

Rutabaga Water Divas

Increasing participation and profits through a “visible” marketing approach

Outdoor Industry Special Edition - by Lisa Johnson

How do you increase participation in outdoor activities and generate over 10 percent growth during a year when most of your industry’s sales have flat lined? That was the challenge facing Jeff Weidman, CEO of the retail paddle company, Rutabaga. Based in Madison, Wisconsin, Rutabaga is a freestanding retail space that has been selling canoes, kayaks, paddles and outdoor equipment for over 28 years.

Rutabaga began by reviewing the industry data and identifying women as opportunity number one for growing participation in outdoor activities as well as increasing their sales and customer base. To champion the marketing to women effort, Jeff tapped into his own talent bank and promoted part-time Rutabaga employee Carol Lynn Benoit to a full-time marketing position.

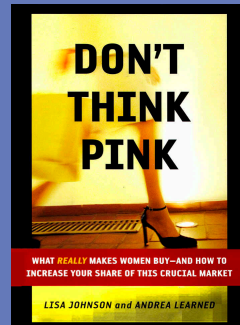
In May 2004, Rutabaga hosted the first Water Divas event for new and inexperienced women paddlers, promoting the in-store educational event through a series of radio ads and savvy grassroots marketing. Jeff expected 10-15 participants and planned to encourage Carol Lynn to build on that small base. Carol Lynn was a bit more optimistic, but absolutely everyone was shocked when 120 women showed up that night and purchased \$5,000 in clothing. Nine months later, Water Divas is successfully providing a quality outdoor experience and a thriving community for new female participants. By focusing on attracting new women to the sport of paddling and cultivating an excited new community of Water Divas, Rutabaga achieved a robust 10.8 percent growth in 2004 and plans to further expand these programs in 2005.

Lessons

1 Know when to be visible

When you’re dealing with a traditionally male product or activity, creating a for-women learning environment makes sense. The Rutabaga Water Divas program draws out tentative, first-time paddlers - the women who’ve always wanted to try kayaking or canoeing, but who are overwhelmed or unsure about how to get started. The team created a comfortable atmosphere that allows newbie paddlers to make mistakes, ask questions and bond with other women. Whether you’re hosting a snowshoe workshop, a bike repair class or a sailing clinic, “for women” events tend to work best when your customers are trying something for the first time.

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Harvard Business School says that Don't Think Pink: What Really Makes Women Buy - And How To Increase Your Share Of This Crucial Market (AMACOM, 2004) is "rich in practical suggestions and

interesting stories, with an easy-to-read style." Learn more about transparent marketing to women by reading a sample chapter at:

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What do women notice that men often ignore? Details, details, details. Rutabaga made several seemingly small changes to attract more women paddlers to their store, including:

- Women-specific products (smaller paddles, boats, vests, etc.)
- More women staff members on the retail floor
- Right product mix for women, including a new clothing line moved from the back to the front of the store
- Tidy and organized sales floor with clear signage
- Better lighting
- More dressing rooms - good mirrors and lighting
- Clean, attractive bathrooms
- Music
- Educational materials
- Inventory organized, well displayed, fluffed and folded
- Fresh lines in the parking lot, spiffier entrance

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2 Meet her multiple needs

Your women customers are looking for more than just great products. She might be **Questing** (expanding her horizons by trying something new), **Connecting** (aiming to build and create new friendships) or **Going Inward** (exploring nature to nurture her spirit). For the new Rutabaga paddling Divas, competition and perfect performance were pretty low on the priority list. Above all, understand why your customers are pursuing a new activity. Rutabaga has a sign in their back room that reads, “We don’t sell boats. We sell time on the water.”

3 Create a community

Build in opportunities to keep the community tight. Every Thursday, Rutabaga offers free, women-only paddle nights to encourage its new Water Divas to get out and enjoy the sport together. In return, Rutabaga strengthens its customer base and its reputation as the “paddle authority” for women. The store also reached out to lesbian customers with a rainbow sticker in the door and advertising in the “pink pages” - a local resource for the lesbian community.

4 Focus on learning

When you’re planning a visible marketing project, keep in mind that most women picture themselves using your products or services long before they actually try them. The Rutabaga team found that while men tend to ask more technical questions about the products, women had the same questions - and a whole lot more. In addition to understanding the right safety gear to buy, she might want to know what shoes to wear in the boat and the best food to pack for an overnight trip - all before she makes a single purchase. Be sure your staff understands that women may take longer to make a decision, but they’re loyal for the long-term and refer at twice the rate of men.

Keep learning upfront by positioning your brand as a credible resource and a community connection point. This could include live preparatory events, field workshops or educational content in your catalogs and sales materials. Rutabaga also plays against type in their staffing by having men present cooking information and equipment, and having women teach the heavy-duty, technical aspects of the Water Divas training. Make sure women are visible and available on the sales floor, and working in key teaching positions. Rutabaga walks its talk with a 50/50 staff gender ratio.

5 Invest in design and materials

Reinforce your visible marketing efforts in all your sales and promotional materials. Rutabaga branded the Water Divas program with an eye-catching logo, a designated catalog, and a “Water Divas Approved” product label. Rutabaga understands that strong graphic design shows commitment to the program and gives customers a sense of the company’s playful, down-to-earth personality.

The Water Divas catalog is another time saving tool to help new paddlers filter through the potentially overwhelming range of product choices. The eight-page catalog features suggested clothes, equipment and educational content. The team also conducted an in-house review of women’s products and applied the Water Divas Approved sticker to the top choices for women.

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