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## Reaching Recession Dads

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There is something more to the recessionary changes in consumer behavior than meets the eye, and it has to do with gender. But it's not the "marketing to women" rallying cry you might expect. Rather, we are seeing a new parenthood perspective, where men are more likely than ever to be at home due to layoffs or shifting careers.

With men currently outpacing women in job losses, this new economic reality is bolstering an already-growing trend: wives taking on roles as primary breadwinners while husbands become primary caregivers.

Men, who may have been increasingly contributing at home and participating in household shopping before, are now finding they have to pay even more attention to the what's and why's of their purchases. They may also be turning first to the brands that understand their new needs as more conscious and family-aware buyers. Therein lies an expanding marketing opportunity that takes a bit more consumer insight to see and serve.

With so many more men joining the at-home ranks, marketers can't afford to continue gender-based efforts focused solely on moms. A telling, and humorous, case of lost gender identity is represented by the online "RebelDad." This particular stay-at-home father and blogger recently took a diaper brand to task for sending him its Mother's Day e-mail, with the friendly and personalized greeting: "Happy Mother's Day, Brian!" And this brand is not alone in assuming its consumer target is female only. A competitor is currently running a spot promoting a year of free diapers, with the single contest qualifier being that you need only be...pregnant. (Sorry again, Brian.)

This sort of dad-disrespect is everywhere. It's in the news, online and even in the movies. And the dialogue among men in the thick of this cultural shift is significantly growing. Why Not Dad, for example, is an independent film that explores the trend of men taking on the role of primary caregiver in their families.

These dads speak intimately of the challenges they confront within a society accustomed mainly to women in that role, and the need for support from and for other stay-at-home fathers. One poignant example is the sense dads get from

moms at the playground. They feel they must quickly establish a connection to their own child in order to put the women at ease about their kids' safety with an unknown man around.

It's becoming pretty clear that men are not feeling the love from the many CPG brands in their new role as "professional dad." If such a brand's reflection of the gender-role realities was bad before -- as in the classic, ever-smiley, cookie-baking mom -- it has become an embarrassingly glaring disconnect.

What we see now is more and more men reaching out for connection over the new lifestyles they are experiencing. These guys need the same level of support moms do. In fact, Newsweek reported in April that every day in the U.S., more than 1,000 men become depressed after the arrival of a new baby and are experiencing postpartum depression. At the same time, these dads are also more likely to be laid off due to the economic recession (80 percent of layoffs befall men).

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We believe that recession dads are more primed than ever, emotionally and professionally, for a new marketing message that reflects an understanding of a new work/home balance. Parenthood is an amazing experience that men want to handle well, and they'd love to know there are brands out there that are motivated to truly support them. Furthermore, dare we utter the term "emotional" when talking about these guys? That taboo is there for men perhaps even more than for women. "Emotion" has become heavy with cliché and "feminine" baggage, but it actually is a human, genderless experience. Language can become such an obstacle in gender-specific marketing.

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But this just means that marketers need to be on their toes even more when targeting consumers of both genders, and especially parents. Real knowledge of how these people feel, think and speak about various products or industries is just as important for reaching men as it is for reaching women. In today's parenthood marketplace, there is absolutely no room for blanket messaging that only caters to women or moms. Mistaking gender in a diaper brand's "parents" newsletter or considering only moms as the main decision maker in research show lack of insight.

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There is a growing contingent of stay-at-home dads who are increasingly aware that they can demand better service of brands. Identifying and applying the deeper parenting insights to your marketing approach is the only way to deliver the real goods -- value and relevance -- to this era's most sophisticated and deliberate shopper.

And, that may well be a he.

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