

Women and the Internet Are Agents of Change

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The trouble with change, including the kind you can believe in, is that it requires patience. It seldom happens in time for the next political speech or evening newscast. It is slow, often imperceptible. When finally it is recognized and accepted as an article of faith, it already is passe, ripe for revolution or at least desperately in need of an update.

Consider the automobile industry, particularly the part of it that deals with the selling of cars and trucks.

For the past 90 years, the auto retail business has celebrated itself at grand, annual conventions that once were the equivalents of three-day parties with a little business thrown in. Those were the days when only men owned and ran the dealerships, when most dealerships were small businesses, when no one worried about the price or availability of gasoline, and when traditional car loans ran 36 months at affordable interest rates.

It was the BTI (before the Internet) Era, when consumer intelligence about products, options and their prices was limited to what could be learned by word of mouth, or from an occasional magazine or newspaper article. It was when a salesman's greatest asset was bull-ability rather than actual product knowledge, let alone any meaningful or useful knowledge about the diversity of clientele, or how differences in ethnicity, race, gender, religion, nationality, age or sexual preference might facilitate or undermine a prospective sale.

That retail world has changed, and evidence of that change will be found everywhere at the 91st annual convention and exposition of the National Automobile Dealers Association underway this weekend at the Moscone Center in San Francisco.

Consider NADA's new leader. She is Annette Sykora, 44, a Texan who has become the first chairwoman of the male-dominated, gasoline-soaked organization. Sykora has been in the business since she was 19, selling Ford trucks to ranchers and construction workers from her family's Smith Ford-Mercury store in Slaton, Tex. Sykora and her husband, Patrick, now own the store along with another Ford dealership near Levelland, Tex.

What is happening at the top of the national dealership organization is beginning to happen in its regional groups, such as at the Washington Area New Automobile Dealers Association, where Tamara C. Darvish, vice president of the sprawling mid-Atlantic Darcars dealership chain, this year became the first woman to chair WANADA in the organization's 90-year history.

Neither woman sees her appointment as a special event, as something out of the ordinary. Darvish, for example, views her elevation as a natural progression, the tangible outcome of an often-cited auto retail industry statistic: Women are directly responsible for nearly 45 percent of all new vehicle sales in the United States, including sales of trucks. They influence 80 percent of those sales. Translation: If the woman in the house doesn't want a certain car or truck in the household's driveway, it is not likely to be bought.

Years ago, when "Internet" sounded like something exotic, there was a great media-driven debate over whether car sales by clicks would replace sales via bricks -- visiting the dealership store or sales lot, kicking the tires, taking a test drive and then haggling with the dealership's sales and finance people to avoid being taken for a ride.

Clicks have not replaced bricks in the auto retail business, and they are not likely to do so anytime soon. Instead, something else has happened: Clicks have created much stronger sales foundations for the traditional brick-and-mortar stores. And the corollary:

Brick-and-mortar stores with poor or weak Internet communications staffs are finding it hard to stay in business, and are finding it next-to-impossible to reach growing populations of Internet-savvy immigrants, such as professionals from South Asia.

"Many of these people [immigrants] live online," said **Monique Tapie**, corporate communications director for New York-based Global Advertising Strategies. "They do everything online. It is their primary way of staying in contact with family and friends back home, their primary way of communicating with each other in the States. If you are not online, they don't see you."

NADA, as a result, once skeptical about the role of the Internet in auto retail, now has embraced it fully. Many dealers nowadays are just as apt to advertise on Facebook or MySpace as they are to advertise in The Washington Post or the New York Times. And the role of the Internet in auto retail now goes considerably beyond that.

Consider Scion, Toyota's youth marketing arm. Scion customers can now go to www.scion.com and configure their prospective vehicles -- build to order, replete with options -- before entering a Scion dealership.

As more dealerships progress from relatively small family-run operations such as Sykora's business in Texas to Darvish's multi-store conglomerate based in Maryland, and as more of them develop into publicly traded enterprises such as Florida-based [AutoNation](http://www.autonation.com), the biggest auto retailer in the United States, dealerships will push for more Internet-based efficiencies. Those developments will include electronic financing, and

something else -- fast, up-to-date, online comparisons of the fuel efficiency of all new cars and trucks available in a given marketplace.

That latter development will not replace sales hype about horsepower. But the betting among some leading dealers, notably Michael J. Jackson, chairman and chief executive of [AutoNation](#), is that it will change the nature of sales conversations on the showroom floor.

[AutoNation](#), as a result, is highlighting "most efficient" ratings, vehicle by vehicle, on its cars and trucks. Jackson says that approach does something the federal government so far refuses to do: It clearly states to consumers the financial costs of their horsepower decisions. You want more horses? You pony up more money.

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