

Keeping mum: speaking to your consumer

Andrew Thomas, Bounty, shows how dialogue with a target audience can provide critical marketing insights

PARENTING LIFESTYLES have changed radically over the years, making it harder than ever to pin down mums as consumers. The solution? Talk to mums and ensure your brand makes their family life easier if you want their business.

These days there is no such thing as the average family. Twenty years ago the phrase '2.4 children' meant something, conjuring up traditional images of a home where dad worked and mum was at home, bringing up the children.

Now it is not so easy. Divorce, single parents, step-parenting, more working mums and the arrival of stay-at-home dads mean that describing a typical family in 21st-century Britain is impossible.

For brands, this presents a challenge. If so many different women – and men – are raising their families in a myriad of ways, how can brands identify the modern mum's needs and aspirations as a consumer? Marketing your brand is easy if you know what consumers want, but today's mums do not conform to any media image. In fact, they are confounding all the stereotypes.

Traditional values

Last summer we set out to find out more about the 21st-century mum. As the UK's number one parenting club, we are in the ideal position to map the shape of the modern family. Using our Mums Opinion Panel in conjunction with Research Now, we conducted a piece of research asking over 4,000 mums questions relating to every aspect of their lives, from shopping habits and attitudes to healthy eating to their level of involvement in the community. We wanted to know how families have changed in a generation – really understand the 'new mum': people we thought would think and behave differently from their mothers. We were sure the huge variety in families today would be reflected by big differences between mums, but what we found was the opposite. Regardless of age and circumstances, most women had more in common than we had thought. And their aspirations, far from being very different from their mothers', were very similar.

Return of the Oxo mum

While families come in all shapes and sizes, traditional values remain important to modern mums. Lifestyles have changed within a generation, but women today care about the same things that their mothers did, namely their children's welfare. In our survey, 23% of women said that knowing their child was happy and healthy was their major concern, closely followed by a wish to see them brought up properly with good development and social skills (21%). The majority, 71%, are married and living with the father of their children; and most aspire to the ideal of the traditional nuclear family of mum, dad and two children.

Read the headlines and you could be forgiven for thinking all mums try to be superwomen, juggling children and home life with careers. You could be forgiven for thinking that they want it all, but our research suggests that is not the case. Just 41% of those who worked said their job was important to them; while 80%, even those who worked, put home life at the top of their priority list.

If anything, modern mums have more in common with the Oxo mum than with the stereotypes in the media. Time-poor and money-rich, the stereotyped modern mum is permanently running on empty as she scurries about, nerves frazzled, trying to keep everyone happy while being a domestic goddess at home and bringing up balanced and successful children.

If this mum really exists, we should all be worried, but she does not. What we found is that most mums these days put their family first, as women have always done; and rather than trying to cram everything into a busy life, most make a big effort to keep life as simple as possible.

If you believe the papers, you might think family life is in crisis, but that is not what we are seeing. Of the mums we spoke to, 82% sit down regularly as a family at mealtimes. Most spend four or more hours of quality time with their children each day.

It is true that a lot of them work (see Figure 1) and it is also true that they have high aspirations for their families, but many of those who worked said they only

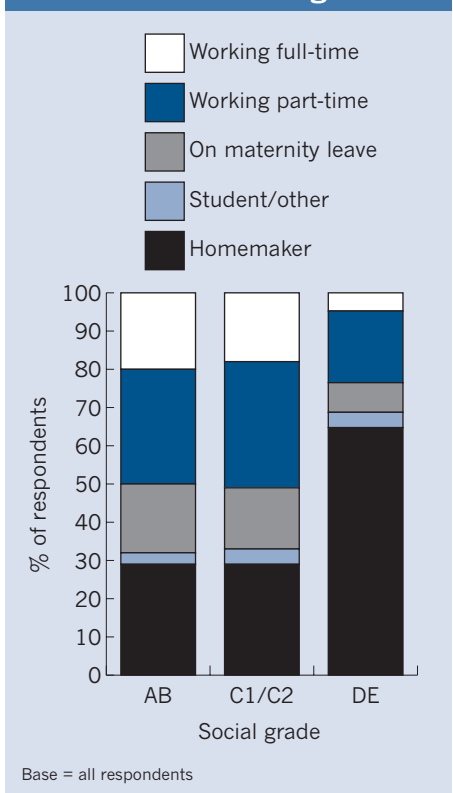
did it because they needed the money. Interestingly, the majority said they would prefer to stay at home with the children, if their finances allowed, recognising the importance of being with their children and enjoying their company.

This means they have to be clever at organising themselves and sometimes sacrifices have to be made – our mums might long for exotic holidays abroad, but while the children are small, they will be taking a break in the UK simply because it is less hassle. But rather than aiming for the impossible, modern mums' expectations are realistic. Most said they were happy with their work/life balance and accept that while the children are young, compromises must be made.

Some things, like a career, have to be put to one side while they concentrate on their family. The mums we surveyed know that being a mother, with the extra expense and responsibility that brings, is just one chapter of their lives.

FIGURE 1

Mums' current working status





Andrew Thomas is e business director at Bounty. He joined the company in 2005 to develop its e-business practice and capitalise upon the success of Bounty.com. athomas@bounty.com

The thing they lack most in their lives, apart from money, is time, which makes convenience and good service a top priority when it comes to choosing which brands to buy or where to shop.

Making life easier

With so much going on at home, anything that makes family life easier has strong appeal for modern mums (see Figure 2). The mums we surveyed all said they became more price-conscious and health-conscious after having children. Even choosing a car is influenced by having a family (in our survey, 61% drove a saloon or hatchback).

Becoming a mum affects how you shop; mums we surveyed said they were more likely to buy second-hand goods since having children, with two-thirds using eBay to buy goods for their children. They like convenience and value for money; they are brand-savvy and good at shopping around. Interestingly, 76% admitted they were happy to swap brands if they saw discounts or special offers in the supermarket.

For marketers, this is a good place to start. Selling them an ideal life, assuming that every woman aspires to be a domestic goddess, or putting pressure on mums to be impossibly glamorous is risky

because it is not what they are looking for. Making a connection with them and building a relationship that shows you understand their lifestyle is much more important.

In this multi-mum society, finding the common ground that connects these women, regardless of age or background, is vital if you are going to win their business. The key motivator for mums seems to be their desire to do the best they can for their families. If they can do that without compromising on quality then, as consumers, they are happy.

At Bounty we are committed to making family life easier; it is what we aspire to in every aspect of the business. Whether it is providing information on topics that interest parents or simply making sure our website is easy to navigate, we do this because our members tell us that is what they need.

Really clever brands, if they are keen to market to mums, need the same focus; it is not about expanding choices any more, but rather improving the quality of the service. So whatever it is you are selling and no matter how big or small you are, it is vital that your product does the job better than your competitors'. And if it makes a task easier or more pleasant, that is a big selling point.

For me, Tesco is a great example of a company with real multi-mum appeal. From the slogan, 'Every little helps' to its ability to house everything a busy mum needs under one roof, even down to the range of trolleys it provides, with different seats for babies and young children, it really works to meet all the needs a mum might have.

When we surveyed our mums about shopping habits, the majority, 16%, when asked what they would most like to change about supermarket shopping, said they wanted more mother-and-baby parking spaces. Next on the list came access to a crèche or nursery, followed by a wish for better trolleys. Taking sweets off the counter or lowering prices were way down the list.

Having empathy, anticipating those needs, putting yourself in the shoes of your customers is what it is all about. We need to build relationships. It sounds simple, and it is, but too many brands

FIGURE 2

Top six things mums would change about supermarket shopping

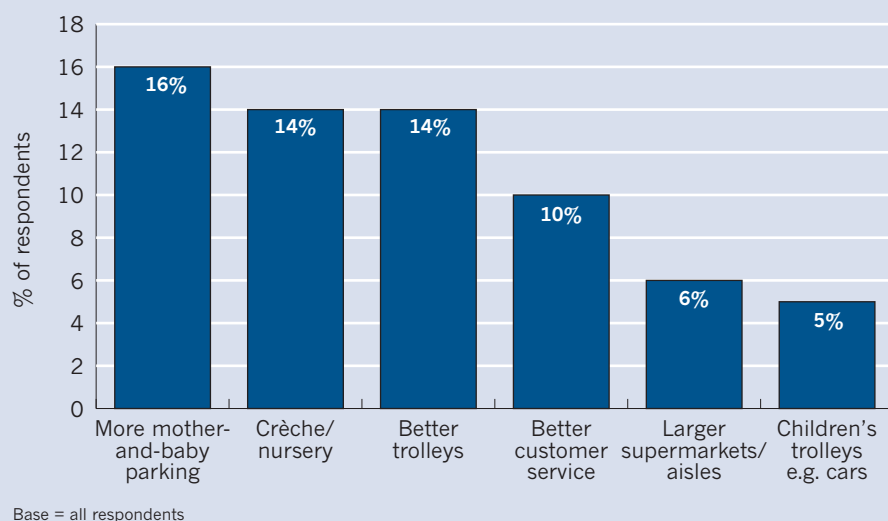


FIGURE 3

How often mums shop online

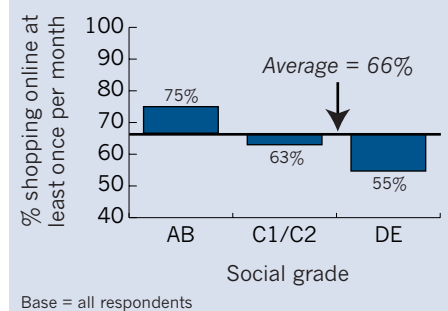
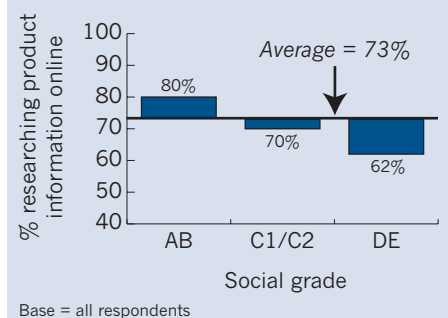


FIGURE 4

Mums' online research before buying products



have forgotten how to do that. Often they do not engage with their customers enough and have become remote from them. In many ways, the rise of supermarkets has contributed to this, and many want to manage the whole relationship with customers directly. But in the digital age, where communication is easy and so vital to business, not talking directly to your customers and having them at arm's length is a big disadvantage. It is time to take back the initiative. If you want to be innovative and know what is going on in the mind of consumers, you have to talk to them.

Fostering community

In this digital age brands have a unique opportunity to engage directly with consumers through web communities. This is a dynamic environment where every consumer's opinion counts and if you want to get your branding right, getting to know the consumers buying your products is the obvious place to start.

You might think mums would be too busy to surf the internet but modern mums can't afford to get left behind by technology and, in our experience, they are embracing it with enthusiasm. Around 73% of the mums we surveyed said they regularly used the internet to shop for product information (see Figures 3 and 4).

A few years ago consumers' impact on brand share was linked to them as individuals: you either bought something or you did not. Word of mouth could be powerful, but on the whole, consumers couldn't really influence people outside their immediate social circle. But now the balance of power has shifted. Consumers are going online and interacting with

people on a huge scale, people with the same interests as them.

An idea can spread like wildfire on the internet and if your customers are talking about your brand on the web you need to know what they are saying. Good feedback is great for business. In the case of Bounty mums, if they find a product or brand that works for them, they are happy to share the experience online. Just 36% of those we surveyed said their shopping choices were influenced by newspaper or magazine articles. Presumably our busy mums respond to the immediacy of the internet, which gives them information at the touch of a button. It is also likely that, compared to magazines and newspapers, the internet offers a wider range of information for mums shopping around for a good deal.

Marks & Spencer is a good example of what can happen when you lose touch with your customers and stop giving them what they want. In the late 1990s it was a huge high-street force and had spent much of the 20th century establishing itself as a retail giant. But when it got its positioning wrong, started selling clothes that consumers seemed to think were poorer quality and charged high prices for them, its sales plummeted. It took it a long time to turn that around.

That is a good lesson on why, no matter how big or small you are, you have to stay in touch with your customers. These days, control of your brand has to be a hands-on process. You cannot have a distance between you and consumers, and expect to give them what they want. Control these days is with the people buying your brand – they can make or break you very quickly. Today running a website is an essential for most businesses and if you

have one, there is no reason why you can't use it to engage with the people you are selling to.

For this reason, the importance of web communities cannot be underestimated. Bounty.com is the biggest online meeting point for mums in the UK. All the mums who use our website are very prepared to listen to advice and information, but are also very keen to hear the views of people like themselves.

Talking to people at the same lifestyle is important to them, but for us what is interesting is what they choose to chat about. We are interested in what interests them, and for retailers selling to mums, their comments can be revealing. Many conversations between new mums are about the best baby products to buy and the pros and cons of different gadgets and equipment. The chances are that if you are selling to mums, your customers will not just be looking at your website, they will also be looking at several online forums to find out what others have to say about your goods and the service you provide.

Making mums matter

Marketing to mums does not have to rely on stereotypes, just common sense and traditional values. Like most consumers, mums want value for money, good service and quality at the right price. But what they want most are products and brands that reflect their day-to-day needs, are practical and help make their lives easier.

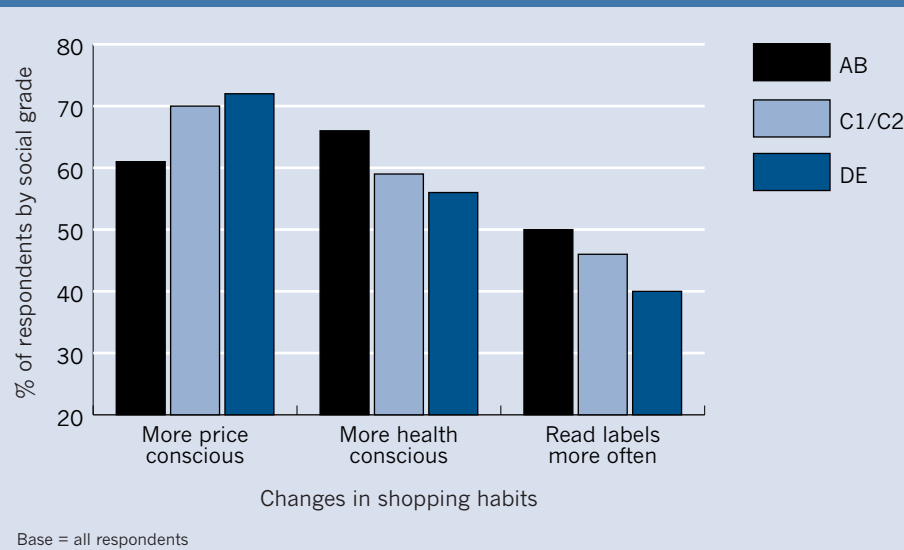
Many are choosing to buy those things via the internet and discuss them with other mums online, which makes it vital that businesses, big and small, provide good, easy-to-use websites where mums using their products can interact with each other and the company. It may sound old-fashioned, but in an age where customer care is often low on the agenda, building relationships with women consumers by offering practical advice, or simply good service, can go a long way towards helping your brand stand out.

So my advice to anyone marketing to mums would be to reconnect again with them and find out if you really are giving them what they want. Be face-to-face, never hide behind your brand and do not underestimate your customers.

Never assume that you know who you are selling to. Instead, ask them about themselves and ask what you can do for them. The feedback might surprise you and take your business in a very positive direction. ■

FIGURE 5

How shopping habits have changed



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