One of my favorite books is written by sociolinguistic expert Deborah Tannen, PhD. entitled You Just Don't Understand and much of what you'll learn here is based on Dr. Tannen's research. Please keep in mind, that the descriptions will NOT fit all men and all women. There are always exceptions to any research.

One of the basic differences between men and women are their reasons for conversing and what they actually talk about. Women converse to build connections and intimacy. They view conversations as negotiations for closeness. Women see individuals within a network of connections and friendships. Life is viewed as a community and women desire to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Therefore, women tend to converse about their relationships with family, friends, people in the office, etc. Men perceive this often to be gossiping when in reality it is the way women build more connections and create greater levels of intimacy.

Men, on the other hand, view conversations as negotiations to obtain the upper hand. They view life as a contest and men struggle to preserve their independence. Men tend to see individuals within a hierarchy in which they are either one-up or one-down. Therefore, men converse and compare notes about things...often toys -- such as cars, stereo equipment, and ways they have conquered home improvement projects. They also will discuss facts and opinions about sports teams or new events. They like to exhibit their knowledge and skill by telling jokes or sharing facts and information because it puts them in center-stage.

The essential element in communication for men is to gain status and independence. This is why one of the internal customer service complaints is that men tend to resist letting people know where they are going and when they will be back. This simple request helps the remaining employees field phone calls and customer inquiries. Yet, it seems constraining and puts the man in a less independent role than he desires or is comfortable with.

I once saw a sweatshirt that said "The first rule of manhood: I know the way. Never ask for directions." This drives many women crazy, but it is just one of the ways men exhibit their independence and status. If men were to admit they were lost, it would be admitting that someone knows more than they do. When a male customer asks for help, make sure you do not belittle him in any little way. It was difficult for him to ask in the first place.

This desire for status is also why many men have a need to read the newspaper and be on top of current events everyday. It gives them something to converse about and impress others with their knowledge. They would not want someone else to know more than they. This may explain why the men's restrooms in many of the nicer hotels and restaurants have the business, front or sports page posted above the urinals. Men can learn why taking care of nature. And, when they return from the restroom, those same males can impress others with new information.

Women on the other hand rarely go to the restroom alone. Most men are curious about that. We go to the restroom and share the latest news about mutual acquaintances and just generally chat to create intimacy.

These gender differences play out in the home as well. For men, home is a place where they don't have to prove themselves or impress others through their verbal display. Translation: men tend to talk less at home than at work. For women, however, home is a place where they are free to talk and where they find the greatest need to talk with those they are closest to. Translation: women will often times talk more at home than at work. Problem?? Can be.

Heloise and Hagar in the cartoon strip, "Hagar the Horrible" have this problem. Heloise asks Hagar "So...do you like your dinner?" "Burp!" "That much, huh?" She goes on to exclaim, "We never talk anymore." Hagar replies, "What do you want to talk about?" Heloise jumps in "Oh, things like, did you have a good day? Was your raid successful? Did anything unusual happen? Are you going back again soon?" Hagar continuing to eat, grunts "Yup." Heloise sighs and says, "We'll try that again tomorrow." Sound like your dinner conversation???

However, when you have a wife who comes home with a problem and brings it up to her husband in the evening, more than likely, the husband will try to solve the problem for his wife. Two days later she'll come home discussing the same problem and her husband will say, "didn't you do ABC like I told you to?" No. Because she wasn't looking for him to solve the problem. The solution?? Tell each other what it is that you need from each other.

Another basic difference underlying what we've already said is that men give facts and information when they talk. Compare that to women who's goal is to build rapport when they converse. Have you ever noticed how men in customer service give lots of information and facts while women tend to key in on building rapport and relationships with customers?

Let's talk about some other possible implications. Men and women tend to deal with conflict differently as well. Women are more astute to nonverbals and their intuition or sense that something is wrong. Men on the other hand can ignore those same nonverbals unless it escalates. When you have a conflict with a woman, you have broken that important intimacy and it will take time to heal the relationship. Some women will react by having a cold war with another person.... they won't talk or even acknowledge the person involved. Often, it is due to hurt feelings and the loss of rapport with that person. This can cause some real tension within a customer service department.

Men, on the other hand, amazingly enough, can have a loud argument at 10 a.m. and then go out for

lunch with the same man. Women have difficulty comprehending that scenario. Didn't they just have an argument? Yes. But the conflict was over and they moved on. In customer service conflicts, women tend to take the complaint personally and let it bother them. Men don't like the confrontation but are able to move on to the next customer more readily.

And how about problem-solving? The gender differences are also apparent there. Women like to discuss problems as a way of building intimacy and connection. Men like to solve problems. Remember, men have conversations to obtain the upper hand, therefore, giving advice comes naturally. Women, on the other hand, have conversations to build closeness, therefore, giving empathy comes naturally.

In the end, when it comes to gender differences and customer service, we may all do best by heeding the Chinese proverb that says, "From listening comes wisdom and from speaking comes repentance". We would all do best if we would learn to listen to others more often (especially our customers), so we would end up repenting far less.

Patti Hathaway, CSP, The CHANGE AGENT, is one of fewer than 7% women worldwide to have earned the Certified Speaking Professional designation from the National Speakers Association for her proven presentation skills. She is a Business Advisor and the author of 6 books that have been translated into 5 languages and have sold over 100,000 copies. Patti solves your people challenges by providing highly customized solutions to meet your needs. Contact Patti at 1-800-339-0973 or at her web site: www.thechangeagent.com for information on her speaking and consulting services or to receive her free e-mail newsletter/blog.