

Let's talk about sex

Men are from Mars and women from Venus? They are when it comes to shopping. Michael Bird looks at the battle for the sexes on our high streets and why retailers should take account

Let's face it - men just can't shop. The talk of 1990s new man, fashion man, and now brand-conscious man may never have been relevant to the supermarket aisle or the high street.

Many of us men still break into a cold sweat when a sales assistant tries to help us. We dither over cost, panic and then buy something we don't want. Concede defeat - women wear the trousers when it comes to shopping.

"Browsing for women is the lifeblood of shopping. Men want to go into a shop and if they don't like what they see, they want to get out quickly," says Christina Afors at retail research group Cultural Imprint, which has conducted research on shopping behaviour for Clarks, Lego and Unilever.

Afors argues that despite retailers' attempts to appeal to both genders, shopping is still a pleasure for women and a chore for men. "Retailers have to admit that, for men, shopping is an ordeal. If men have not bought anything on a shopping trip, they feel a failure. Women try out different identities and even if they don't buy anything have a good shopping experience."

Afors argues that the identity of a woman is characterised by a series of life changes, such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, motherhood or the menopause, while the male has one identity that increases in stature as he grows older.

Work for Clarks sparked a new strategy for the shoe retailer, after it revealed areas in which it was failing.

Cultural Imprint found Clarks was adept at targeting men, but less successful with women, who it should have been selling to via a series of female identities according to the type of shoe, such as glamour girl, working girl or weekend girl. "It needed to be a place where you could see yourself with a new outlook. Women open up to an emotional hook," says Afors.

Studies found that men prefer to buy the same style and often purchase two pairs of the same style, to save the pressure of having to return to the shop. "Clarks had the right idea with men, who want more of the same."

Dr Tim Denison, director of knowledge management at Solution Products Systems, agrees with this description. "Women buy more outfits. Men tend to buy single items and replacement items," he says.

The research also highlighted the fact that Clarks was under the misapprehension that it was a store for family shopping. "It thought that people shopped together. But the concept of family shopping is an idea of hell. People shop individually," Afors says.

Denison, however, argues that families or couples can shop together successfully. "Partners can act as a shopper's best friend or assistant, and there is a higher conversion rate for couples than individuals."

Afors found that there were too many lines on sale in Clarks and its marketing focus needed to change. As the firm's heritage was built on the concept of a perfect fit, this was the theme its marketing followed but "it was too medical". A perfect fit is not important for women; it is more important that the shoe fits their mindset, Afors says.

Clarks' product range was narrowed and the shops redesigned to give women different recipes for identities. Known brands were clearly marked and Clarks has subsequently become the UK's number one shoe retailer.

Denison says the design of men's and women's fashion departments needs to be different. Menswear departments tend to look a lot simpler, in a block layout, with an easy-to-understand product range, he says. "We use the eye as a means to understand and navigate the store. This is not true in the case of womenswear. Combinations of clothes are put together."

Elements that appeal to other senses, such as the touch of a garment, are also more important for women.

"In terms of behaviour," he says, "when women go into a clothes store they take the item off the rail and put it against their body. Men don't."

Afors says men need an alibi to shop, an excuse to buy something luxurious. An example is the former strapline for Mars, "A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play", or KitKat's "Have a break". A man allows himself to indulge in chocolate, providing he has a rational reason to do so.

The modern equivalent of this is the concept that brands are a mark of quality. A man will spend £100 on a pair of Nike trainers because of the brand's associations of comfort and design, combined with patronage by world-class athletes. "Men are looking for an alibi," says Afors.

Brands also offer security, especially to insecure 18 to 24-year-old men. Denison says: "This age group is very brand conscious. They spend more time in-store and are enthusiastic about finding clothes in order to enjoy Friday nights and build up their persona."

He says men prefer branded clothing as it gives them an accepted identity to fit in with their peers. "Women are more confident about buying clothes that are not branded; it's not the name that matters, but whether it looks good."

He says one of the reasons for this is that women develop an understanding of clothes shopping faster than men. At 14 or 15 years old they are more attracted by labels, but as they grow older the overall look takes precedence.

Women will ask strangers in shopping aisles their view on an item of clothing, or where they bought something. Men rarely do this. Afors says this is because heterosexual men do not want to appear gay. "Behaviourally, men will go out of their way to give the impression of not being gay."

Men prefer a more impersonal shopping experience. Denison says they do not feel comfortable in a clothes retailer but adds: "Where an assistant does manage to build a relationship, men are easier to sell to."

Is this due to the fact that when a sales assistant has helped the British male, the consumer feels he should make a purchase? "Men are less hard-nosed when it comes to feeling obliged to buy something," admits Denison.

From Afors' research she discovered that the only time men were willing to spend more time in-store and give themselves up to a sales assistant, was when they were shopping for a wedding. It is an important threshold in their life, so needs to be treated seriously. This means it should be the role of a retailer to make every male shopper feel like he is shopping for a wedding all the time.

However, there is evidence that gender differences are blurring. "A lot of women are beginning to shop like men," says Denison. He says that the traditional male image of wanting to get in and out of a shop and make a purchase as soon as possible is a trait that is appearing among women aged between 20 and 40. He puts this down to lack of time and work pressure. "For them, retail is becoming less of a leisure activity and more functional."

Denison says men spend longer in supermarkets and come away with larger shopping baskets than women. He says men are more comfortable in the supermarket zone as they have been shopping in this environment for a longer period of time.

He also puts their ease among the supermarket aisle down to men's willingness to be taken in by supermarket marketing strategies. "We are a bit more gullible than women," he admits.

He points out the new generation of male shopper is changing. "Younger men, in their teens to mid-20s, are shopping far more frequently. They are beginning to shop in groups, like teenage girls."

Technology is educating men to become more confident consumers and use the Internet instead of the high street. Research last year by pollster Netpoll found men go shopping online as a research tool, before buying in a shop, while women use it a time-saving device.

"Men are more likely to do price comparisons on the Internet," says Netpoll director Andy Mayer. "They use it as a substitute for walking around shops."

"Men feel unsafe and the retail space isn't helping," adds Afors. She believes retailers can help by creating a male "den", where a man can roam and experiment without feeling under pressure to purchase.

She says one retail space that allows men to be themselves is the Early Learning Centre. "You have a space here where children can play in the middle of the store and parents can see how they play. Boys need space and there's no fear if a child breaks the toys."

Gender in Britain today

- Women working full-time earn 82 per cent of the average hourly earnings of male full-time employees.
- 838,000 women are employed as sales and retail assistants, making up 72 per cent of the workforce, as opposed to 327,000 men
- 51 per cent of the population are female, but only 18 per cent of members of parliament are women.

Source: Equal Opportunities Commission

Raise a glass to our differences

Men still do not think of others when shopping for alcohol. Almost 60 per cent of lager to be consumed at home is bought by women, according to research by Coors Brewers.

It also found that nearly all women are thinking about someone else when they are buying beer, while two-thirds of men have only themselves in mind.

"One of the significant differences is that when women want a premium range drink, they prefer to drink it from glass," adds Coors off-trade category marketing controller Linda O'Brien.

She says this information has helped in this summer's relaunch of Grolsch and in positioning brands such as still alcopop Reef.

She points out there has been a rise in popularity of flavoured alcoholic beverages among women as an alternative to wine - "for parties, barbecues or girls getting ready to go out".

Women are also buying in multipacks, prompting marketers to sell these

products in packs of eight. But neither men or women, she says, buy on brand. "All our research shows that flavour is the number-one reason for a purchase, followed by value for money.