

# THE SIXTH SENSE

By Ellen Britz

**I**ntuitive judgments are hard to sell, yet when Charlotte Moss worked as an investment banker on Wall Street, she often found herself doing just that—especially when her work involved interviewing prospective employees. She remembers one meeting with particular clarity. Her boss, a man, asked her to interview someone whose resume displayed a high measure of much-needed expertise.

"The interviewee came in and sort of stood on one foot," Moss says. "Then he looked at me with these droopy, basset-hound eyes. I wondered if there was anything going on behind them." Moss, an experienced interviewer, knew the first few moments of an interview formed the bulk of her judgment. Whatever this man's resume exhibited, her instincts told her he would not work out.

That initial impression hung on, and when her boss asked her what she thought of the applicant, Moss told him. He didn't agree. To him, the candidate's qualifications were unquestionable. But she stuck by her judgment; her boss stuck by his; and the man was hired—then fired about a year later.

Convincing others of a person's worth based on such an indefinable

assessment is difficult, at best. Yet Moss' perception—her "woman's intuition"—was right. And that same intuition, ignored on Wall Street, later led her to ownership of a highly successful home furnishings business, Charlotte Moss & Co. How did she decide on the direction of her new enterprise? Moss explains, "I simply felt it in my bones."

Not too long ago, a woman's intuition was a questionable and somewhat mysterious foundation for decision-making. The phrase suggested an ability to see through the haze, beyond the falsehoods, and around the obvious. With it a woman could discern true character and honest intention—as long as she confined it to the domestic side of life.

Unfortunately, as women enter the marketplace, they often find only well-documented analyses garner respect. But denying an instinct that has served so well isn't necessarily the answer. As one businesswoman told Weston Agor, author of *Intuition in Organizations* (Sage Publications) and *The Logic of Intuitive Decision-Making* (Greenwood Press), "I've learned to dress up my decisions in data clothes so they're palatable to my male colleagues."

**Call it intuition or a hunch—trusting your gut gives you an edge. Ask Charlotte Moss, whose instincts sparked her successful home furnishings business.**

Photo © Catherine Gibbons

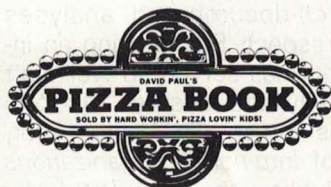


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Intuition is generally described as the ability to know something without knowing why you know it. In the business world, it's called a hunch or a gut reaction—terms more acceptable in a male-dominated arena. And while a gut reaction is gaining acceptance as a respected tool for decision-making, a woman's intuition is still thought of as an emotion lacking in substance and value.

Judith Hall, an associate professor of psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, has done extensive research on gender variations in perception. According to Hall, in general, women are better able than men to accurately read the subtle nuances behind others' words. A wave of the hand or a tilt of the head are both more likely to be properly understood by females than by males. "It's a learned phenomenon," says Hall. "In our culture, women are expected to be interpersonal experts; they facilitate, respond, empathize." Hall's research included children as young as 8 years old; the difference in accurately interpreting nonverbal communication is apparent even then.

Hall's assertions have not gone unchallenged. Dahlia Zaidel, professor of psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, poses a scenario where a woman and man first meet. The woman notices the way her partner sits, the arch of his eyebrow, the quiver in his voice. She knows he's nervous. But, Zaidel says, "How do you know the man hasn't noticed the same things? Maybe he sees her hand gestures, hears her voice inflections—but he says, 'What the hell. So what if her fingers are fluttering or her voice is two octaves too high. It's not important.'" Hall insists, on the other hand, that acting on what you perceive is all part of the intuitive skill.

### INTUITION AS A SKILL

A person's intuitive ability grows with experience. And while men have traditionally been given access to the business and financial training that may culminate in a sound business instinct, women's unique position offers its own promise.

When the company Mary Anne Jackson worked for capitulated to a leveraged buyout, she wanted to remain in the food industry. Through

her years of work-related experience, Jackson developed a good intuitive sense of the marketplace. After the birth of her daughter, she also developed a good intuitive sense of the demands on working mothers. She combined the two and set out to find a competitive

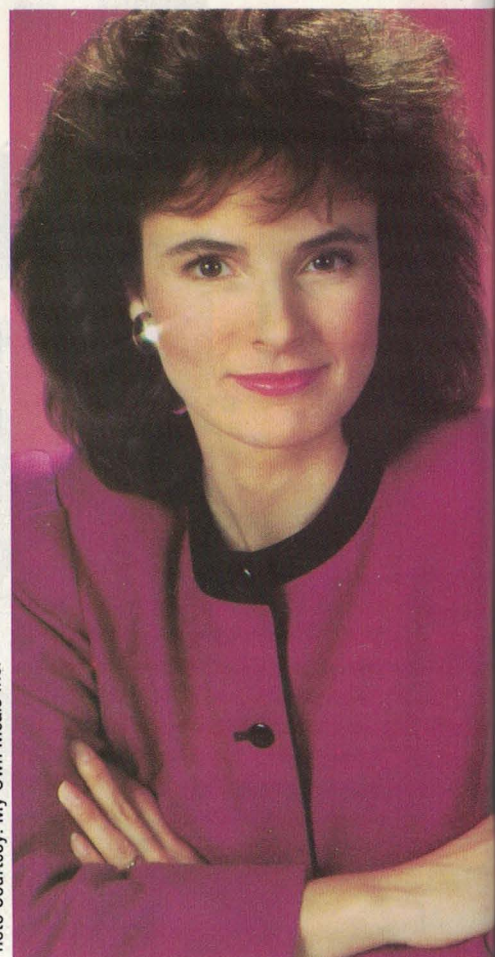


Photo Courtesy: My Own Meals Inc.

**Mary Anne Jackson combined maternal instinct and market savvy to create natural foods for kids.**

niche. It didn't take long. There was a glaring lack of quality products in children's foods. So Jackson came up with My Own Meals—all-natural foods that are attractive to kids. "The need was so obvious to me," says the Deerfield, Illinois, entrepreneur, "yet no one had thought of it before. Why not? Because most companies are run by men. Now the whole world thinks it's a great idea."

Jackson's reliance on intuition goes beyond identifying markets. It's reflected in her sales approach, hiring policy and even her product's name. That same reliance on intuition helps many entrepreneurs suc-



ceed. According to a study by John J. Kao, a psychiatrist and associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, entrepreneurs as a group showed a strong preference for intuitive decision-making—much more so than their corporate counterparts. "Entrepreneurs may base their decisions on knowledge, but it is the intuitive faculty that pulls all the knowledge together."

### IMPROVING YOUR INSTINCTS

Many people find it hard to tap their intuitive nature. Many more don't trust it. But it is a skill open to improvement. In his book, *The Logic of Intuitive Decision-Making*, Agor suggests several steps for heightening your intuitive skills:

1. *Keep an intuition journal.* Record those times when your intuition seems most fruitful—during a walk, a shower or when listening to music. Recognizing your "hot spots" allows you to cultivate your intuition when it's most needed.

2. *Practice it.* Unless you allow your intuition a role in your decision-making, you will never trust it. Of course, it should always be confirmed by quantitative research.

3. *Keep a track record.* While many theorists insist intuition is never wrong, they agree there are times when it is mistakenly identified. The feeling of absolute knowing may more honestly reflect absolute wanting. The best way of separating what you want from what's true is to keep a close watch on your hunch's success.

Even the strongest proponents of intuitive decision-making don't suggest going it alone. "At every stage of a company's start-up, you're going to have to sell the idea to others," Kao notes. "The more people you're forced to sell to, the more perspectives you'll get and the better off you'll be." A good idea survives intensive research and objective scrutiny, and brings benefits in the form of increased marketability, a more focused sales plan and greater investor interest.

### DO WOMEN HAVE AN EDGE?

The marketplace is changing. No longer are we a nation of heavy industry and manufacturing. As we approach the 21st century, interpersonal skills such as communication and sensitivity will become

crucial to business success. It's a future tailor-made for women and it's built on foundations laid in the past. "The notion that a woman's place is in the home is a fairly recent idea," explains Helen Fisher, research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. "In hunting and gathering societies, women left their children with their relatives, [set off to work], and came home with 60 to 80 percent of the food at night. The double-income family is millions of years old."

Fisher theorizes that women's expertise in social interaction is derived from a long history of nurturing babies and providing the social "glue" that holds society together. Women have had to be better at interpreting a small child's whimper and at understanding subtle forms of communication. And although some researchers question whether such skills have relevance in today's business world, many others see them as the apex of human development.

Whatever its derivation, the ability to intuit one's way through the infinite variety of societal pathways is a blessing bestowed primarily on women. It may be predominantly based on social interaction, but its application to the world of business is almost limitless. An intuitive woman may identify markets male competitors miss; she is also more apt to perceive her clients' requirements; and she is more likely to respond wisely to others' needs.

Is every woman correct in assuming she has an intuitive edge? Probably not. The studies cited to confirm women's perceptive abilities reflect an average. There will always be some men who are more intuitive than the average woman. The overlap is too great to assume that every male competitor a woman faces is not her match. But a woman's talent for intuiting what's going on around her is far from meaningless. The ability to read beyond the words "may not result from a conscious act, but it is a very sophisticated form of knowledge," says Judith Hall. "It's what makes society possible." It's a gift women would be foolish to ignore. ☒

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