



AVOIDING GENDER FENDER BENDERS

BY PATTI HATHAWAY

Are men and women really that different from each other? According to Deborah Tannen, the answer is yes—at least in the way they express themselves verbally. Tannen is the author of *You Just Don't Understand* and other books which describe her research into how men and women communicate.

Although there are always exceptions to any research, and Tannen's descriptions will not fit all men and all women, they offer some valuable insights for those in the customer service field.

The differences between men and women include their reasons for conversing and what they actually talk about. Women see individuals within a network of connections and friendships. Therefore, women tend to converse about their relationships with family, friends, people in the office, etc. Men sometimes perceive this as gossip when in reality it is the way women build more connections and create greater levels of intimacy.

Men, on the other hand, tend to see individuals within a hierarchy in which they are either one-up or one-down. Men view life as a contest and conversation as negotiation.

What this means in a customer service situation is that men will give facts, information and advice when they talk, while women key in on building rapport and relationships with customers.

Another difference: 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.

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, be sure you understand that it was probably difficult for him to ask in the first place.

Men and women tend to deal with conflict differently as well. With women, when you have a conflict you have broken that important intimacy, and it will take time to heal the relationship. Two men, however, can have a loud argument at 10 a.m. and then go out for lunch a couple of hours later.

In customer service conflicts, women tend to take the complaint personally and let it bother them. Men don't *like* confrontation any more than women, but they are able to move on to the next customer more readily.

And how about problem solving? The gender differences are also apparent there. 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, they like to discuss problems as a way of building rapport.

In the end, when it comes to gender differences and customer service, we may all do best by heeding the Chinese proverb: "From listening comes wisdom and from speaking comes repentance."

We would all do best if we would learn to listen to others more often, so we would end up repenting less.

Patti Hathaway provides customized keynotes and seminars. Contact Patti at her Web site (<http://www.thechangeagent.com>) for information on her speaking services or to receive her complimentary E-mail newsletter.