



**GENDER  
BALANCED  
ON THE ROAD  
CONVENIENCE**

# Q8

In 2008 the Q8 stations throughout Denmark were facing not only the looming crisis, but more fundamental trouble. The stations/kiosks of all petrol brands were boringly alike; messy, a bit worn, macho universes that did not at all appeal to the increasing number of affluent women on the road — and the male customers weren't too excited either.

Same, same. Profile porridge. Petrol price-driven. After having a good look at the mega womenomics trend and finding that nobody else in the petrol business seemed to have noticed the female potential and the health wave holding hands to conquer all trades, marketing and retail director Helle Dahlgren Skov initiated an ambitious plan. She wanted to take the Q8 brand from “a petrol station with a tired looking kiosk and a rather junky food offering” to “a modern convenience store for people on the road — where you can by the way fill your tank and have a quick car wash while you rest”. Now, more than 100 stores later, the vision turned out remarkably strong.

The Swedish market is next in line to eradicate the myth that you can't buy quality food at a petrol station and that you can't cover male and female desires within the same sharp concept.

## LET YOURSELF BE INSPIRED BY A DIFFERENT RETAIL AREA

This case-interview is the first time the Q8-project is illuminated in all its details. There are loads of interesting experiences showing how insight in and interaction with female customers can fuel innovation, quality, communication and common sense – for the benefit of all customers. Why did Q8 do it? How did they approach the challenge? Why were the on the road-women so reluctant to enter the old kiosks? Did the guys leave when the women actually started entering and enjoying themselves? How did Q8 steer clear of the traps and stereotypes? How do you create gender balanced convenience design from a female focus? How can a gender-balanced approach open new sources of story telling? And why can you never count on customers to tell you what they want? You, dear reader, might consider yourself doing business far from the convenience trend, but chances are you are not. There is a high probability that you can grab several ideas directly from the Q8 case to inspire your business opportunities on a brand as well as a shop level. You may own a wine shop with the windows full of bulky boxes and plastered with price signs, a bit dusty and gloomy and closed on itself. Your furniture store might need a good cleaning, new ways of presenting the products and a great espresso machine. Your car dealership may benefit from less feature focus and strike colour and style tones closer to the influential female driver while staying cool with the guys. Your DIY market would probably gain market share by introducing a benefit-oriented interior decoration that would improve the convenience factor.

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### ASK THE TALKATIVE FEMALE CUSTOMERS

When the Q8 convenience project - fuelled by the new female benchmark - started, the whole idea of buying anything edible of a certain quality at a petrol station was foreign to most women and probably quite a few male customers agreed. Many found the prices to be a rip-off. Not a very promising cocktail for a highly competitive future. Too few female customers paid the shops a visit despite the fact that there were an increasing number of women sharing with the guys on the road a need for healthy convenience food to go.

Dahlgren Skov and her Q8 colleagues chose a thorough and simple way to find out why some customers were rather or seriously reluctant to enter the kiosks. They asked the customers – and especially the talkative female ones. Here are the major reasons they identified:

- some of the potential customers habitually went to a competitor and they had come across no reason to change that habit
- some of them exploited the long opening hours of retail and didn't need other store options than their near by supermarket
- some had no idea why they would enter a Q8 shop and they were totally unaware of the offer
- some had a really old perception of the kiosks and hadn't noticed the gradual changes that had taken place – for example the fresh bread
- some considered petrol shops a rip-off
- some said they planned exactly what they would eat and they never needed to grab a bite on the way
- some expected the shops to sell only unhealthy stuff
- some simply didn't want to be tempted by the candy and cakes
- some didn't want to wait for the food that needed to be prepared
- some wanted a real break – to sit down – and that was not an option at the time
- some would prefer to go to a bakery or a coffee shop to get good quality
- some really doubted the freshness
- some simply didn't find what they came for – for example non food and car care products
- and to some the product offer were simply unappealing.

## FRONTRUNNER IMAGE THROUGH FEMALE INSIGHTS

This is what Q8 concluded:

As long as others within the specific business area are not yet fully aware of the female customer potential it is a strong and highly profitable differentiation strategy and getting started will provide you with a frontrunner image and a platform for further investigations into the gendered approach.

The new female customers can help discover a new way and regain customer closeness – baring in mind that focus had so far always and automatically been on the men.

The first insights into the female customers' lives were:

They want to be tempted in a good, healthy way. They want to experience that the brand/the shop is doing its best – seriously considering the offers and intentions – and not just lazily repeating itself or following the rest of the trade. They want to be involved and engaged in the development process, and taken seriously when shopping. Their expectations as far the petrol station shops are concerned are really low.

This is what Q8 concluded:

We need to send clear signals about quality, hygiene and freshness. Then the women will turn up to test it. We need new requirements to define the convenience concept of the future. It is crucial for the female audience that the bake-off and food to go is top quality, we need more healthy treats and better, more “delicious” design to meet their expectations.

## QUALITY FOR LESS IS A STRONG LICENSE TO BUY

The key words for the concept at this stage turned out to be:

### STIMULATION

Experiences and innovation.

### SIMPLIFICATION

Simplicity through fast and innovative solutions.

### SINCERITY

Be more present, sincere and human.

In other words: Be less “fuel-like”. And always remember to give them a good deal. This goes especially for the women who tend to be more reflective during the shopping process than men. They notice details and evaluate all the time, they negotiate with themselves and quality for less is a great reason to buy. Throughout this process one point

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was constantly present:

How do you avoid losing the guys? Later on it turned out that quite a few of the male customers were out there waiting for the same convenience modernization and healthy products – just a bit delayed compared to the female customers.

From these insights and decisions, the Qvik to Go concept was born. It included a resourceful logo, competences within gender balanced convenience design with a female focus, employees training - and a private label health products introduction.

The shape of the logo was inspired by the Q. The colour purple was chosen because it signals exclusivity, elegance and dynamics. It is accepted by both men and women – and no competing brands were anywhere near the purple universe.

## **CLEAN UP THE MESS AND PROMOTE A SENSE OF SECURITY**

The areas that were explored and changed to meet the convenience design demands, with a female benchmark, were the following:

- **An open and welcoming façade**

promoting a sense of security. Transparency, making it easy to check out the standards of hygiene and design. Tempting atmosphere from a distance too.

- **Lighting**

bright, nice and modern. Focus on the products and the colours.

- **Colours**

a sense of calm and modernity and a touch of playfulness

- **Low shelves and wall elements**

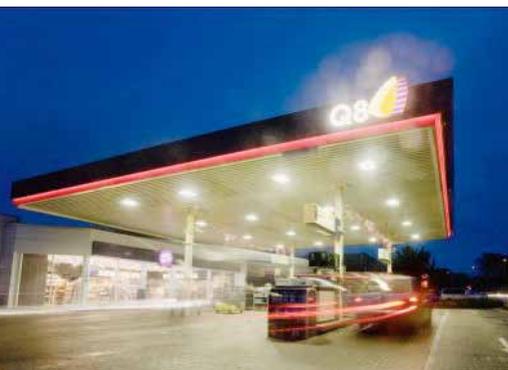
providing an uncluttered environment. Making it easy to navigate and efficiently find what you need. The fact that you can actually see everybody in the shop gives a sense of security.

- **Get rid of the outside product mess**

fighting the fuel-like image and the cave-like interior.

- **Employees were instructed to keep the bathrooms strictly clean.**

If the bathroom is a mess, women tend to be scared away assuming that this is the general standard of the shop.



The private label product introduction focused on health, high quality and design – and new products, made especially for the female audience. The key words were:

- Make sure to show variety and quality. Focus on the positive surprise.
- Let in delicious design and colours in packaging and merchandising. Push prejudices and focus on freshness.
- Organic alternatives within snacks, bread aso. Make sure to meet the needs of the conscious mom.

## **AND THEY LIKED IT**

In the marketing materials all products are given the Q-shape and bright colours. Fun, fresh and tempting, in a good way. The campaign hit all consumers, but it was tested very thoroughly against women. So what did the consumers say?

- It works well with the men and it is highly appreciated by the women. Significantly more women than men find the ads a lot better than those of the competitors.
- Women decode the ads better than men.
- 39 % of the women and 32 % of the men feel like visiting the shop after having seen the ads.
- 52 % of the women and 42 % of the men find the shops very attractive – only 3 %, respectively 5 % are negative.
- 55 % are likely to shop at a Qvik to Go the next time – and there is a high proportion of not Q8-customers.

A year after the introduction there were 20 Qvik to Go shops and the follow up research showed that:

- Q8 were gaining market share. The shop and campaign continued to test positively against women. And men!
- A 50/50 gender distribution among customers was obtained.
- The project was proving profitable.

# THE VITALITY OF THE FEMALE FOCUS REDISCOVERED AGAIN AND AGAIN

Fast-forward to 2012.

“By the end of 2012 most Q8 stations throughout Denmark(106) have a Qvik to Go shop, says Helle Dahlgren Skov.

It happens during the interview for the case, as she resumes the point of departure and results of the project and explains the challenges of the near future, Dahlgren Skov rediscovers the full vitality of the female focus. “I had almost forgotten the enormous power and drive of this source”, she says. “We need to make a circle movement to make sure that we return to the female inspiration as a benchmark, the roles, motives, worries and changing lives of the women. We need to keep closely in touch and exploit our hard won gendered intelligence position. Four years ago, Q8 was the frontrunner in a macho market to tune in on female channels. Progressively we reached the gender balance, and the newsworthiness and unique context of the shops and campaigns gradually took over the top agenda from the deep interaction with the female customers. Now we need to move on and we have to revitalize our female insights. Women change and we should too. We have moved from unhealthy to healthy, and the guys are moving with us. Many campaigns during the past years have intended specifically to challenge male barriers towards healthy food. So we start with the driving force: the women. We make sure to meet and sometimes even exceed their expectations. Then we invite the guys to follow – and when they do, we need to move to the next innovation step to make sure to keep our business healthy despite the declining total customer base and increasing competition”, says Dahlgren Skov.



"Now the gender thinking is deeply rooted in the company culture as a natural dimension of the brand's personality"



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## GIVING THE SHOP A KEY BRANDING ROLE

### Looking back here is what has been obtained:

- Turning the shop into an emotional touch-point and giving it the key branding role: a convenience shop with a petrol pump and car wash.
- Exploiting fully the scent and attractiveness of fresh, quality bake-off.
- Designing a transparent, as opposed to “tacky” environment.
- Made sure that the tempting signals are clear all the way to the pump platform.
- Made the light, colours and sense of safety join forces. No male customer had ever told Q8 that he felt insecure in the shops, but women obviously did. Before Qvik to Go, that is.
- Q8 went through a long, experimental period offering super delicious organic snacks in elegant wrapping, but the delicacies turned out too expensive and overshooting – at the time. The initiative was up against the crisis, habits and lack of credibility as far as really high quality was concerned – and Dahlgren Skov and her colleagues probably moved a bit too fast-forward and got out of sync with female price focus. Also there was the durability issue and after a while, Q8 moved away from packaged luxury and concentrated the efforts on freshness. (“A bit reluctantly”, says Dahlgren Skov, “because it was great fun. But when you note that the products don’t move, you had better move yourself”).
- The project started just before the crisis, but Q8 never doubted that the female focus was the way to differentiate, and now the gender thinking is deeply rooted in the company culture as a natural dimension of the brand’s personality.

It was a bit of a sensation when a leading newspaper chose to compare Qvik to Go coffee with coffee shops like Baresso, and several Q8-employees at first found it to be an unfair comparison. But first of all it turned out that Q8 could actually compete on quality – and secondly – as Dahlgren Skov expresses it: “The journalists have got the message. We have changed, we are ready to be tested, and we have landed at Baresso level, which is great. Comparison with high quality food distribution keeps us on our toes”.

## Don't ever count on customers to tell you what they want -listen deeply and do your job

"We have spent a lot of effort analyzing how you actually signal "healthy" in an appropriate way because this signal is crucial to women – and to an increasing amount of conscious, fat-fighting male customers as well. Should we put the healthy products in a separate area to get it away from the candy and other sugar-stuff that we need to offer too?" asks Dahlgren Skov. "It is important to state that we do not compete with high quality food take away on a large scale, but we have so far obtained credibility as a bakery – and in the cities people appreciate that they can always park the car while picking up what they need".

The total petrol station kiosk customer base is decreasing. There is a discount market on every corner in the cities, but Q8 has long ago taken the consequences of this development and gotten rid of a lot of the products that people would earlier buy at a petrol station. The value proposition is continuously getting narrower and deeper in the Danish Qvik to Go shops.

Dahlgren Skov: "I have just been appointed responsible for our Swedish sister company where they still have a quite different shop universe. They sell lawnmowers and a world of car gear and – to put it diplomatically – very traditional macho food. They have

huge do-it-yourself areas where the guys fix their cars. The question is now: How do we in this culture interact on a larger scale with the women and stay cool with the men? Again we intend to use the female focus/benchmark to push innovation and modernization towards contemporary quality. Again we have to listen deeply to the voices of consumers and to remember that they can never tell us what they want. This is our job to find out! The customers didn't tell us that they wanted smaller cakes as an option at the Qvik to Go but we understood the constant accounting that is going on in female as well as male brains, and we interpreted it into a product which has turned out to be an acceptable temptation and perfect for a birthday brunch" says Dahlgren Skov.

## Taking a totally different podium with gendered storytelling about life quality issues

Q8 regularly communicates with the local and national press about the subjects that have been clarified through the female innovation process. The stories focus on health, traffic security, car care, coffee quality, dangerous driver's fatigue, sex differences when it comes to checking tire pressure etc. As the reluctance to talk about gender in a commercial context has been decreasing, Q8 has taken a new podium and today finds itself a credible, natural source when it comes to

general advice about health, food quality, and safe life on the road.

Former Q8 communication director Jytte Wolff-Snedorff started a few years ago to invent the new source of storytelling, linking to key issues in the business strategies of the brand. "When I asked my colleagues for stories, they told me that we sold 5000 more rolls than last year. Not really interesting to the general public. Another barrier that I bumped against was competitor sensitive information, so I decided to take another road", says Wolff-Snedorff and continues: "By participating with specific questions in broad marketing analyzes I found relevant and interesting conclusions that have to do with our line of business and the lives of our customers. We took the podium so to speak, and now we have obtained the position as a credible source when it comes to actual and seasonal advice to people about important reminders in their every day life. Like: Do you know that your dirty car can be dangerous? (Gender differences when it comes to car washing facilities – and how Q8 deals with them). Do you know that most modern men on the road today prefer wholemeal bread? We teach women (and men) to learn to check the tire pressure to avoid accidents and to save fuel... etc. A whole new world of stories is springing from the customer diversity and the consciousness about what is important in the lives of the customers – not only in the situation when they buy fuel and have a snack".

## **Q8 did NOT:**

Shrink it and pink it.

Stereotype women and men.

Forget freedom of choice and get rid of the traditional food offer.

Shout about the new female/gendered focus. (Just did it!)

Go for the female universe only and let the men down.

Get insulted by the repellent views of potential female customers.

Stick to ideas that turned out too expensive and not relevant.

Ask what women want as much as what they don't want.

Jeopardize the gender balance on the way.

Forget the health dimension when it comes to male customers.

Let the crisis disturb the new quality direction.

Forget the importance of a good deal.

Consider female focus a short-term trend.

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