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Wal-Mart's Mom-In-Chief Targets Millennial Mothers

Katherine Wintsch understands what it is to be a mom today. When she's not changing diapers, leading a strategy meeting or coordinating research at her think tank, she's scowling at those "awful" Kelly Ripa commercials for Electrolux. "I don't wear high heels at home or bake my own muffins," she says.

Wintsch works for prominent advertising firm The Martin Agency in Richmond, Virginia, where she is the lead strategic planner for Wal-Mart. Becoming a mother of two (a 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son) sparked her "aha" moment. She suddenly realized the enormous disconnect between today's moms and the marketing that targets them. "In every TV or magazine ad, the mom had it under control and was so perfect," she says. "But I felt overwhelmed as a new mom. It was frustrating that the portrayal was so off."

Last February, Wintsch founded think tank The Mom Complex to study modern moms and improve mom advertising. Her research, supported by studies like The Shriver Report, revealed that three in four moms, some 34 million women, feel misunderstood by marketers.

Moms control over 80% of household spending, making them the "essential" consumer in America and Wal-Mart's target audience. "Wal-Mart is the biggest marketer to moms on the planet," says Wintsch, noting that her agency produces over 100 television commercials a year for the retailer. Misrepresenting moms would be bad for women and bad for business, so the company's support was easy to attain, she says.

Key among their findings: Supermom is out.

Today's moms are overwhelmed and under pressure. "You'd think with more working mothers, the demands to be Supermom would abate," says Pamela Stone, Ph.D., editor of academic journal *Mother* and sociology professor at Hunter College in New York. "Instead, the demands have gotten greater. Now we're seeing a backlash to this extreme pressure on moms to be perfect."

Wintsch believes that real moms—and the ones that play them on TV—are undergoing a critical transformation. "We're seeing an evolution. Mom 1.0 was June Cleaver," she says, referring to the *Leave It To Beaver* 1950s housewife. "Mom 2.0 was [*The Cosby Show's*] Claire Huxtable—the career woman who could have it all. Mom 3.0 is the new millennial woman who is more comfortable being imperfect."

Today's women bristle at idealized, cookie-cutter characters, agrees Kit Yarrow, Ph.D., author of *Gen Buy* and psychology professor at Golden Gate University in San Francisco.

"This generation is unique in that they value being an individual," says Yarrow. "They want to be seen, and they crave authenticity."

The desire for more realistic advertising may also be fueled by increased connectivity online. Moms are the biggest group of bloggers and social networkers, Yarrow says, which allows them to easily connect with other real moms. Moreover, consumers are demanding better communication with brands and businesses through social media. "Millennial moms have tremendous power. The Internet is a giant megaphone," she says.

Depictions of perfect women in spotless kitchens may be meant to idolize moms but only antagonize them. According to Stone, modern women spend more time with their children than earlier generations—despite working more outside the home. An Oxford study of parental time diaries found that in 1975 mothers spent 1 to 2.5 hours a week on child care. By 2000, it jumped to between 6 and 10 hours per week.

This could be because parenting standards have gone up, working women's guilt has intensified or global competition has pressured parents to provide their children with more tools to compete (a la Tiger Amy Chua). Whatever the cause, their lives are hectic.

"Where does that time come from?" Stone asks. "From time on themselves." In fact, research from The Pew Center reveals that 90% of moms feel unable to balance their roles as mothers and as individuals.

The good news is that advertisers are listening. Wintsch has already used her research to create family-friendly Wal-Mart campaigns. In one commercial, she and her team cast a real family and followed them around for a week in order to capture authentic interactions.

Last year, mom group TheMotherhood.com and American Eagle teamed up to promote its new children's property, 77 Kids. They created a Do Good Day campaign, recruiting 77 mom bloggers to organize random acts of kindness in their communities.

Stay tuned for more to come. A brand new Wal-Mart campaign to target moms will roll out in March, and Wintsch hopes her work will influence the agency's other major clients, including Tylenol, Pizza Hut, Discover and GEICO.

Emily McKhann, co-founder of TheMotherhood.com, says the intersection of moms and brands, primarily relating online, is new and exciting. "The shift we're seeing now is changing the world of advertising in ways that we will never go back. And mothers are leading that."