

VARIETY

These women are alphas of the aisles

A woman can live for 30 days without sex or shopping. Just don't take away her smartphone, say "alpha panelists" who help predict consumer trends.

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In a classic exchange between 1960s advertising executives Don Draper and Roger Sterling on "Mad Men," Draper muses, "What do women want?"

Sterling replies, "Who cares?"

The line prompts guffaws from today's viewers. Women, who in those days often received weekly allowances from their husbands, now make 80 percent of household buying decisions. Marketers will do almost anything to find out what, indeed, women want, and how to sell it to them.

Mary Van Note and Beth Perro-Jarvis of Ginger, a Minneapolis branding and research firm, make their living in part by filling their clients in on upcoming women-consumer trends. Their not-so-secret weapon is their Alpha Panel -- 400 women in 10 cities across the country, including Minneapolis, Chicago, New York and San Francisco.

"She's the one who always knows what's going on in her circle, whether it be the boardroom, the pickup line at kindergarten or a college English class," said Perro-Jarvis of the "alpha." "What should I wear, how do I get a date, how do I get a job, all heads swivel to that woman. We use them to help us predict because they're ahead of the curve. Where they are is where the bulk of women will be in two years."

The Ginger duo puts groups of the proprietary panel together with clients like Target and Nordstrom to help the businesses figure out what they're doing right, what they're doing wrong, and what they should do next to attract women's spending power.

The groups typically meet in settings more comfortable than office meeting rooms, like a cozy back room at a restaurant or someone's family den.

"Women love to get together and talk, and in a situation like that most of us will be pretty open-minded and uninhibited, even if we disagree," said Realtor Jane Larson of Edina, 48, one of the local alpha panelists.

Van Note and Perro-Jarvis, who met when both worked at the ad agency Fallon and started their business in 2003, were united in part by a philosophy that emphasizes getting clients together with consumers for frank, face-to-face conversations.

Spending survey

For the past five years, Ginger has asked its alphas to fill out an annual spending trends survey. Some of this year's findings were predictable -- such as preferring time spent with family on Mother's Day to an actual gift -- but others were more surprising, such as budgeting for a couple of splurges, like a vacation, over paying down debt or adding to savings.

As for what the women could not go 30 days without, the smartphone was a strong winner.

"Women are multitasking more than men, juggling more roles and situations," Van Note said.

The No. 2 spot went to exercise, trumping coffee, makeup and adult beverages.



(<http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/01ALPHA>)

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"It's not about having the perfect weight or figure, or even for health. It's because exercise is a great stress reducer and we're hearing that's what saves their sanity," said Perro-Jarvis.

So what could they go a month without? Easy: sex, chocolate and social media.

"We have a feeling the numbers might have been a little different if we asked men about the smartphone versus sex," said Van Note, "but you know we said just 30 days. There's always Day 31."

Willing to speak up

The panelists include women with unique résumés -- like the high-tech San Francisco executive who dropped out for a few years to be a lounge singer in Paris, the Christian sex therapist who sells high-end adult toys and the 50-something snowboard instructor in Colorado who just started a mountain-rescue business, but also stay-at-home moms and recent college grads. They range in age from their mid-20s to mid-60s, but most are in their 30s and 40s, "a peak buying time for families, from diapers to cars to health care," said Van Note. They have at least one key trait in common.

"We know what we want and how we feel, and we'll tell you, sometimes even when you don't ask," said Colleen Burns of Eden Prairie, a former TV news anchor and producer turned spokesperson/blogger and mother of five sons.

"When you get all of us in a room together, it becomes this big think tank of women who aren't afraid to share their opinions. They're probably sometimes afraid of what we're going to say because they don't want to hear it, even though they should."

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So how does one collect a giant posse of alpha women, anyway?

"They are recruited lovingly, by hand, by us or people we know who know who's in the know," said Van Note, who added that they're not necessarily superstars. When you're selling detergent, someone well-connected in kids' team-sport circles can be more valuable than a boldface name.

Larson and her husband have three children between ages 9 and 17.

Asked whether she considered herself an alpha trendsetter, she said, "Yes and no. I try to stay pretty current on my own, but it's also because of people I know. From my kids' friends and their parents to my clients, I'm always picking up on what's happening."

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Beth Perro-Jarvis, left, and Mary Van Note do an annual "What Women Want" survey for clients of their research consulting group.

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