Who’s More Critical of Business: Men or Women?

Women, more strongly than men, look to government to curb the power and profits of business and to cure social ills. To reverse this trend, management must respond with alternatives.

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Organizations used to be run from within. Today, policymaking appears, by contrast, to be shared among an internal hierarchy of directors and professional management, plus a diverse set of government entities, all claiming to represent some segment of “the public.” This change has forced the “internal” hierarchy to listen with considerable interest to that “public” which gives the government its powers. However, the situation may be complicated for the business of tomorrow by the emergence of two “publics”—men, who have traditionally exerted the primary influence in the legislative and regulatory areas, and women, who are now beginning to make their influence felt.

Emerging power for Ms. Employee/Voter/Legislator/Lobbivist/Consumer has created a set of priorities that differ from those traditionally associated with what was, in effect, a male-dominated “public” and business executives are well advised to discover the differences. This article reports the results of a study of attitudes held by men and women toward government and business, and suggests specific implications of those attitudes for executives.

For decades, the constituencies to which a business organization listened were its stockholders and, perhaps to a lesser extent, its customers. Today, by contrast, any large organization is overwhelmed by splinter “publics”—consumerists, environmentalists, and racial and ethnic minorities. So numerous are the pressure groups that an organization may overlook the larger aggregates, men and women. In reporting on the attitudes of the two sexes, this study serves to focus the attention of business on a more broadly based constituency. This examination of their attitudes indicates that they, too, are publics to be reckoned with, perhaps more so than are smaller groupings.

Attitudes commonly held by men and women are of interest because numerous studies have shown them to be important in shaping political perceptions of the business

NOTE: A copy of the Houston Community Study on which this paper is based is available from the authors

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community and actions affecting it. Citizens are not fools, but neither are they civics-book models of behavior. They are influenced by issues, knowledge, and common sense, but they are also directed by prejudice, misinformation, and ignorance. It becomes necessary, therefore, for managers to look at actual opinions held by men and women, rather than to operate on assumptions of what they “should” favor or oppose.

Attitudes of women are of particular interest: women are a majority of the population of this country, and during the last fifty years the proportion of women workers has risen from one out of five to almost two out of five of all workers. Many of these women are heads of households, and others contribute substantially to the total family income. Considering these statistics along with the growth of the women’s liberation movement in the last decade, the indication is that women will become increasingly vocal, active, and powerful in our society.

Historically, in the critical area of business-government interaction, women more than men have favored the government’s side. One explanation of this difference suggests that even as early as the primary grades, girls learn values associated with home, family, and motherhood, whereas boys learn values directed toward competition, success, and recognition outside the home. The differences in value learning make young women more trusting than young men.

Second explanation of attitude differences between the sexes places less emphasis on the value differences and more on their behavioral consequences. Historically, men have had sex roles encouraging contact with the world beyond the home. These experiences were thought to temper political attitudes to more realistic levels—specifically, to a realization of the limitations of any institution, particularly government.

The study reported here probed attitudes toward business and government in adversary roles, as well as attitudes toward both as joint problem-solving institutions. It was expected that women would disproportionately take the side of government over business when government and business appeared to be on opposite sides of an issue. It was also expected, however, that women would tend to have greater confidence in both business and government than would men.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Male and female attitudes were investigated as part of a community study by the College of Business Administration at the University of Houston. The study, financed by Brown & Root, Inc.; Exxon Company, U.S.A.; and Shell Oil Company, included an opinion survey of Houston citizens. Its purpose was to provide those companies, and the community at large, with an objective picture of how citizens viewed a variety of issues.

An area cluster probability sample of 1,000 male and female heads of households was interviewed personally in late 1975. Because of the broad focus of the study, the average interview lasted ninety minutes. While a variety of questioning techniques were utilized, the opinions discussed in this paper were derived from analyzing responses to a series of thirty-five statements. A seven-point scale was used to provide a range of responses from extreme agreement to extreme disagreement.

The statements were grouped into two
broad areas: (1) corporate size, profits, and social involvement, and (2) government regulation and legislation. Answers from 452 males and 538 females were coded on a +3 to -3 basis so that differences between sexes in their answers could be tested for statistical significance.

Corporate Size and Profits

Approximately two-thirds of the respondents believe large corporations have too much power in general and that most major industries are controlled by one or two corporations. They also believe that government agencies are controlled by business. A significantly larger number of women than men hold these opinions, either because fewer women disagree with these statements or because fewer are "not sure" of their feelings. Almost 75 percent of both groups, however, recognize that large corporations are needed for continued economic growth in this country. Similarly, less than 35 percent of the respondents agree that "large corporations should be busted up for the good of the country."

With respect to corporate profits, women respond differently from men, to a significant degree, on two questions. First, women disagree more strongly with the statement that corporations should be allowed to make unlimited profits. Second, women are stronger advocates of government regulation of corporate profit levels. As Figure 1 shows, however, the differences between male and female responses are small in most cases, but significant because of the large sample size. On other questions where differences are less than significant, women appear to be more negative toward corporations: suspicious of their power, size, and profits; and skeptical of their ability to solve serious social problems.

Answers to other questions reveal that neither men nor women see business as the segment of society that should handle social problems. In a possible contradiction, however, both sexes disagree with a statement that government is doing a better job of solving problems than is business.

Government Policies

Sex differences are the rule rather than the exception in responses to questions about government regulation and legislation. Out of the twelve statements on which responses were obtained, nine show significant differences. Women consistently advocate increased government regulation or legislation.

In the area of regulation, a higher proportion of women say that the government should keep auto prices down, keep pollution devices on automobiles, and limit corporate profits. Nearly half the women in the sample agree that government makes business more responsive. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) believe that the government must protect citizens from big business.

Attitudes toward proposed legislation also reveal sex differences. As shown in Figure 2, a significantly higher proportion of women than men consistently advocate legislation to guarantee jobs and health care for everyone and provide programs for the poor. More women than men also favor guaranteed jobs and guaranteed family income. The only statement on which no significant difference was found was on the issue of consumer views. Neither group believes that consumer views should always be given priority in the legislative process.

In summary, women appear to be more inclined to support government intervention. We expected, therefore, that they would also show a higher degree of trust in government and perceive government as having more power to accomplish things. It was found, however, that women do not differ significantly from men in their perceptions of "trust

FIGURE 1
How the Sexes Differ in Attitudes Toward Corporate Power and Profits

FIGURE 2
How the Sexes Differ in Attitudes Toward Social Legislation
in government"—at any level. Neither sex has much trust in government, but women did give corporations the stronger evaluation of distrust.

Women, much more than men, believe that various levels of government have substantial power, but both groups disagree with the statement that "government can get anyone to do what it wants." A significant perceptual difference exists concerning local government. Men perceive city government as having less power than women perceive it to have. In answer to another question, almost two-thirds of both men and women agree that citizens need protection from business, even though they indicated, in response to other statements, that government is not doing a good job of providing such protection.

**THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES**

The results of this study clearly indicate that women's attitudes significantly differ from men's in several areas. First, women tend to perceive corporations as having too much power and control and making profits that are too high for the good of the country. Second, women are more in favor of increased regulation of big business. Similarly, they agree that more social legislation needs to be passed in this country, and that much of the cost of this legislation will probably be carried by the private sector.

The implications of these findings are manifold. Anti-business legislation, or at least legislation aimed at curbing the profits and "power" of business, will stand a much better chance of passage in the next few years. Equally strong support will be available for regulation of business by government at all levels. Since women's groups are becoming increasingly vocal and politically oriented, the demand for this regulation is expected to rise.

Our reasoning here stems from a look at enrollments in colleges of business and at the rhetoric of literally hundreds of seminars for women in management. Women are being told that barriers to attainment of power are falling. Their enrollment in pre-management programs (40 percent women at the University of Houston) attests to their belief in the message of opportunity. It seems only realistic, therefore, to foresee that well-prepared women who expect opportunity will find it, at least in greater numbers than did women ten years ago.

In sum, our research indicates evidence of greater support by women for actions that will increase government control over business. Given this fact, we considered what the appropriate response is for management to make.

**MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSE**

Our research suggests that women have as little confidence in government as they have in business. Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that their support of legislation to "cure" social ills stems from a lack of perceived alternatives. It is thus up to business leaders to become better communicators and to make women more aware of alternative ways of correcting these problems. How best can business achieve effective communication with women?

First, business leaders should stop thinking of "women" and "business" as two different populations "them" and "us." Women are part of business as investors, employees, and taxpayers, picking up their share of the bill for every government program. But the interrelationships are not always outwardly apparent because those who speak for business are usually males—the announcers on television commercials, the speakers at Chamber of Commerce banquets, business editorial writers, and so forth.

Second, a wise organization uses the expertise and the visibility of its woman managers. If there are none, that is the first problem to attack. If women do occupy decision-making positions, then they can serve as the organization or industry "voice" in the
general media, as well as in talks before women's groups.

Third, even if the same communicator—a woman—addresses both all-female and mixed audiences, her message may, realistically, have to differ. A truism of communication suggests that a successful persuader starts "where the audience is," in terms of attitudes. Thus, a speech or article directed to a primarily male group may proceed from the assumption that the limitations of government action are familiar to the audience. A parallel message to an audience composed primarily of women may, by contrast, first need to make the argument that government action has proved to have serious limitations, and then to present alternatives to such action.

Fourth, a corporation may want to examine the likelihood that most of its communication goes to male audiences. If a review of corporate communications shows neglect of female audiences, the disparity should be corrected.

Fifth, the measurement of impact of any such program must include the gathering of opinions from women as well as from men. Too often, success is proclaimed based on opinions of "the people at the top of the organization"—who will very likely be men. A simple but more scientifically oriented search for feedback from the general population will, by contrast, include women if a random sampling technique is used. Then the corporation has some basis to say—as the three sponsors of the Houston Community Study can now say—that in fact they know the priorities of various segments of the population.

Business has realized for many years the necessity of telling its story effectively to John Q. Public. We are now suggesting that managers consider talking to—and listening to—Jane Q. Public as well.

Women who have opted for the modern feminine orientation differ from traditional women in a number of ways. They are more liberal in their attitude toward life, events and business; and more cosmopolitan in their interests. They are financially optimistic but careful spenders, pragmatic about major purchases. Although modern women appear to be less satisfied with their current situation in life than do the traditionalists, they are more optimistic about the future. And while modern, they are not radical—their basic value structure is similar in kind, but not degree, to that of the traditionally-oriented segment of the female population.

—Fred D. Reynolds, Melvin R. Crask, and William D. Wells
"The Modern Feminine Life Style"
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