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Women Leaders in Marketing: Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

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Women Leaders in Marketing: 
Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

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Introduction

During my internships I was able to have open conversations with women coworkers about the struggles women face in their careers that men do not. I was surprised by statements about low statistics of women in executive positions, unfair recognition, and aspects of women's schedules or workplace environment that did not fit their needs. I had assumed these issues would no longer apply in modern, inclusive, and successful businesses and corporations. As I searched for a thesis topic, more and more women encouraged me to study the differences between men and women's working or leadership styles, and any inequalities women face.

Entering into my research I prepared myself to hear of stories where women were passed over jobs in favor of male applicants, or that they had not been considered for a promotion because they had children at home or were pregnant. After hearing women still felt men excelled more quickly and frequently, I believed the issue must originate in the executive suite. I prepared to find disgruntled women serving under patriarchal men. However, what I found was quite different.

To conduct the research for this project I contacted women who serve as my mentors and asked them to participate in interviews about why they chose marketing, their leadership roles, and challenges they have faced in their career. At the end of each interview I asked the women to suggest another female role model in marketing to interview. Many of the women suggested other women at their level of career, often recognizing a colleague on their own team. Others suggested their managers, and a few identified women outside their organization. I continued interviews based on availability of myself and the interviewee up to April 2017.

Intent

The intent of this thesis is to provide an honest look into the lives of professional female marketers to allow younger generations to prepare for challenges they will face. As I approached the women who would participate in interviews, I explained this project provided them a means to mentor young women whom they had never had a chance to meet. Personally, I have been fortunate to have many confident, wonderful female mentors, and I wanted to pass along the advice I had received from them. Many young women entering the marketing field from college have not been able to interact with so many strong women role models. One of the consistent themes of the interviews was the bond between women to support other women. I want this thesis to exemplify that bond, and to develop our future women leaders.
Methodology

I conducted the research for “Women Leaders in Marketing: Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling” with guidance from Dr. Ann Veeck. All research used was primary research. Prior to the outset of this project my opinions on the subject were formulated through articles, discussions with professional men and women, and from lectures or discussion panels. However, I have done my best to professionally retract personal bias from the interview questions and this thesis.

Nine interviews were conducted with women at various stages of their career in marketing. Three of the subjects were nearing the end of their career, three have made a few role changes within the field of marketing, and three are in the beginning of their marketing careers. Each subject had to currently be in a marketing role, or have been in a marketing role within the past year. Initial contacts were all women who had previously mentored me. Additional subjects were contacted on a referral basis. Subjects were all asked to participate in this study with full awareness to the subject matter and the process of collecting information. Most were contacted through email to discuss the study and to arrange the interview.

Out of the nine interviews, eight were conducted in person. The other was given orally over the phone due to availability of the subject. Per the requirements of WMU’s Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) each subject was given a copy of the consent form at the interview, which was reviewed for them by myself prior to administering any questions or any data collection. All subjects signed the consent form. Each interview included nineteen questions, administered in a consistent order. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour based on the availability of the interviewee and the amount of information they were willing to supply for use in Women Leaders in Marketing: Breaking through the Glass Ceiling. Data was collected through the use of a voice recorder under the consent of participants. Some names are changed or shortened to simply first names based on the preference of the participant.

The primary points from each interview are recorded in this report. This section serves as a summary of the data collection. The intent of summarizing each interview is to increase the impact of the primary messages, and to condense the information into a consumable format. Information is summarized on the thesis author and chair’s discretion.

Consent forms, data collections, and this thesis paper will all be kept in separate folders in Dr. Ann Veeck’s office on Western Michigan University campus in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The information will be kept for three years as mandated by federal law, before its destruction on April 2020. A copy of the thesis will be available through the Lee Honors College in Kalamazoo, Michigan. They are to present it at their discretion to students, faculty, and staff of Western Michigan University. However, this information and formal report are not to be published publically at any time by the thesis author, the thesis chair and board, or any members or associations of Western Michigan University. A thesis defense will take place on April 19, 2017 at the Haworth College of Business at 10:15am EST. This defense will be a summary of the information in this report. The defense presentation is open to the public. However, primary audiences will be students or faculty from Western Michigan University.
Limitations of Study

This study is limited primarily due to the restriction of time prior to my graduation. Additionally, no funds were used to conduct this study, so resources were limited to subjects known by participants of the study and within the Kalamazoo, MI and Grand Rapids, MI area. The study could have been improved if there were more time to connect with secondary and tertiary relations. This would have diversified the pool of companies represented, and the career stages of the participants further. There was also a limit to the interviews due to inexperience of the thesis author who wrote and administered the questions.

Results

Enclosed are brief summaries of each of the interviews conducted. The most emphasized points of the interview will be the focus of the summaries. Each interview is presented on its own page.
Micki Benz—Director Marketing/Community Involvement, Mercy Health St. Mary’s Hospital

When asked, “How did you get into marketing” Micki responded “I’m an English teacher, I got my Masters degree in English.” After a job transfer she was working at Michigan National Bank. In her role she saw that there were ways the bank should be presenting itself to the public, which led her to marketing. This is important because while talking to Micki, I got the sense that if she saw an opportunity she would leap into it. A piece of advice that stands out from Micki’s interview is to do the things that scare you. If it doesn’t scare you, you’re not challenging yourself enough.

As a leader Micki loves working with individuals to bring everyone to consensus as a unified group. Although she is a leader herself, Micki states, “you’re never too old to be mentored, seriously.”

Micki was in the third class of the Chamber of Commerce Leadership Grand Rapids program. She was honored to be considered one of thirty up and coming leaders. “We all looked around and thought, Oh my gosh, people think we’re leaders. It was almost funny!” But then the other women, and men, of the group helped each other develop and challenge each other. Today she continues her learning by challenging herself because she believes you learn most from your failures. “You can read, that’s good, but you have to practice.” To become a better person and a better leader, “you really can’t rest.” Her advice to future women leaders is to attach yourself to good leaders and don’t be afraid to ask for their advice.

In her eyes, women leaders should be valued for their ability to get on other’s wavelengths. Having the emotional intelligence to read between the lines helps women identify the real issues and to anticipate expectations. In general, she thinks the weakness of men and women is that women don’t think they know everything, men often do.

Micki doesn’t think women have any reason to feel discriminated against. Instinctively, her first response to hearing some women feel discriminated against is to say, “that’s their problem.” However, she notices that some leadership boards are male dominant, and believes this to be true due to the nature of the industry and company culture. Personally, she never felt under-appreciated as a woman, even in the male dominant industry of banking where she was the first female Vice President.

The difference she sees between men and women is that women don’t question themselves as much as women. This is a weakness because you can grow from understanding your areas where you can improve.

Her future goals are to travel more and spend more time with her grandson. She never wants to just sit back, instead wants to continue to develop herself and remain eager, engaged, and active.
Meg Derrer—Executive Director, Hope Network Foundation

Meg fell into marketing. Her previous experience was in Communication and Public Relations. Early on she was given a lot of autonomy, which allowed her to experience a variety of job aspects. She enjoyed with the strategy of marketing, and wanted to use her skillset differently to help fundraising at her first marketing position at Saint Mary’s Hospital in Grand Rapids. She was interested by the challenge of integrating storytelling and strategy.

When asked what she loves most about being a leader Meg replied, “Being considered a leader...opens a lot of opportunities for community impact work.” She put in her dues, but now is honored to be asked for her opinion in the community. Meg also loves how she’s been able to complete the circle of being mentored, and mentoring others. Her greatest mentors have primarily been other women, and she feels like there’s a special bond between women leaders.

Meg credits her leadership skills to the people she’s worked with. She was also part of the Chamber of Commerce Leadership Grand Rapids program and Leadership Advantage. Through those programs the interactive peer learning really helped shape her personal leadership style. To continue learning she listens to podcasts, and reads books about how to maximize yourself. She also prioritizes making meetings with people she wants to learn from. Meg wants to encourage other women to become leaders, and says it doesn’t matter if you feel unsure about what you’re doing. Her secret; “we’re making this up as we go along.” Find a core group of “anchors” that will allow you to be vulnerable, and to give you honest feedback about your ideas.

All leaders have blind spots, and Meg feels like women are more easily able to identify and accept those blind spots than men. To overcome these weaknesses, Meg says a strong woman leader will surround herself with a complementary team of people smarter than herself. People are often afraid to do that because they don’t want to look like the weakest link, but it does the opposite. Surrounding yourself with talented individuals makes you look amazing. The advantage of women is that they are conditioned to be a little less confident in themselves, and have better insights into people, which helps them build a strong team.

Meg never felt discriminated against as a woman. The women she worked for have always empowered her and given her lots of autonomy. She credits Micki Benz, her first professional boss, with a lot of her development into a strong leader. “She put me in situations that scared the shit out of me, but she always had the confidence that I could handle it.” That built a great foundation, to have that experience at the beginning of her career. Her approach from there has been whatever problem comes your way, you can figure it out. It’s a position of confidence that never allowed others to make her feel inferior.

Male leaders don’t acknowledge their blind spots or weaknesses. They tend to feed off of a testosterone vibe of each other, to one up each other until someone comes out on top. Individually, they don’t act that way, but when put into a group situation it becomes a competition. On the opposite side, Meg has a network of males and females who don’t work with her, but still mentor each other. She doesn’t feel like there are gender differences between the way the males and females act in that network. However, there is a difference in how the males and females approach solving a problem, and she hopes through this network both sides are able to rub off on each other.

Her future goals are to always bring her whole self to the table in every situation, and to continue to expand her community impact.
Emily—Marketing Manager

Emily really valued her first marketing experience at a small startup company. She was able to have her hands on all aspects of marketing, from the website to printed brochures. Her position was Director, but she says it was not glamorous. She was working 7 days a week, setting up booths at events, even dressing up as a duck just to build more awareness for her company. What I learned from this is that it’s important to pay your dues and put in the long hours. You’re not going to love everything you have to do, and it’s not all going to be glamorous, but a true leader will own those experiences too. It’s the drive to get things done, and to be willing to do whatever it takes to help your company succeed that will set you apart from others. “I was very humbled, I did not have any entitlement... I was underpaid and overworked and I was fine with it because I was able to lead this organization in marketing and see the fruits of my labor, and it was successful.” The lessons she learned in that position helped her become successful in the large company she now works for.

As a leader she loves to mentor other women and to be in charge of product decisions. It has given her the power to become a leader in her industry and to chalk the field for the company’s future success. She likes to see the success and the pure joy of those she leads after she’s given them advice at a moment they needed it most.

Emily told me that the top ways to become a better leader are to learn from experience and from the people around you. You need to continue to ask others how you can improve, and to ask for more leadership opportunities. Attend events that will ignite your leadership. If you surround yourself with those you admire and want to be like, eventually it will rub off on you. The key for women to become leaders is to be truly professional, “in everything you do and every conversation you have, it impacts other people and changes their opinion of you.”

There are everyday challenges, but a big challenge for Emily was continuing to show her value and prove herself after a reorganization that changed who was her manager. She no longer reported to the person who hired her for the position, so she had to prove why she should be kept on as a valued team member. But she learned and wants young professionals to know that change is a part of marketing. You’re always going to have to continue to prove yourself and have the confidence to do so without getting disheartened. As a woman Emily was part of a male heavy sales team, and the customers they served were predominantly female. Her male counterparts often wondered if it was difficult for her to get into new accounts because she couldn’t, let’s say, charm her way in. Emily’s response was that she could connect with the females on a different level than the male salespeople, so it was actually advantageous in accessing new accounts.

Emily doesn’t think her company treats men and women differently. Although the leadership is predominantly male, she believes it’s purely talent based and personal goal based. Many women leave the workforce after having children, so there are less female candidates applying for those positions in the first place. However, she believes women have more responsibilities to handle. In the morning women have to not only get themselves ready, but also their children. And they have to shave their legs and put makeup on! She does find that to be an added struggle at times that most men don’t have to face. It allows them to put in more hours at work, making them look more dedicated.

Emily’s future goals are to manage and impact more people. She wants to live near her family again, and says it’s more difficult to be away from them now that she has a child.
Alexa-Strategic Marketing Research

Even at a young age Alexa’s strengths aligned with those needed for marketing. She enjoyed talking to people to hear more about their interests, and giving presentations. In college she discovered marketing and has never second-guessed her career choice. Alexa enjoys the fast paced, dynamic flow and constant change of a marketing position. No two days are alike.

At her company employees become a leader in their own role. All decisions about how the company will proceed through that product come down on the marketing employee who “owns” it. Alexa experiences many leadership responsibilities in her strategic role. The entire marketing department depends on her for quarterly updates and monthly newsletters, and looks for her guidance through research. One of her favorite moments as a leader is being able to present something she’s put a lot of time and effort into. Recently she’s been able to identify new market opportunities and steer the marketing team into developing the products necessary for those markets.

Alexa credits her own leadership skills from her mother, who she says is also a strong female leader. Beyond her mother, Alexa draws a lot of her leadership style from learning from the other strong women around her. She’s had some wonderful mentors and is looking forward to the day she can return the favor. Her advice to young female marketing professionals is to never settle. Know you aren’t perfect and continue to wonder what you can improve. She has found a lot of value from educational seminars and free webinars. Overall, she says you need to have the willingness to learn and accept advice.

One of the biggest challenges Alexa has faced in her career is being the youngest person in the room. Because she’s had the least experience she feels like her opinion is often discredited. To overcome this she empowers herself. “I need to take ownership in my role. When I give off an invisible sense that I am confident, they automatically think I’m more credible.”

She reluctantly admitted that she believes men and women are treated differently where she works. She says it is dependent upon the situation. One is in the way men and women have conversations. Men are very direct and to the point, while women often ask more questions about the details. But Alexa thinks that it is ok to have those differences, and doesn’t think women should feel discriminated against. She doesn’t think it is detrimental to the promotions of women at her work. She believes they always find the right people for the role and is glad there are women in leadership positions. As a woman leader she hasn’t felt like there have been many challenges specifically because she is a female. She said generally she has had times where she’s struggled to voice her opinion, and knows many other women who have felt the same way. She also believes women are typically more empathetic than men, which can be seen as a weakness but is actually a strength. Generally, she believes men naturally assume more command and authority. However, she’s seen empathy and command strengths in both men and women so she believes it’s really dependent on the person.

When asked what future leadership positions she is hoping to take on Alexa responded, “I try not to be committed to thinking about what’s next. I take responsibility and ownership of my current role to maximize myself.” With that mindset she would rather take on new responsibilities rather than a new title.

She is optimistic that more and more women are entering leadership roles. “We’re gaining more confidence. I don’t want to say we’re taking over marketing, but, in my undergrad, there were more women in my marketing classes than men.” She encourages women leaders, saying there are plenty of opportunities.
Alexis (Lexi) Huizar-Product Manager, Stryker

As a previous professional female athlete, Lexi gave me an interesting perspective on the distinctions between males and females. There is a huge difference between how male sports are perceived and represented as compared to female sports. In the female softball league, a majority of the fans were family members of the players. Even then, how the women looked and were objectified affected their status in the league. Unlike men, their status wasn’t solely based on the women’s athletic abilities.

Lexi’s background is in healthcare, so she’s never taken a marketing class in her life. Her first position was a nurse aid. After a few different positions both in the hospital and in-home care, she decided delivering care wasn’t for her. She was driven to get into marketing at Stryker because she wanted an impact on new product development. She wants to ensure the nurses have the best tools to safely do their job in helping people heal. Now she enjoys the constant changes and challenges a marketing position provides.

One of people who inspires Lexi to succeed is a quadriplegic she took care of while studying to become a nurse. He was in an accident when he was nine that broke his neck and he lost the use of all four limbs. Lexi says “This guy was amazing!” and that she learned so much from him about positivity and optimism. “Just through hearing all his accomplishments and what he’s done in his lifetime you never would have known that he was a quadriplegic.”

Although she doesn’t have authority from a higher job position, she is a leader of the research and development team. She says it’s so important to be confident and to have done your research so you are credible as a leader. The biggest takeaway she’s learned from working with engineers is that they need detail and context. Those skills have helped her develop her leadership style, and she believes it’s important for all leaders to use those skills when communicating with their team. She also has leadership come into play in strategy planning for the company. It takes many leadership skills to bring a project in front of a board of directors and ask for millions of dollars so you have to be confident and know your numbers.

Anytime that she’s been able to help others she’s felt like a good leader. She doesn’t enjoy doing things to “stand up and take credit,” instead she’s motivated by seeing others improve after the feedback she’s given them. Lexi has been able to experience this in marketing and coaching positions.

When I asked how she had developed leadership skills, Lexi had some advice. “Once you’re able to get past the hump of being afraid to say what you think...people will be able to rely and trust the feedback you’re giving them because it’s honest. Don’t try to fake it and tell them what they want to hear, sometimes you need to be blunt.” Lexi says good leaders aren’t afraid of hurting someone’s feelings; they are able to be honest but always polite. She is always continuing to improve her leadership skills by opening communication. One of the struggles that she's seen both men and women deal with is having open communication with senior managers and executives. She encourages everyone to have those tough conversations because then your superiors develop more respect for you than if you just sat by quietly.

Her advice to upcoming women leaders is not to be so competitive with others, instead build each other up, especially other women. Speak words of encouragement and positivity, and avoid gossip.

Lexi said one of the things she struggled with was the pressure to continue in nursing positions when she knew it wasn’t what she wanted to be. She urges graduates to be open to new paths and try new things. Don’t force yourself to stick to an old plan; it’s ok to stray away from that while you’re still young.
Lexi sees differences in how men and women communicate and deal with problems at Stryker. That plays into how people are treated. It’s not treating them worse or better, but rather addressing the needs of different personalities. She has noticed that you have to fight to be heard in a group of men. They argue and talk over each other in meetings, and she has struggled to break her way into some conversations. Lexi describes herself as more of a listener, but she’s been able to use that skill to listen into what the real problem is and to bring the group to a consensus. When she’s presented to the Board of Directors, Lexi thinks that they perceive women as someone who doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She feels like she has to prove herself more than she thinks a man would feel like he needed to.

From doing these interviews, I know Lexi is not alone in feeling this way. It’s an internal struggle that many women experience, whether it’s true or not. She has realized that men feel more comfortable with speaking up and negotiating, but women are afraid to push for more. What frustrates Lexi is that she sees women very competitively measuring themselves against each other. What we need to do is build each other up and work together “the more that one of us succeeds, the more we all succeed.” That mindset will allow women to push the bar of success and leadership.

Looking towards the future Lexi is looking for the next big opportunity in healthcare markets. She wants to push beyond the standard template of presenting new projects so that she can make more of an impact in executive meetings and to help provide the right tools to nurses. She wants to continue to have a good work/life balance so she’s able to spend time with her son. She’s optimistic that women can become future marketing leaders, but she thinks there needs to be more open conversations throughout the corporation about some of the issues currently limiting women.
Stacy

Stacy has always had strengths in marketing. She started in sales but wanted to climb the leadership ladder. When she looked at the people who were leaders in the business and who had an influence in the industry, many of them were in marketing. So Stacy joined the marketing team so that she could lead the sales team and impact the industry they served.

In college Stacy’s major was actually leading her into a completely different field. However, when she looked around at the successful individuals, she realized they had no family lives. Wanting both, Stacy quickly switched into sales. It’s inspirational to me that Stacy plans to have a successful business career, while also raising a family. I know she had to make the sacrifice of not following the path of her major, but she’s been able to use her strengths from that major in marketing.

One of her favorite moments as a leader was promoting one of the girls on her team. She says it was an honor to look her in the eye and tell her how proud she was and to recognize her in such a distinctive way. Stacy is proud of how her leadership style is very individualized. She likes “to learn about each individual person [she’s] managing and to coach them and mentor them individually.” Her interests lie in the diversity of the group.

Her leadership skills have developed from the leaders she’s had and the people around her. Their investment has helped her establish her skills. Stacy says she really prioritizes investing in herself. “I’m constantly reading about leadership.” She also takes time to sit down with leaders on a quarterly basis to continue those connections. I just finished The Seven Principles of Being Effective.

Stacy encourages young women to never be afraid to speak up. “I think having a voice is really important as a woman and as a leader.” Stacy is a very confident woman so I was surprised when she said, “even I have felt intimidated” in meetings full of men. “We have a different perspective than men, and we bring a lot of emotion into a situation that I don’t think men see.” She says speaking up has really helped her career. She also encourages women to have a change of mind. Don’t focus so much on the equality piece; be more of an influencer and that equality will naturally follow. Strive to be the best version of yourself, and that will lead you to leadership opportunities.

One of Stacy’s biggest struggles is that she is always trying to predict the future to make sure she makes the right decisions. She identifies herself as a control freak, so it’s difficult for her to let her decisions run their course. As a woman, she’s never felt like she’s been looked at differently in a business decisions, but the social aspect is difficult. The guys get together to go golfing or go to a sporting event, and at those social events they end up talking about business and making connections. Since there aren’t many women leaders yet, and since the men don’t always invite the women to those events, it puts women at a disadvantage. It’s not purposeful, but it does happen.

When I asked Stacy how her leadership style was different because she was a woman she went back to her earlier point. Women are able to see the emotions in a situation while men are very black and white. Women bring the empathy to the business decisions. Maybe it makes sense for the business, but how will the employees and customers feel about those positions.

Stacy hopes to return to leading a sales team. But she wants to stay close to family. She never expected to want to settle down and was always very career driven. Now she is still very career driven— “I don’t want to stop! At all!”—but, after having kids she realized the importance of having family nearby to support her family. She still wants to continue moving up as a leader in the company.
Carrie Heath-Portfolio Marketing Manager, Stryker

When I asked Carrie how she got into marketing she said “I…I don’t…I don’t know!” She studied exercise science in college, but once she entered the workforce she naturally had an affinity for marketing. She liked to learn why people were the way they were; what interested them and what influenced their decisions. She liked marketing because she asks, “how can what I do make an impact in how people make decisions?” She likes helping solve people’s needs by developing new products to help them in the medical field.

Carrie is a project leader. It’s her responsibility to be the voice of the customer when developing new products. It’s her role to make sure the team is working collaboratively and communicating effectively. Previously she was a leader for an area ice skating program. She ran the program and had to unite a team where each person had their own agenda. She really enjoyed that position, but travels too often for work to be able to help the program now.

As a leader Carrie loves the moment when “everything clicks, for everyone involved.” She likes uniting a team that previously was in all directions. Carrie makes sure her teams always have open conversations in order to get everyone out of their own head so they can unite for the better of the health care providers. She likes to “facilitate all of the craziness” and find creative solutions to bring everyone’s ideas together.

“I think its super important to take what you’ve learned, both good and bad, from leaders around you,” says Carrie. She’s experienced both in her professional career and through sports and takes a little of each of her leaders with her. The good leaders she tries to mimic their styles, but she learns from the bad leaders what not to do. “I think you almost learn more from the bad experiences,” Carrie laughs. She continues to build her leadership skills by building a network of leaders with whom you can go to to bounce ideas off of. It’s important that some of the people in your network are very similar to your mindset, but also to have those that are very different from you. The ones who are different from you will really tell you if you have a good idea, but they’ll also challenge you to make your ideas better.

She advises future women leaders to find other women leaders who will mentor them. What she would say to herself six years ago when she was starting out; be confident and don’t be afraid to speak up for what you feel is important. She says she likes to take it all in before she speaks, but she’s challenging herself to speak up more often. “Be strong and be confident, and don’t let anyone tell you you’re not.” She’s noticed “more times than not” that she’s the only woman in the room. And she feels like she hasn’t always done herself justice. She would have an idea but I would wait, trying to find the perfect moment to say it, and then someone else would say the exact same thing. She realized that’s not who she was or who she wanted to be. “I should say it, especially, especially because I’m the only woman in the room.”

When she first started in a fast paced organization, Carrie would get a question or a request and she would panic if she didn’t know the answer immediately. She thought people would think she was incompetent and that they would never ask for her opinion again. What she learned is that it’s ok to say, “let me get back to you.” That gives you time to get to the question when you have enough time to devote to it and to get the right answer. She also learned to ask, “when do you need to know this by” so that she knew how to prioritize her time. What she realized is that people respected her more for taking the time to research their questions and to get them a better answer. She also set expectations for those she was helping, and hand off some of the questions to others who knew the answers better, rather than trying to do it all herself.

She hasn’t felt like she’s been overlooked for positions because she’s a woman. But recently she’s been more aware that it’s often “just me and the boys.” She takes it upon herself to prove to the boys
that she knows what she’s talking about and not just some “young, dumb, blond girl.” She wants them to feel confident in the feedback and direction she provides the team.

Carrie thinks there is a perception of women, especially when they are younger, that they are inferior. However, at Stryker there are many strong women gaining leadership roles, so there aren’t as many situations where women are looked at in a weaker way. It makes her believe that woman are on an even playing field.

“You can categorize it as male/female, but everyone is different.” Carrie has worked for individualizers who are males, and women who are very direct and blunt. She knows stereotypically males are more direct and women are more empathetic, but in her experience she wouldn’t characterize the differences between males and females.

In her future, Carrie would love to manage people. What she has learned is that she needs to be more vocal about what she wants. Thinking about her aspirations is not enough; she has to tell her manager. “I think it’s very important from a leadership standpoint to know what you want and articulate it.” Remember your manager is not a mind reader.

I asked Carrie if she thought the marketing world would change to treat men and women more equally and she quickly responded “Gosh I hope so, I really do!” Marketing needs to think about all customers of all ethnicities, genders, and styles of life. So having more diversity on project teams can only help the company develop better products for more people. “It’s so great to have all those different viewpoints.”
Anna Walters—Product Manager, Stryker

Anna started her career at a power tools company, an industry very heavily male dominated. She discovered her passion for sales, which led her to Stryker for their excellent sales team and training. During her application she was suggested for a marketing position, which she accepted, knowing that marketing is a stepping-stone to get into sales. Her interview was interesting because, although she is passionate about another department, she excels as a leader in marketing in order to prove the value she would provide to the sales team. However, she’s recently been passed over for sales positions, and instead a male gets the role.

She is a leader of her product line, so the success and failure of that line falls on her shoulders. One of her most successful moments as a leader was at the General Sales Meeting this past year. Her product line had not done well that year and she knew the sales team was frustrated, no longer believing in the value of the product. At the sales meeting Anna initiated a tough conversation to put the sales reps in their place by telling them leadership was disappointed in how the sales team had acted; that it was not acceptable to just ignore a product the company had invested millions of dollars to develop. She was able to inspire confidence in the sales team and rejuvenate their understanding of the product. After the meeting she got so many calls from the sales team asking even more about the product and how they could effectively sell it.

Anna credits her leadership abilities to her theater training. Originally she was “painfully shy,” she wanted everything to be perfect before she said anything. She remembers having “filters” that would limit her. Somehow she knew she wanted to try theater and shined as her true self to overcome that fear on-stage. “It gave me confidence in my public speaking abilities,” says Anna. Anna also has three sisters. Watching them struggle with their own self-doubt or challenges, Anna was able to help them overcome those obstacles. And it gave her confidence to improve herself, knowing that everyone faced challenges.

To improve her leadership skills Anna takes every opportunity she can to learn from the leaders around her. Anna noticed that a lot of people are so concerned with their own path to success and reaching that next milestone that they forget to learn from others. Her advice is to take the time to listen to leaders about what made them so successful, and then use that knowledge to help yourself. Her advice to women hoping to become leaders in their careers is to have confidence in everything you do. “I think that is the one thing all women could improve on.” In general women are such perfectionist and we hold ourselves to such high standards that we start to question ourselves if things aren’t perfect. It makes us look unconfident. “There’s a reason you’re doing what you’re doing...There’s a reason someone interviews you. There’s a reason someone hires you.” look at those as wins to give you confidence in your abilities.

When asked about her biggest struggles, Anna feels like they are because she is a woman. The biggest feedback she’s gotten about going into sales is that she’s “too nice.” It’s frustrating because it has nothing to do with her abilities or her achievements. “People who are kind are more in tune with how to get things from people” says Anna.

Anna believes men and women are treated differently where she works. That men are not held to as high of standards as women. Women are expected to be good at certain things and men are expected to be good at other things. People don’t do it on purpose, Anna claims, it's just something that’s engrained in all of us. It started in school early on when girls were separated into one group, and boys another. Women are held at a higher standard and are expected to be perfect at everything. That lowers our confidence because it’s just not possible for everything to be done perfectly. One example Anna has is that the women on the team have all learned how to use a new software, whereas the men still don’t understand it and would rather push that work onto the females. She thinks the women all
learned the software so quickly because they are used to the pressure to be perfect at their jobs. Anna has never had a female manager, but from what she’s seen or heard, women are more willing to relate to you and listen to what you’re going through. The male managers Anna has had have been very hands-off, expecting employees to deal with problems themselves. Anna actually enjoys this aspect of their leadership. But she doesn't feel like her managers have really influenced her career.

I could tell Anna had a lot more to say about the subject of women versus males in the workplace so I asked her “What other question did you expect me to ask that I didn’t?” “Promotions” she said. Anna has seen times where a female employee worked for years in the company, but then a male counterpart comes in after her, and is quickly promoted to a managerial position over the female employee. She can’t see any reason why that would have happened other than that the company values male managers. She feels like if she were a male, she would be in sales by now. For whatever reason she’s seen women have to work harder to get into sales than males. “I am passionate,” but all the salesmen I’ve talked to are passionate too. Just because I’m passionate in a different way than yelling and getting frustrated, doesn’t mean I’m any less capable. Yelling and screaming is losing control of your emotions too. People see it as a sign of strength and dominance, but I see it as a sign of weakness said Anna. She’s appreciative that the President of the company has been such a great advocate for hiring women into leadership positions. She believes if we can get a strong woman marketing manager, that will change the culture of the marketing team at Stryker.

Anna’s number one goal is to get into a sales position. She likes the clear-cut numbers that define success. She knows she can prove herself, if she just gets the opportunity. Although Anna is very career driven, she also plans to have a family one day while continuing to strive for leadership positions in her field.
Marni Epstein - Marketing Communications, Eaton

During college Marni worked for a small survey company. As she was graduating the marketing position opened up, and they offered it to Marni even though she had very little background in marketing. "I started knowing absolutely nothing and having absolutely no mentors," but she figured it out as she went along, even helping the company build their first website and go through a logo change. It was a great learning experience because she had her say in everything, tradeshows, brochures, and digital marketing. As more competition entered the market she joined the Small Business Committee and led that, as well as the Home Builders Association where she was voted to the Board of Directors. Then she went through the Leadership Holland Program.

When she started, she loved the creativity of marketing. "I had the idea that I was going to work for Procter and Gamble or plan the next Nike commercial!’ Marni remembers, "I was just guessing how to do things’ so after a while I wanted to work for a large company where I would have mentors and a team to learn from. When she went to Johnson Controls she learned the process and the science behind marketing, and that’s where she really found her passion.

Right now Marni isn’t involved in as many formal leadership positions as she usually is, but she’s appreciating the break. She is leading a diversity and inclusion program called “The Garden of Eaton’ and is helping mentor a colleague. In the past she was part of the Chamber of Commerce Leadership Grand Rapids program. Additionally she ran the Women’s Leadership group mentoring program, and the Habitat for Humanity chapter for Johnson Controls.

Marni likes leading people so that she can help them learn the whole process of project management. "I think a lot of people just jump right into it’ says Marni. She teaches those she leads about objectives, planning, and reviewing to see if you met your goals. She says a lot of people don’t have the confidence to look back and realize how much work they put into that project, so as a leader she likes to help recognize them. One of her favorite moments as a leader was seeing an employee take ownership of her own projects. She remembers the former female employee always asking questions like “should I do this?’ “do you think this is the right thing to do?’ and finally Marni just said, “you really know what you’re doing! And if you screw it up it’s not the end of the world.” That woman became one of Marni’s best employees, even taking over managing webpages in foreign languages. Marni approaches everyday like a learning opportunity. She now enjoys her position because she doesn’t have to be a manager, but can still mentor younger employees.

She says working for both good and bad managers has shaped her own leadership. “Working for really good managers shows you like, Wow! This is how it should be. And really bad managers teach you like Wow! I never what to be like that at all!”

Her advice to young women leaders is to have patience. We get conflicting messages that you can have everything and be whatever you want to be. But you have to make sacrifices. You need to be adaptive to different industries, and learn what your priorities are. She has always worked in male dominant industries, and she warns women not to get impatient. There is some sexism, but it goes both ways. Males think about women in a certain way, but women also think about males in a certain way. You need to find ways around the frustration, rather than just living with it and being upset all the time. We all look at people and we all make perceptions of them. So although she does think women are treated differently at Eaton, she thinks it’s always fairly. That they are treated differently based on their personalities and the style in which they prefer to work. She doesn’t see discrimination of women, but she does think women need to work harder to prove their credibility, whereas men are assumed credible until proven wrong. “I felt like I’ve always had to prove myself twice as hard.” Even recently she’s had an experience where a male professional has rushed through a meeting acting like Marni didn’t understand the topic. But then when she proved she did, the meeting suddenly got very engaging and
more of a two-way conversation. Marni would say women are typically more empathetic and understanding, but she has worked for men who also have those strengths. She thinks men who have stay at home wives, don’t really understand the struggle of working and managing a home, whereas most women usually do.

Marni appreciates all she’s been able to accomplish and experience in her career. She’s been able to do a lot of the things she really wanted to do. In the future she might consider a more strategic role, but is otherwise satisfied with her role in marketing. At the end of her interview Marni said she often wondered how women graduating college felt about their ambitions. Growing up we’re always told “you can do anything you want” so Marni wondered if I still felt that way.
A Quick Guide for Future Women Leaders in Marketing

Using the questions I asked in interviews and the responses I received to answer the questions you have about how to become a leader in marketing yourself:

How did you get into marketing?

There are many paths that can lead an individual into marketing. Meg said it in her interview that you should apply for the jobs that best align with your strengths. And, like Lexi said, be open to trying a role you never expected; don’t stick to one path just because that is what you thought you’d like back in high school when you chose your major. Many of the women I interviewed had not expected to go into marketing, but their interests and strengths led them in that direction, and now they are leaders of their field.

What is different about men and women’s leadership styles?

This question will help you know what to expect when dealing with different managers. But, you should realize that most of the women I talked to said that it depends less on gender, and more on personality.

Typically, men have more of a commanding presence and they lead from a place of authority. In a meeting or group, they often feel the need to one-up the others and speak over each other in a debate or argumentative nature. You need to be able to speak up in meetings to get noticed.

All of the women I interviewed said, “women are more empathetic.” They feel like as leaders they need to communicate with others to build trust and gain approval. Female managers will be more understanding of family obligations. You need to build a relationship and trust to gain the favor of a woman leader.

What is one piece of advice you have for women hoping to become leaders in their careers?

Be confident and don’t be afraid to speak up.

How did you develop your leadership skills/ How are you continuing to build your leadership skills?

Learn from the leaders around you. Find strong female mentors and know that “you’re never too old to be mentored.” Always be learning and improving yourself. Take what you learned and put it into action, because you learn best from experience. Don’t be afraid to ask for more leadership responsibilities. Your manager isn’t a mind reader, but they are often willing to help you develop if they know how you want to improve.

What challenges have you faced because you’re a woman?

Most women replied: I’ve struggled to speak up in meetings or to ask for more from my manager or company.

Do you think men and women are treated differently where you work?

Most women replied: they aren’t discriminated against, but everyone is treated differently based on their personalities, not their gender.

However, some women do still feel like women are passed up for positions in favor for male counterparts. Most, if not all, of the women I talked to could think of at least one experience where their competence was questioned because they were female. Be extra aware of this as you begin your career, because age also influences this.
Summary

To answer Marni’s question, I have always felt like I could be anything when I grew up, and I still believe that to be true. Women may need to work harder, or may have more societal pressure thrust upon them, but we also have unyielding strength and resilience. Throughout this project I have felt a sense of empowerment and the unspoken bond between women. Every one of these women has displayed strength and determination to reach their goals, confident that they can overcome the challenges. They believe in the abilities of the other women around them, mentoring each other. There is a bond between women that I doubt men get to experience as often. Our bond is like a secret determination to prove our doubters wrong. If a woman needs help, she knows there are other women around who will support her as she reaches for her goals.

What I heard the most from the women I interviewed were two things; women are more empathetic leaders, and women often struggle to speak up. When I started this project I thought the issues would be from the top down. I expected to find out that leaders would be the ones limiting women, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, I feel like the issue is also within us. If women can get past our fear of being wrong, or over our nerves and speak up more often, maybe the perception of women will change. We need to realize our more feminine traits are our strengths. Our empathy makes us better individualizers, allowing us to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of those we lead. It helps us to better develop those around us, so together we make a better team. We are great listeners. We’re able to hear past the egos and arguments to identify the real issue and to bring a divided team together. Both empathy and our listening skills help us make business decisions that benefit the customer and the people involved in all steps of the business.

I think in the future we will see more women achieving top-level leadership roles. Today young girls are exposed to more media empowering them to enter roles traditionally held by males. The perception of women is changing, so I believe companies will be searching for women to fill leadership roles in the future.

I don’t want women to change. I want us to value our feminine strengths. Once you know your own value and exude confidence, there’s nothing that can stop you. Yes, we will face many challenges, but we are strong enough to overcome them.
Appendices

Interview Guide