

prenatal educator who has had both a doctor/hospital birth and a midwife/home birth says, 'I know some men who would make wonderful midwives. But having another woman there on a continuous basis, who is well-trained, is far superior. And I'm not talking about female obstetricians or busy labour-room nurses who bustle in and out periodically. Women in labour are more relaxed with midwives. The whole experience is totally different.'

In the U.S., midwives—highly trained professionals and self-taught lay attendants alike—are demanding and winning the right to practise their skills without fear of prosecution. In Canada, a movement toward reinstating midwifery has begun. In Vancouver, a citizen's group called SPARC is urging reconsideration of midwife-attended birth. And in Toronto the Home Birth Task

Force held a full day of discussion on alternatives in childbirth, and sponsored a four-day workshop on midwifery led by a lay midwife from the U.S.

What about midwives themselves? What are they doing to further their own cause? In small ways they are beginning to gather support for their profession by organizing themselves, educating the public and medical groups about their qualifications, and even challenging (perhaps breaking) the law, in order to follow their calling. The movement is small but growing, and many health-care providers and consumers are looking to the future when Canada will once again have midwives helping families birth their children—a future in which an entire group of working women will be recognized for the highly qualified professionals they are.

Time is Money: A Query Into Consumer Questionnaires

Judith Posner

Une sociologue étudie comment les questionnaires du marketing manipulent les femmes et soulignent l'idée que le temps des ménagères ne vaut pas d'argent.



Dear

I am writing to you both as a consumer who was asked to fill out your questionnaire on retail shopping habits, and as a professional sociologist. The questionnaire your organization sent is an extensive one and I have decided not to fill it out on the grounds that it is really an imposition for businesses like yours to expect women to give up hours of their time to help profit-making organizations make more money. Let me clarify this point. As a sociologist I have nothing against questionnaires and I usually respond to them with ease. But government or pure research questionnaires are one thing and marketing questionnaires are another. Even so, I have filled out a lot of the latter — out of interest's sake if nothing else. But your questionnaire would probably require close to two hours if filled out thoughtfully (and I hope you wouldn't encourage respondents to fill it out any other way). I spent about half an hour on less than five pages before I decided that it was ridiculous to continue. It seems quite incredible to me that any woman (working or non-working) would give up valuable time to help your organization for free. (By the way, your lottery ticket is hardly adequate payment). Unfortunately, however, I suppose some, perhaps many women will fill it out, and perhaps that is more a reflection of the fact that women in our society are used to 'working for free' than anything else. But I personally refuse to help perpetuate this pattern.

Furthermore, your covering letter is particularly insulting. It is a real misrepresentation for you to say 'It will only take a short time to answer the simple questions on the enclosed survey form. . . .' Are you trying to intimidate respondents into filling out the form by suggesting that only an idiot would find it taxing? It would have been preferable at least to admit the form is long, but. . . .

Finally, you say all information is confidential. But in an era of junk mail, consumer pressure, and privacy invasion, who wants intimate financial data on a form with their name on it?

I would, of course, be interested in your response to my comments.

Sincerely,

Dr Judith Posner

Recently, I received a phone call from a market-research company asking me if I would be willing to respond to a questionnaire that would be forwarded in the mail. The subject of the questionnaire was consumer habits and, being a devoted consumer, I said they could send me a copy. A couple of weeks later I received the longest questionnaire I have ever laid eyes on. Enclosed with it and the covering letter was a one-dollar provincial lottery ticket. A small token of their appreciation!

The questionnaire asked all sorts of detailed questions about consumer habits, such as: Where do you buy specific items? How much do you spend on them? It inquired into everything from wedding gifts to toothpaste. After working on it for forty-five minutes I realized just how time consuming it was going to be. I had worked close to an hour and still wasn't a quarter of the way through the booklet. I decided to pack it in and sent the above letter to the marketing firm.

As my letter indicates, the firm implies that the form is easy to fill out when the opposite is true. The firm's preliminary phone call and covering letter also understated the extensive nature of the questions asked. (Did they hope I wouldn't notice?) This is a conscious manipulation on the part of the marketing firm. Furthermore, the introduction to the questionnaire makes it quite clear that it is aimed only at women, reflecting the fact that women are still the prime consumer targets (or victims) in our society, and are considered to have limitless time on their hands.

The more I thought about this questionnaire, the madder I got. Private companies think nothing about asking women to give up their free time. What about supermarket line-ups? Most of the people in line are women. What about telephone sales? Most of the people who answer intrusive sales pitches are women. In short, women consumers are constantly and consciously victimized by our sexist society.

A week or so after I sent my letter I received a phone call from the company thanking me for my letter and pursuing my comments further. It was quite clear that the person (man) who called was not really interested in understanding my point of view, but rather was interested in defending his. He was eager to let me know that the return rate was more than sixty per cent. If this is true — and not a manipulation on his part like saying 'It will only take a short time' — the firm's tactics are astoundingly successful. It is very disconcerting that so many women are so eager to work for free. Perhaps this is because the study claims to help women consumers:

The information you provide in this study will be of great value in helping store owners and manufacturers serve you, and other consumers better.

This is rather unlikely. I have yet to see a store or market-research outfit that had the consumer's best interests in mind. It would be more accurate to assume that the respondents' answers will help the marketing firm to direct stores into manipulating us more successfully. Why should we help them? If consumer outfits really want to help, why don't they do something about line-ups, or the slow service in department stores, or the loss of carry-out services?

The most insulting thing about the incident was the tone of the follow-up phone call. The explicit defence of the firm was, 'We didn't mean to be sexist, we're just trying to do our job.' Pleading ignorance is no excuse. The man on the other end of the phone, and others like him, are responsible for the implications of their actions whether they are aware of them or not. While it may be comforting to some of us to know that he was not motivated by malicious intent, this does not change the effects of his actions. Such studies help to reinforce an already sexist society which devalues women's time.

The follow-up phone call went from bad to worse. First of all, I was surprised when a man called. The questionnaire, of all things, was sent by a woman who signed herself 'Ms.' But the follow-up was done with her husband. Perhaps a woman's name was used on the questionnaire to lend it an aura of camaraderie and consumer legitimacy. More importantly, the male representative suggested that since my response was atypical, I must be offbase. He stated several times that most women weren't offended by the questionnaire so it must be OK.

The diatribe about the difficulties involved in deciding what 'freebie' to enclose in the mailout made my heart bleed! The firm had carried out a test study to see if women preferred a lottery ticket or 'two shiny new quarters in a plastic pouch'. He repeated this phrase several times and mentioned the energy and time involved in going to the bank to get the 'shiny new quarters' and the time it took to put them in the plastic pouch. Too much wasted time for the company. So they decided on the lottery tickets.

Women were expected to sell two to four hours of their time for a one-dollar lottery ticket! When I commented on this inegalitarian exchange he replied gruffly, 'Women didn't have to fill out the questionnaire if they didn't want to.' The problem is that many of us feel obliged to do so after saying 'yes' to a phone call and receiving a token payment. The lottery ticket, like saying the questionnaire is short and simple, is a manipulation.

The phrase 'time is money' is an apt reflection of a consumer society like ours. Probably no other culture in the world is as time-obsessed and work-oriented. The only problem with this ethic, however, is that it applies only *outside the home*. In other words it applies largely to men in the salaried-work sphere. Women who work in the home and are unpaid are not usually looked at from a time perspective. That's why we stand in line for hours at checkout counters and hang around the house waiting for service people. How many times have you asked a repairperson when he is coming and had him answer 'In the morning,' only to have him/her arrive at 4 p.m. What difference does it make? A housewife isn't doing anything but hanging around the house anyway.

As women, when we allow ourselves to be exploited by profit-making market-research outfits, we are not only contributing to our own manipulation, we are doing it for free as well. Enough is enough. From now on if people want my 'professional female' consumer opinions, they can pay for them.

