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Richmond ad executive Katherine Wintsch understands what it takes to run a household and raise children while maintaining a career. But chances are pretty good that you won't ever catch her singing about frying up bacon for her man after a long day's work. "Being a mom is difficult. But most people don't understand just how difficult it really is," Wintsch said.

She is a mother of two, a vice president at The Martin Agency and on a mission to change the perception of moms who think they need to live up to standards set by the glamorous super wife crooning "Cause I'm a Woman" in the 1980 ad for Enjoli perfume.

Wintsch, a vice president and group planning director at Martin, is using her life and her position at the Shockoe Slip ad agency as a role model to help moms around the country — and the world — get noticed for what they do. She heads the agency's think tank The Mom Complex, which researches mothers and helps corporations and ad agencies better understand them.

Leaning back in a plush red chair at the agency's headquarters recently, Wintsch, with another meeting to attend before being able to go home for a weekend packed with family activities, looked tired.



"I studied moms for seven years before I became a mom and I thought I knew how hard it was. But I just don't think anybody really knows until you become one," she said. "There is something about being a mom. You bear the burden of their education, their development, their eating habits."

The Mom Complex's main mission is to find ways for companies to reach moms by helping bridge the disconnect between what's on TV and on the cover of magazines and the reality of women's lives.

The researchers study the images and the insecurity moms feel when they can't live up to them.

The think tank calls the disconnect "The Perfect Mom Paradox," which is defined as "the conflict that arises between a mother's perfect expectations for herself and her imperfect reality."

David Urban, a professor of marketing and executive associate dean at Virginia Commonwealth University's school of business, said marketing to moms is very difficult.

"There is no massive, homogeneous market segment of moms, and the category is becoming more fragmented all the time," Urban said. "The bottom line is, not all moms are the same. That's a fundamental reason why many of them may feel that advertising aimed at moms may not really apply to them." Wintsch wants to change that notion — and there are big dollar implications for doing so.

Mothers control more than \$2.1 trillion of all household spending, or about 85 percent of it, according to a 2009 study by the Marketing to Moms Coalition.

However, three out of four mothers think that marketers "My house is a wreck and my children are crying," Wintsch said. "Then I turn on the TV and every mom is so pretty and so happy and so confident and their house is so clean. That's not real, but as a mom you feel like you're the only one."

One way The Mom Complex gets its information is by talking directly with moms in their own environment. The think tank hosts opinion parties across the country and abroad where moms are invited to a volunteer's home to eat, talk and play. The sessions are videotaped, and the moms know that.

The moms have fun, and what they say is incredibly important to researchers. "It was kind of a miserable showing," Hampton Ford said of a series of commercials shown at an opinion party she hosted recently. The moms at that party viewed a series of 10 commercials representing moms and were asked to rate them on a scale of one to five.

"I don't know where that disconnect is coming from," said Ford, a Richmond mother of two. "But they aren't giving us enough credit."

Not surprising to the researchers, the commercials that fared the worst are the ones that depicted moms as some sort of superhero moving through life in high heels or acquiescing with a smile on her face to every demand their children made.

But commercials that showed moms as they really are — tired, often frumpy and with too much on their plates — scored the best. Ford said the realistic portrayals, often done in a humorous way, resonated with the moms.

"In real life, it needs to be a partnership," she said of a family co-existing in a home.

Ford, who studied marketing in college, said the opinion-party format was relaxing and allowed the attendees to open up and share ideas.

"The setting itself invites a different type of honesty," said Leslie Griles, an account supervisor for Martin's BrandFirst Entertainment division and director of outreach and partnership for The Mom Complex.

So far, The Mom Complex has hosted about 28 opinion parties — 16 in the United States and 12 internationally. Each party includes, on average, about five women.

Ford said she likes that real-life moms are getting a voice. "I think it's brilliant," she said. "If the marketers listen."

Wintsch said the discrepancy between what moms see in modern media and what life really is about is what drove her to start The Mom Complex last year.

"Basically it was started because, when I first became a mother four years ago, I'd never seen a greater disconnect between what my life was like at home — and how hard it was — and how easy it looked on TV and in magazines," she said.

The idea of generating research that would help marketers and advertisers reach a key demographic like mothers was embraced by senior management at the agency. "There are times when I feel (top executives) believe in this more than I do," she said.

Matt Thornhill, founder and president of The Boomer Project, a marketing research firm in Richmond that looks at the boomer population, said think tanks can generate the kind of research on underserved and misrepresented groups that can effect change in how companies approach large segments of the population.

"What happens in the corporate world is that they fall into habits, saying 'This is what we've always done,' " Thornhill said.

He said think tanks, like his and The Mom Complex, give corporations and ad agencies added insight.

VCU's Urban agrees.

"The idea of having a think tank to study these and other issues in advertising and marketing makes sense," he said. "The more that marketing strategies and tactics are based on research from the marketplace, as opposed to armchair speculation, the greater the likelihood of success."

Wintsch thinks that armed with the research and the tools, she can affect real change both for companies trying to reach moms and moms themselves.

She goes on network TV to share tips, makes speeches at conferences and pitches her findings to clients.

Although The Mom Complex and work at the agency mean a lot of hours and traveling, she believes wholeheartedly in what she's doing.

"I was always passionate about doing the research," Wintsch said. "But now I'm insisting people listen."