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Girls Just Want to Have Fun

By Sue Marquette Poremba

Women know: Sisterhood is a lot of fun and even good for them. As the numbers of Bunco groups and book clubs multiply, also on the rise is the number of trendy products that appeal to women kicking up their heels for some good old-fashioned fun.

Almost every woman will confirm what research out of UCLA has found: Female friendship bonds counteract stress. Women have a special place in their heart for their girlfriends, and today, a growing number of gift shops are turning over shelf space to items especially geared toward women having a good time together.

While girls' nights out involve women of all ages and backgrounds, Marti Barletta, author of many books including *Marketing to Women* and *PrimeTime Women: How to Win the Hearts, Minds, and Business of Boomer Big Spenders*, believes the target group for most "girls having fun" items are what she calls Prime-Time Women, women who have raised (or are nearly done) their children and have not only more discretionary income, but also more free time.

"It is like a second adulthood," she says, "when most women have more money and fewer family obligations. What women really want to do at this point is reconnect with their girlfriends." Smart vendors and shops, Barletta adds, are recognizing this trend and are selling products made especially to tickle a woman's funny bone.

A splash of wine

Women gathering to have a good time is the basis of Bonnie Jesseph's business, W.I.N.O.S. (which stands for Women In Need Of Sanity). A portion of the profits goes toward charities that benefit women and have special meaning to the women in her life.

The Boone, NC-based business started by selling cookbooks that focused on cooking with wine, and from there she added cocktail napkins with fun sayings. Many of these featured women and wine. A representative saying was "Just give me wine and chocolate and no one gets hurt."

W.I.N.O.S. also sells beverage accessories, baseball caps and visors, and aprons with roomy pockets—most products retail for under \$25. "Women like to show up at gatherings with a gift for the hostess or buy fun gifts for their friends," Jesseph says, adding that less expensive products make it easier to splurge on something that everyone will enjoy.



Naughty and nice

While these products have enjoyed a popularity spurt in recent times, Anne Taintor believes the concept of women having fun is an ageless idea. For her, the trend began 25 years ago with a stack of women's magazines from the 1940s and 1950s. "I looked at all of those contented-looking housewives in the ads and wondered, 'Hmmm, are they truly that thrilled with their clean sheets and well-stocked fridges?' I felt as though the women in the photographs had something more to say, so I decided to let them say it. I took the images from the vintage ads, and added the thought balloons."



Admitting she likes her fun with a touch of naughtiness, Taintor's collection includes items like shot glasses, drink coasters, emery boards, luggage tags, and shopping bags with vintage images and captions sure to get a laugh. For example, one of Taintor's coasters is a woman in 50s-style dress, sitting demurely on a sofa, with the caption: "She was one cocktail away from proving his mother right."

"I like to imagine people's secretly subversive thoughts—the things they're too polite to say out loud," she says. "I hear from lots of women who tell me I've been putting into words exactly what they have been thinking. It's not always nice, but I hope it's always funny. After all, where would we be if we didn't laugh: not just at each other, but also at ourselves?"

By women for women

At Suzy Toronto Studios, the goal is to help women build the strength of such relationships by reinforcing all that is good about themselves and friends and family.

"I believe the strength of fun gifts for women has always existed and will always continue. The most robust lines in the gift industry will be those that focus on female relationships and friendships," says Toronto.

Her most popular products include T-shirts, books, art prints, memo pads, luggage tags, note cards, mugs, mouse pads, and calendars. The products carry messages, such as "Pretending to Be Normal Day After Day is Exhausting," "Life is All About How You Handle Plan B," "The Gathering of the Goddesses," "Never Underestimate the Power of a Hissie Fit," and, of course "Anyone Who Says She Doesn't Need A Girlfriend, Just Hasn't Found A Good One Yet" and so on.

Suzy Toronto has major cornerstone licenses with Midwest/CBK and Blue Mountain Arts, and recently agreed to a brand new license with White Mountain Puzzles.



Midwest-CBK has worked with Suzy Toronto for more than three years, and both retailers and their customers love her inspiring and light-hearted sentiments, explains Beth Lorentz, Midwest-CBK Vice President of Product Development. "We've built a wildly popular line of girlfriend gifts for everyday designed by Suzy, and just introduced a new line of Suzy Toronto holiday designs during our 2011 product launch."

The price is right

Anne Taintor's most popular items are the boxes of mini tissues, lip balms, and sticky notes—all items that fill a practical need while inspiring a smile. The products are popular with women of all demographics. "Women love picking out gifts, sharing and laughing with girlfriends, sisters, mothers, daughters, and co-workers. Small gift items like ours don't cost a lot, but they give a lot of pleasure," Taintor says.

Martha Field agrees. The Boston-based retailer sells Anne Taintor products in her store, Gracie Finn. "The cutting humor hits the mark," Field says. She sees women of all ages—including mothers and daughters—coming into the store to purchase these items. Field uses an old-fashioned refrigerator as a display case for Taintor's products. "It attracts people to the line," she says.

Toronto agrees that providing products and messages at an affordable price is especially important. "All of our products are created to retail between \$10 and \$20. No matter how bad times get, we women will still spend money on family and relationships. Keeping the price right is key," Toronto adds.

To attract women to the line, Toronto suggests that many of the stores that carry the line host a Suzy Toronto Day at the shop.

Fun and cheeky gifts

Sometimes the products are a way to recognize the quirks of a friend's (or one's own) personality—at least that's what Jen Zurowski has found with her product, Cheeky Umbrella.

Her company got its start when Zurowski moved to Vancouver, B.C. She had never needed to own an umbrella before, but in her adopted community, umbrellas are a must. Zurowski wasn't happy with the selections available to her, so she developed her own—with designs and sayings that are, well, cheeky.

Cheeky Umbrella's most popular styles have catchy sayings on the inside—"I prefer umbrellas in my cocktails" and "When does it start raining men?" The outside is decorated with brightly colored designs. Zurowski tested the designs on her friends so she knows they can be great conversation-starters.

"They make unique gifts," she says. "In a tough economy, this is one of those fun things that can brighten up someone's day. It's even more fun when you can give a gift that matches the recipient's personality and interests."

According to Barletta, the reason these gift items resonate so strongly is the shared sense of humor in the girlfriend social network. A woman's sense of humor is different from a man's, she says. "What makes it funny is the shared sense of experience," she adds. "We read the sayings on the notecards, and we all get the joke."

This "shared experience" is the inspiration behind Jill Haney-Neal's collection, Jill's Wild (but Tasteful) Women, based in Bend, OR. The women Haney-Neal draws don't resemble Barbie Dolls, but have the round curves of the average woman. She describes the art as "sexy, bodacious, and fun. The images are used on a variety of product lines, such as mugs, plates, coasters, T-shirts, aprons, lithographs, greeting cards and wine labels.

Haney-Neal does believe there is a line between humor and crude or over-the-top depictions. "At one time I was licensed with a greeting card company that pushed the images over the top with the greetings that I felt were crude," she says. "As in real life, there has to be a balance."

At Kiona Winery in Benton City, WA, Jill's Wild (but Tasteful) Women labels are on four selections of the winery's Vivacious Vicky wines—a table white and table red, as well as a merlot and a rose. "My mom, Vicky, met Jill at an art show, and the two hit it off," says J.J. Williams, sales manager. "The winery had wanted a second label for a while, and this was a good fit."

Williams likens a wine label to the cover of a book—it attracts someone into trying something new. The wines with Jill's women are meant to show they are inexpensive wines geared for a fun, relaxing time. "The labels help attract a

whole different set of people to the winery," Williams says. And yes, that includes women coming in for a girls' outing.

Or, perhaps they'll take a few bottles of wine home for a girls' night in with a game night. What's a DAME to Do was developed by Kerri Neubek and her sister when they realized there weren't many (if any) games geared specifically for women to play as a group.

"We want women to be able to play the game with their peers or their college-aged daughters or their moms," says Neubek, based in Perkasio, PA. "We want our products to enable players to relax and laugh and not be on edge wondering if when it's their turn they will cringe."

Trending up

Midwest's Lorentz thinks this particular product trend has been growing and building momentum especially over the past decade as women have formed or joined a variety of Girls Night Out, Bunco, book and other clubs. "Women, especially Baby Boomers, have gained more time, independence, confidence and economic resources. They want to celebrate the special times, events and memories shared with the special women in their lives—mom, sister, daughter, aunt, co-worker, neighbor, friend."

Whether it is a game, an evening shared over a bottle of wine, or even an impromptu gift for a friend, products geared towards women having fun are one life's little indulgences, says Barletta. "It's all about adding fun in the context of women doing things together."