

## **What Do Women Want?** **By Jennifer Selby Long**

As I drove up to 24 Hour Fitness, two squad cars were parked outside. When I entered, the visibly rattled receptionist apologized for the drama. The tension in the air was thick and the women were all fuming. Two police officers were talking quietly to a very strange woman and her husband. The regulars at the gym, all women in their 40's – 60's, were talking about the incident I had just missed.

For the second morning in a row, the female receptionist had been accosted by this bizarre woman after telling her she was unable to give her change for the parking meter, which triggered a stream of screeching racial slurs and threats.

Because no manager had appeared on the scene the day before, nor had any representative of management followed up with the customers or employees who had been present, one of the female customers had become fearful this second time around -- and called the police.

By the time I arrived, not only had the female employee repeatedly asked the woman to leave, the other female customers had also pointedly told her to leave. Now it was the police officers suggesting she leave in lieu of getting arrested and thrown in jail.

The police asked the employee to sign a paper and she began to cry. She was completely overwhelmed. The other women gathered around her in support. This is more than I can say for the representatives of 24 Hour Fitness management, who were still noticeably absent.

I watched the employee repeatedly try to locate a representative of management to advise her by phone. The other women and I openly shared how mortified we were and how fully unsupported we felt when the employee was told that no manager would come to the phone – let alone come to the gym – because of a meeting. A meeting.

*The police are in the gym, the employee's voice is shaking, the customers are furious, one called the police and now another has just called an employment attorney -- and a meeting is more important than the crisis unfolding directly in front of the customers.*

A bit later, a manager did somehow find time to cut away from this meeting to listen to the crazed, racist, and violent customer rant on for 15 minutes on the phone. That was it for me. I had had enough.

As a female customer, the debacle at 24 Hour Fitness made it clear to me that 24 Hour Fitness doesn't understand what women want, nor do they appear to understand that they are legally obligated to provide a safe workplace for their employees.

So here in a nutshell, is my opinion of the basics women want:

1. *Women want to be physically safe.* The complete lack of responsiveness by 24 Hour Fitness management to a repeat incident led the employee to believe that she was not safe. It also led the older women in the group to form a protective circle around her. It's instinct.
2. *Women want to be free of harassment.* That includes harassment from customers. Yes, amazingly, the crazed woman was a dues-paying customer who went off the deep end -- twice.
3. *Most women want a sense of personal connection.* By showing no management support in a time of crisis, the company created a lack of trust with the customer (and, I assume, the employee), because their behaviours demonstrated that our crisis wasn't their priority. Amazingly, only the shaken employee demonstrated caring for the customers, as she kept apologizing to us about the commotion and how that must make it hard for us to work out. End result: we still trust her, but we don't trust the company. The sense of loyalty to the company was shattered.
4. *The majority of women want management to do the right thing.* Setting aside the obvious oversight of their legal responsibilities, the gym failed to respond in morally right way, *to simply do what's right* – which is to send a representative of management to the scene of a repeated crisis. Most men would not have been rattled by this situation, but women aren't just short men. We're different. When we see our own safety or the safety of another woman threatened two days in a row, at the same place, at the same time, with no response from the company, we decide we've had it with the company and start looking for somewhere else to take our business.
5. *The majority of women want and prefer collaboration and harmony.* For example, using our MBTI® lingo, 75% of women are highly energized by harmony and/or values, and the other 25% still prefer and choose collaboration as their primary mode of conflict resolution. As such, if you don't manage a situation in which your female customers feel threatened, they will “flock together” and manage it themselves, whether in a way you like or not.

Having worked out at this location for a while, I can say that the club has been generally well-managed on a day-to-day basis, which indicates that in this instance, the problem lies higher up the food chain, in fundamentals of policy and management practice.

So what straightforward steps can you take to ensure that the women who enter your place of business, work for you, or interact with your sales force, get what they want?

1. *Scrupulous attention to physical safety is a foundation.* Is your place of business safe? Is your building safe? If you're a man, you may have to ask the opinions of women. There may be something about your place of business that screams, "Unsafe!" to women but men would not even notice.
2. *Should a potentially threatening situation occur, get a representative of management to the location immediately.* It can be the site manager, an HR manager, a regional manager, or a sales manager who happens to be driving by. My opinion – the title doesn't matter, the gender doesn't matter, the age doesn't matter, as long as they're well-trained in dealing with emotionally charged situations and have good judgement.
3. *Be serious about ensuring that both the men and the women in your organization don't just go through the motions of Diverse Workplace training* (which one of my more boisterous colleagues jokingly calls, "spay and neuter clinic"). Ensure that they understand the basics of respecting physical space, for example, and of the types of humour that don't work well in a business.
4. *Be beyond reproach in hiring, promoting and rewarding your staff on the basis of contribution to the business and results.* If the top spots are continuously occupied by men, while the middle spots are 50% women, figure out the root cause and deal with it. *Many business owners and leaders fail to understand the incredible power of visual symbolism.* A male African-American client recently told me of the sinking feeling in his chest when, at his company's annual management meeting, the CEO of the company gave a rousing speech on their diversity initiative – and followed his impassioned speech by announcing the four top-level promotions for that year, which were all white, US-born males of the same age group. Every single thing he said in his speech was immediately wiped out by the visual evidence that, of the enormously diverse tier below, he had chosen four more just like him for the top rungs of the ladder.
5. *Openly give serious consideration to both the business consequences and the ethical questions of every business decision.* Most women judge your effectiveness as much on the first as the second. They demand both, not either/or. I've noticed many men do, too!
6. *Try collaborating with your clients and employees in an appropriate way.* Simply fighting to win leaves most women yawning with boredom or rolling their eyes. If you want them as devoted employees and rabid fans of your

products or services, you need to engage with them in a collaborative manner.

These steps are so simple and straightforward. It's just a matter of increasing awareness, acting on that awareness, and changing a few entrenched habits. Truly, any business can do it. Certainly every employee is an individual, and there will be variations on any theme, but as an overall approach, the above six steps will go a long way toward meeting the needs and gaining the loyalty of many women.