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IN YOUR CORNER

At too many dealers, cars are boys' toys

By PAUL WENSKE
Columnist

When Gretchen Gleue goes car shopping, she takes a guy along — not to buy the car, but to get a salesman to notice her.



The last time she was in the market, the Topeka businesswoman spent weeks researching models. She knew the options she wanted and what she was willing to pay. It didn't matter. "If I stepped on the lot alone or with a female lunch companion, we would've been sunburned before the salesmen headed in our direction," she said.

Her reaction: "Get a clue, salesman."

Gleue is one of nearly a dozen women who filled me in on the travails of dealing with clueless salesmen. Some resort to having a husband or male friend in tow for support.

The message to a car industry in the doldrums: Forget the gimmicky stuff, and simply treat women with respect.

It's a problem the auto industry is trying to address, partly by devoting more time to training the sales force and by hiring more saleswomen. After all, women carry enormous purchasing power.

The women I heard from were responding to my Web column last week about **Capital One's** "Gender Rules of the Road" survey that said 77 percent of women plan to take a man along for their next car purchase. Seventy percent said that the financial finagling on price is the hardest part.

But the respondents said it's not because they weren't prepared. The process is painful simply because it's steeped in an intimidating male-dominated culture that is a turnoff.

Vicki Trembly, who runs **Cranial Aerobics**, test-drove her car, negotiated the price and handled the financing. When she went to get her tags, she found she couldn't. The car dealership had put all the paperwork in her husband's name. "I don't even remember telling them his name. My name was nowhere," she said.

"I'm not a raging feminist, but that really bugged me."

Are some salesmen so out of touch that they're willing to shoot themselves in the foot?

Unfortunately, yes, said Sandra Kinsler, editor in chief of **WomanMotorist.com** and **NewCarBuyingGuide.com**.

"Dealership culture is the reason that women, and often men, feel uncomfortable," Kinsler said.

"The feeling of intimidation comes out of the belief that women are less technologically capable than men and that men make the tech decisions in most households."

Neither belief is true. Women buy more than 50 percent of cars and influence 85 percent of all purchases. That makes them a big cog in the process. Still, "even normally strong women can quickly be made to feel at the mercy of the dealership when unprepared for the psychological game that is being played," Kinsler said.

Many salesmen are simply blind to differences between men and women, said Gerry Myers of [Advisorylink-dfw.com](http://www.advisorylink-dfw.com), a consultant who advises auto dealers on selling to women.

She said men may relish the sparring. Women, she thinks, are more into forming relationships when negotiating a deal. So when women are ignored, they take it more personally. "Salesmen sometimes act as if the woman is invisible," she said. "They will ask a question and turn to the man for the answer."

But here's a clue: When women shop for fun, they go to the mall.

"Women don't go shopping for fun for cars," Myers said. "So if they are there, they are a serious buyer — more so than many men."

Myers advises women not to play the game. If you don't get good service, let the dealer know and walk away. "Nothing is going to change until the dealers feel it's hurting them financially," she said.

Kinsler suggests that women who bone up using the Internet can become confident car-buying warriors. "Prepare, prepare, prepare," she said. "It isn't hard to know more than the salesperson."

That worked for Jennifer Fennell. The senior retail buyer went looking for a car, taking her husband along solely for support. During the negotiating, the general manager kept trying to deal with her husband, who would just smile and "look back at me. And I would look at the general manager until he finally would shake his head and actually give me eye contact."

After the contract was written, she went to pick up their daughter. Thirty minutes later she got a call on her cell from her husband, back at the dealership. The manager wanted to increase the interest rate.

"Just then, the GM walked back into his office and said (to her husband) 'Is that your wife on the phone? Never mind — we'll hold the rate. Just don't (come) back here.'"

She found the comment offensive. Still, she was flattered: "I have found there is a huge advantage to being a woman, if you play your cards right."

On the Web

www.cars.com

www.edmunds.com/women

www.womanmotorist.com

Women and wheels

Women don't have to be taken advantage of, experts say. Some tips:

- Do your homework. You can get all the information about the models you are considering online.

- Know the ranges in invoice prices, optional features, engine options, mileage, safety ratings and insurance costs.
- Never divulge how you will pay until the price is settled.
- Consider negotiating online or through faxes to generate records.

Sources: Sandra Kinsler and Gerry Myers

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