

CASE STUDY: BIC FOR HER

How NOT to Market to Women (And How Ignoring Psychology Turns Your Product Into a Global Meme)

In 2012, BIC, a billion-dollar company that's been making pens since 1950, decided they finally understood women.

They didn't.

What followed is the single best example of how NOT to market to women. And how ignoring female buyer psychology can turn your product into an international punchline overnight.

Let's break down exactly where they went wrong, why female audiences rejected this so immediately, and how to make sure you never, ever do this in your own offers.

THE SETUP: A BILLION-DOLLAR COMPANY FUMBLES A DEMOGRAPHIC THEY THINK THEY UNDERSTAND

BIC isn't some scrappy startup that didn't know better. This is a multinational corporation with decades of consumer research, global distribution, and presumably... a marketing department.

BIC launched its most iconic product, the ballpoint pen, in 1950. Since then, the French company has expanded to offer razors, lighters, and even phones.

So when they decided to launch a line specifically for women, you'd expect some level of sophistication. Some understanding of who they were selling to.

Instead, they gave us this...

BIC for Her debuted in 2011. The pens came in pink, purple, and pastel colors, and were supposedly designed to fit a woman's hand.

The product description actually included phrases like "elegant design, just for her" and "thin barrel to fit a woman's hand."

They created a line of pens that came in purple and pink color ways, and advertised them as the "perfect accessory" to "add a touch of personality and a pop to your day with beautifully smooth writing," as if a pen was everything besides a writing utensil.

The tagline? "Look like a woman."

(I'm shaking my head as I'm typing this)

Let me be clear about what happened here. A billion-dollar company looked at a demographic that represents 50% of the population and controls 85% of consumer purchasing decisions, and their big insight was: "What if we made it pink?"

This is what happens when you think you understand women but have never actually listened to them.

HOW IGNORING PSYCHOLOGY TURNS A PRODUCT INTO A MEME

Here's what BIC's marketing team apparently didn't know: women have extremely sensitive bullshit detectors.

Female buyers don't just evaluate products, they evaluate intent. They're asking "Does this brand actually understand me, or are they just trying to extract money from me?"

BIC failed this test so spectacularly that the internet turned their product into performance art.

Hundreds of amateur comedians flocked to the BIC "For Her" Amazon page in the United Kingdom, offering up reviews that ranged from faux outrage to blistering sarcasm.

The fake Amazon reviews became legendary. And they're worth reading because they reveal exactly what women were actually thinking...

"FINALLY! Someone has answered my gentle prayers and FINALLY designed a pen that I can use all month long! I use it when I'm swimming, riding a horse, walking on the beach, and doing yoga. Since I've begun using these pens, men have found me more attractive and approachable."

"Before these pens, I was nothing. I was a mere inconsequential woman, stumbling around writing nonsense with big pens that made me look ridiculous."

"When I saw these I just had to have them, so I asked my Husband to buy them for me. He refused, as he said that owning a pen might make me Think, and then have Ideas of My Own."

What's happening here? Women are using humor to expose the absurd assumptions baked into the product. They're holding up a mirror and saying "This is what you think of us?"

The product gained global media attention when Comedian Ellen DeGeneres did a full segment on her show where she expressed sarcastically how ridiculously sexist the marketing was.

Ellen took four whole minutes out of her show to explain to BIC that this was not a very good marketing idea. She deadpanned: "It's about damn time. Where have our pens been? We've been using man pens all this time."

Four minutes of national television dedicated to mocking your product. That's what happens when you ignore female psychology.

WHY FEMALE AUDIENCES REJECT PERFORMATIVE PANDERING INSTANTLY

Here's the psychology BIC missed entirely.

Female buyers process marketing through an emotional safety filter before they ever get to logical evaluation. One of the first questions they're asking, consciously or not, is: "Do I feel understood here?"

BIC for Her failed this gate in the first three seconds.

BIC made a wrong assumption that women would be more inclined to purchase pens that more "suited their style."

The problem isn't that they made colored pens. Anyone can buy a purple pen. The problem is they framed women as a separate species that needed special accommodation for a task (writing) that women have been doing just fine for centuries.

Women have been using pens as pens, not as accessories since the first pen was invented in 1827.

This is what performative pandering looks like: Making surface-level changes (color, packaging, language) without understanding the actual psychology of your buyer.

Women detected the performance immediately. They knew this wasn't a product designed to serve them, it was a product designed to extract money from them using shallow stereotypes.

The problem isn't how BIC is handling the social media backlash, it's that the pen was made in the first place. You don't need to be a Women's Studies major to spot the sexism.

And here's what made it worse...

BIC was charging significantly more for its lady pens than it was for the gender-neutral varieties.

So not only did BIC insult women's intelligence, they charged a premium for the privilege. This is the Pink Tax in its most blatant form. Same product, higher price and patronizing messaging.

Women rejected it instantly because it triggered every alarm bell:

- "This brand doesn't understand me"
- "This feels manipulative"
- "They think I'm stupid"
- "They're trying to charge me more for less"

That's four of my Six Emotional Blockers triggered simultaneously that no amount of marketing spend was going to save this.

THE RESPONSE THAT MADE EVERYTHING WORSE

When the backlash hit, BIC had a choice. They could have acknowledged the mistake. They could have even leaned into the humor and pivoted to something self-aware.

Instead, they got defensive.

Instead of acknowledging or playing along with the public's mockery of their pen line, BIC threw away what could have been a publicity opportunity or "saving grace" for their mistake by releasing a stern apology and forced diplomacy.

This is exactly what NOT to do when you've fumbled with female audiences. Doubling down or going corporate-speak just confirms that you don't get it.

BIC ultimately discontinued the pens, simply thanking its customers for their "honest feedback."

The product was discontinued at the end of 2016.

But although the product died, the lesson lives forever.

HOW TO AVOID EVER DOING THIS IN YOUR OWN OFFERS

So what do you do instead? How do you make sure your marketing to women never becomes a BIC for Her situation?

1. Ask whether you're solving a real problem or a perceived one

BIC's fatal flaw was solving a problem that didn't exist. No woman was struggling to write with regular pens. No woman was asking for thinner barrels or pastel colors.

There was no obvious problem for designers to solve for their customers.

Before you create anything "for women," ask: Did women actually ask for this? Is there genuine friction you're removing? Or are you just assuming what they want based on stereotypes?

2. Never pink-wash a product that works perfectly fine for everyone

Gendered marketing sometimes makes sense, but many products, including pens, are the same no matter who's using them. BIC could have simply manufactured pens in pretty colors and sold them to all genders without the "for her" bit, but instead leaned into dated stereotypes ripe for mockery.

If your product works the same way for both genders, adding "for her" isn't marketing. It's a tax on women dressed up as personalization.

3. Understand that women detect performative pandering instantly

The mistake in their reasoning lied in the fact they overlooked the blatant misogyny that lied in the message of their marketing.

Female buyers evaluate intent, not just product. They're asking "Does this brand see me as a person or as a wallet with lipstick?"

Surface-level changes (colors, fonts, "empowering" language) without genuine understanding will be rejected faster than you can say "thin barrel designed for a woman's hand."

4. Never charge more for the "female version"

The Pink Tax isn't just ethically questionable. It's marketing suicide. Women talk. Women share. And women will absolutely roast you publicly if you're charging them more for the same product wrapped in condescension.

5. If you fumble, own it

BIC's response made everything worse. If you get called out for tone-deaf marketing, the worst thing you can do is get defensive or release a corporate non-apology.

Acknowledge it. Show you actually learned something. And for the love of God, involve women in the conversation about how to fix it.

6. Test your messaging with actual women before launch

If BIC would have made some research in this area, would get feedback first, or would have had any interviews, they would see that this product was unneeded. [Course Sidekick](#)

I guarantee you that if BIC had shown this product to a focus group of women before launch, someone would have said "This is insulting." The fact that it made it to market means either they didn't ask, or they didn't listen.

Neither is acceptable.

THE BOTTOM LINE

BIC for Her is what happens when a billion-dollar company thinks "marketing to women" means "make it pink and add flowers."

It's what happens when you skip the psychology and jump straight to the surface-level execution.

It's what happens when you build a product based on assumptions instead of actually listening.

And it's what happens when female buyers detect that you see them as a demographic checkbox instead of actual human beings with functioning brains.

If BIC learns a lesson from this "disaster," it shouldn't be one about registering domain names or weathering a storm of complaints. It should be that women don't want to be upsold on stupid shiny lady pens. Period.

91% of women say marketers don't understand them.

BIC for Her is Exhibit A for why that number is so damn high.

Don't be BIC.

P.S. If you found this valuable, share it with one other person who's struggling to convert female buyers. The more people who understand this, the better marketing gets for everyone.

P.P.S. If you want to work with me, DM me on [Twitter](#) or [Telegram](#) and let's get to work. Not free or cheap.

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