

MYRA STARK IS A MEMBER OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING GROUP IN SAATCHI & SAATCHI'S NEW YORK OFFICE. SINCE 1996, MYRA HAS PUBLISHED AN ANNUAL SNAPSHOT OF THE CULTURAL TRENDS INFLUENCING CONSUMERS.



mstark@saatchiny.com

The Mommy Wars: Phase 2

Just listen to the terms in which the work versus family debate is now being framed: "choice," "challenge," "decision," "struggle." The words expressing the emotions associated with this debate are equally loaded: "pressure," "ambivalence," "stress," "anxiety," "guilt," "insecurity," "self-doubt."

Listening to this language makes clear that the debate has moved to another stage in the public consciousness, particularly of Gen X and Gen Y women. What was referred to a decade ago as the "Mommy Wars" has moved from a battle between stay-at-home moms versus working moms. The conflict has been internalized; the battleground is now within.

It's hard to pick up any women's magazine these days that doesn't contain an article on what *The New York Times Magazine* called these "terrible work and family issues," so compelling is the subject to women. In fact, a new field in book publishing has emerged to reflect the debate: Mommy Lit. A sampling of books would include:

- Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It*———
- Jane Green's *Babyville*
- Danielle Crittenden's *Amanda Bright@Home*
- Douglas and Michaels' *The Mommy Myth*

Other indications of the prevalence of this debate in the culture are the popularity of parent coaches, 24/7 parental stress lines, support organizations like *MOTHERS* (Mothers Ought to Have Equal Rights) or *Mothers and More* as well as innumerable Web sites and blogs on which the issue of work versus family is endlessly debated.

An even more telling indication of the changed nature of the issue comes from demographics. There has been a drop-off for the first time in over a

decade in workplace participation of married women with a child less than one year old: in 1997 the figure was 59%, but by 2000 it had dropped to 53% and is still going down, the first decline since the Census Bureau began recording these figures. According to Catalyst, the organization which tracks women in business, 1 in 3 women with MBAs are not working full-time; the comparable figure for men is 1 in 20. Saatchi & Saatchi's presentation by the Consumerology department, "*The Future of Mom*," notes that of the 41.8 million children under 15 who lived with 2 parents last year, - of them -10.4 million-had moms who stayed home as opposed to 9.4 million in 1994.

What accounts for these new trends in the work versus family issue?

First are the shifts that have taken place in attitudes toward work. Ironically while there has been increasing acceptance of working mothers among the general population, a growing disillusionment with the work world has occurred among Gen X and Gen Y mothers. The Families and Work Institute has documented how mothers feel the work world has failed them. We are seeing what has been called a "*reluctant revolt*" on the part of managerial and professional women against 80-hour-a-week jobs. As a Time article on the issue comments, "*ten, 15 years ago it all seemed doable.*" It no longer does.

Adding to the conflict between a full-time job and a family is the importance Gen X and Gen Y place on the value of balance. As work becomes more demanding, balance has become a sacred value. According to a Catalyst study, both Gen X women and men rate personal goals higher than career goals. Survey after survey confirms that these generations want to spend more time with their families and children and define a successful life as one in which work is balanced with human relations.

There are many reasons why balance has become so sacred: the desire on the part of these generations not to repeat their early history as the children of divorce, a generational counter-revolutionary revolt against what they see as the over-valuation of work by Boomer women, the growing spirituality of America, the effect of Asian philosophy on American society and, of course, the growing importance of home and family throughout the '90s, escalated by the anxieties of 9/11.

In pursuit of balance, women are turning to sequencing, or living what The New York Times Magazine calls "*a life in chapters*," working in their early 20s, staying at home with young children, hoping to return eventually to work. The entrepreneurial and self-reliant characteristics of these generations has led many women to start businesses of their own which afford them more flexibility than working in corporate America.

On the other side of the issue, however, are economic pressures.

The fact that almost 75% of women with children under 18 are in the work force because they have to work, regardless of how fulfilling the work is or how important it is to their sense of identity. When women demanded opportunities in the work world in the '60s, one income was sufficient to maintain a family. Now, however, women increasingly find that they must work to keep the family afloat, given the increases in housing prices, in educating children and in many other economic indicators. Two incomes are needed today if a family is to stay in the middle class.

No wonder the issue of whether to be a working mother or a stay-at-home mother is a highly charged one for young women. Anyone who markets or advertises a product that touches on motherhood, children, work or the role of women within the family must realize that women are in a state of heightened sensitivity around this issue. Whether the product is cereal, toothpaste, detergent or cars, women will scrutinize each communication because it touches the conflict within.

What marketers and advertisers need, therefore, is an analysis that looks at the signs and symbols within each communication to understand if they are being read as they were intended to be, or unintentionally convey something quite different. Semiotics is the communications research tool we should be employing.

However, conflict also presents opportunity.

Precisely because this issue is so compelling to women, they will be more receptive to any communication that evokes it. As "*The Future of Women*" emphasizes, they will be particularly receptive to communications that make them feel more competent and in control as well as those that convey a sense of belonging, that, whatever their choice, others have struggled with it.

A recent study, part of the *Yankelovich Monitor*, referred to at the 2004 annual conference of the U.S. advertising industry, announced the depressing news that 59% of U.S. consumers feel that marketing and advertising is of no relevance to them. We pay attention even in this cluttered world to that which touches us emotionally. Because the work/family conflict has been internalized, women continue to debate the issue long after they have reached a decision. It is a guarantee of attention.