

Women shoppers have power to ring changes at the tills

They have the money to spend and the desire to shop. Now they must make themselves heard, argues Rachael Oakes-Ash.



THE
HECKLER

I'm a shopaholic. I find it impossible to pass a shoe shop, I never pay off my credit card in full each month and the word sale sends my heart racing.

Of course, my boyfriend doesn't get it - he thinks a mule is a half-bred horse, *pashmina* is Hindi for kiss and a clutch is a pedal in a car.

But my condition must be contagious because my girlfriends race me to the sales rack to buy clothes they'll never wear, and they think retail therapy is covered by Medicare.

These girls are intelligent, well-educated women. They can balance a cheque book, have property portfolios and own their own businesses, but they go weak at the knees when the words discount and Versace appear in the same sentence.

Women consume for a variety of reasons: for instant gratification, as a form of therapy, a reward, a bribe, a pastime, as bonding with

friends and even to pick up men (just check out Neutral Bay Woolies on a Tuesday night).

Men, on the other hand, are in and out of a shop before you can say "football". They'll buy whatever fits, and have no need to poke, prod and price the meat in aisle six, preferring to grab what they see first and leave the store.

Sixty-five per cent of male shoppers who try something on buy it, regardless of colour, pattern or cut. You only have to walk down the street to know that's true.

Only 25 per cent of female shoppers who try something on buy it. Women take their time. When shopping with a female friend they'll take an average of eight minutes and 15 seconds to make a purchase; when shopping with a man they'll only take four minutes and 41 seconds.

Consumerism became mass market in the early 1900s with the introduction and boom of department stores such as Myer

and supermarkets such as Woolworths, where shopping was convenient and came with a money-back guarantee.

But it wasn't until the 1950s that consumer market research was done, and it revealed what we all know: women are a spending mass unto their own.

Before this it had been thought that while women did almost 80 per cent of the shopping, it was shopping for the family, children or the menfolk. As if a woman had no shopping needs of her own.

Today women make up 30 to 40 per cent of wage earners. We buy 50 per cent of sports equipment, 51 per cent of personal computers and are responsible for half the car market. Women pay for almost half of home improvements (hence Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren making house paint) and control 80 per cent of the consumer dollar.

So why do I still find it hard to find clothes in my size?

Why are car salesmen patronising to me and talk to my partner as if I am not there? Why do waiters give the bill to my male dining companion even

though he is my client? I'm the one with the bucks here and I do my research.

I went into a car yard in Sydney recently to buy a vehicle. This car yard had a cafe, a gym, a valet parking, the lot - but it didn't have a savvy salesman. I walked in, pointed to the brand and make of car I wanted to buy and asked the price. The salesman began his pitch about all the

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knick-knacks and colour schemes it comes in.

I asked again what the price was. He launched into the shopping size of the boot and the difference between leather and fabric interior.

I asked, slightly more loudly, how much this two-litre, six-cylinder car with all-wheel driving, fuel injection and anti-break-locking system would cost me. He told me that silver was the best colour for resale value.

I told him that he had just lost a \$40,000 sale and resultant commission and left the building.

If you are a female consumer it's time to make your voice heard. Write to the shop with the bad service, send back your food if it's not what you ordered, walk out on the patronising car salesman.

We've spent thousands of years accepting second best. Now we're the ones with the true

spending power, let's use it to improve consumer standards and personal service.

Rachael Oakes-Ash is the author of Good Girls Do Swallow and has 42 lay-bys awaiting final payment.

In this column you are invited to apply your wit to anything that makes your blood boil. Send 750 words, with your contact details, to sbaldwin@smh.com.au or GPO Box 506, Sydney 2001. Submissions may be edited and may also be published on the Internet.