



GUN

LOS ANGELES / SEATTLE / BOSTON / NEW YORK

WOMAN WITH GUN: 1001 NIGHTS/GETTY IMAGES

THE NRA

LAST YEAR

Samantha Prier, 31, an engineer in western Iowa with three children, was shopping in the local Target, her kids in tow, when she spied a khaki-clad man following her through the aisles. Security escorted the family to the car. The police were called. In minutes it was over. Prier wasn't traumatized by the episode; she recounts it cheerily. But for weeks, she told me, she'd seen similar accounts on social media. "I see millions of stories about [crimes] targeting young moms, young women professionals," Prier says. Experiencing something firsthand, she says, "was the last straw." She decided to buy a gun. ¶ Prier bought a Ruger LC9 and joined a women-only training class sponsored by Sturm, Ruger & Co., one of the top five gunmakers in the U.S. "I was so nervous," she says, "I had tears rolling down my face as [the instructor] asked me to pull the trigger." When she fired, her anxieties "just melted away." Prier completed the training, which included a tour of the company's manufacturing headquarters next door and a Ruger gift package with a complimentary concealed-carry handbag. The event was called The Ruger Experience for Women. ¶ Prier is among the country's new female gun buyers, whose numbers are growing. Her experience wasn't uncommon to that of more than a dozen gun-owning women *Glamour* spoke with, like Tashonia Williams, 40, from Raleigh, North Carolina, who bought her first pistol in December, or Jenna Schartz,

25, from Omaha, who bought her first handgun last summer. Two of the three women didn't grow up in gun-owning households, they all cited self-protection as their chief motivation to buy, and they are content to own just one handgun (at least for now). And they each describe buying a gun as a kind of personal triumph. "We've found something that's empowered us," Prier says happily. ¶ These stories mark a success for someone else too: the NRA. "More women are buying more guns, and more of them are buying guns for self-protection," says Aimee Huff, a professor at Oregon State University who studies the industry's marketing. As the percentage of men owning guns has dropped precipitously over two decades, according to a Harvard-Northeastern study, the percentage of women has ticked *up*—from 9 percent in 1994 to 12 percent in 2015—a swelling of roughly 5 million. Handgun sales, the heart of the industry, have been particularly buoyed by this: Women make up 20 percent of long-gun owners (rifles, shotguns, and the like), but 43 percent of those who own only handguns are female. Meanwhile the NRA has been changing attitudes. In 2012, according to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of women agreed that owning a gun is more likely to protect someone from crime than to put their safety at risk. By 2014 that number was 51 percent. ¶ This could hardly have come at a better time for the industry, →

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WANTS YOU

THE GUN LOBBY IS INCREASINGLY TARGETING WOMEN, TRYING TO CONVINCE THEM THAT BUYING A FIREARM IS AN EMPOWERING, PERSONAL CHOICE. BUT ARE THOSE MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR EFFORTS REALLY PAYING OFF?

BY BEN WOFFORD

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE

which not so long ago found itself in a serious dilemma. By 2008 the percentage of gun-owning households in the U.S. had declined for the eighth year in a row, a slump driven by men. “Ten years ago the indus try realized, OK, we need to keep growing” to make up for lost market share, says Huff. “Women were a logical next step.”

The overtures are necessitated as much by politics as sales. Perhaps no greater variable predicts support for gun control than gender: According to a 2017 Gallup poll, about 60 percent of women consistently support stricter gun restrictions, compared with around 40 percent of men. “The demographics of the country threaten the NRA,” says Adam Winkler, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has written extensively about gun politics. If the gun lobby was serious about protecting its political flank, Winkler says, “the NRA had to target women.”

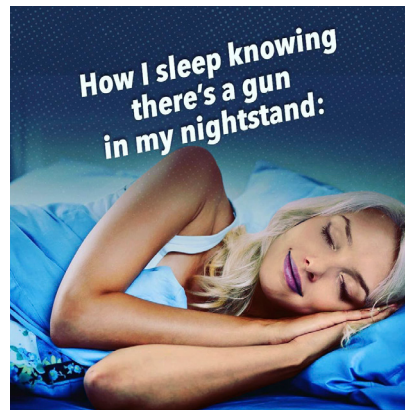
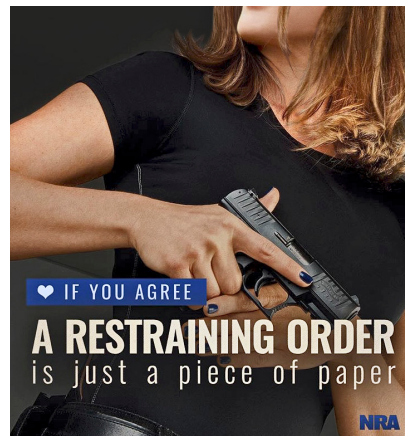
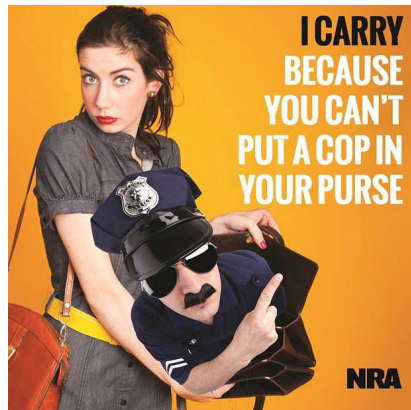
From Blogs to Big Business

To understand the feminizing of American guns, you have to meet Carrie Lightfoot. In 2008, Lightfoot, a ministry worker in Arizona, bought her first handgun. The buying experience was doused in testosterone. “There was nothing for women!” Lightfoot says. “It was either about being sexy, or it was ‘You’re not smart enough,’ that you need a man to tell you what you need.” In 2012 Lightfoot started an online forum for women about gun culture (and to sell the latest gun ephemera). She called it The Well Armed Woman. In 2013 she launched a chapter program aimed at recruiting new women to gun ranges.

Lightfoot was right: The industry had a rich history of failures reaching women, beginning with male-designed marketing in the late eighties. Some ads seemed to make light of assault: “You can’t rape a .38,” proclaimed one popular slogan. A 1993 ad—oblivious to the nightmare of a loaded gun left lying out near young children—shows a Beretta on a bedside table next to a photo of a single mother and two daughters. “That’s how a man would think to reach women,” says Shari LeGate, a Phoenix analyst for FMG Publications, a firearms media group. “They did a horrible job.”

Selling a gun presents several challenges. Unlike, say, cell phones, guns are durable—just one lasts a lifetime. Guns are experiential: Hate the range, and you’ll hate the gun. And in the modern era, gun marketers faced a virtual ban on ads in the mainstream media, with companies from Comcast to NBC enacting policies stating they don’t accept firearm advertising.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle to reaching future female customers was the



Insta-Strong
The NRA has been ramping up online and social ads, spending \$4 million so far in 2018. Ads focused on women often carry a message of safety and empowerment.

product on sale. In the United States, 50 women are shot each month by current or former partners, 4.5 million report having been threatened by one with a gun, and American women are 16 times more likely to be killed by a gun than women in other developed countries. Both gun-rights advocates and those pushing for gun control agree on these facts but use them to different effect: One side tells women to shun the tool of their tormentor. The other tries to accomplish something more difficult—persuade them to buy it.

It was the Internet and social media, LeGate says, “that has blown everything open.” Lightfoot agrees: “It kind of changed everything.” By 2013 thewellarmedwoman.com and its chapter program had taken off. Industry executives descended on Lightfoot, offering to sponsor an annual summit with 100-odd chapter leaders, or to design custom female-friendly firearms. “We had Glock, Walther, Ruger, Liberty Safe, LWRCI,” Lightfoot ticks off. She partnered with LWRCI to design a specialty AR-15 and beta-tested it through the Well Armed Woman range program’s 400 chapters and 12,000 members.

Soon after buying their first gun, Prier, Williams, and Schartz each discovered the Well Armed Woman. Williams, who lives with her husband and two children, bought a Glock in December after watching a news segment about a home invasion. She found the group online, which had a chapter 10 minutes away. “To see these women know how to handle a pistol, know how to shoot, work a gun and

clean it, I was just fascinated,” she says. “And all these women of color—not just Caucasian women. That’s when I was hooked.” Williams adds that “I actually feel safe now that I can carry. I have to protect myself. I can’t wait on my husband.” (She didn’t wait long: After watching Williams, her husband took his concealed-carry test as well.)

The Well Armed Woman was not an outlier. About the same time it launched, a number of female gun enthusiasts were establishing other online brands, with names like Girl’s Guide to Guns, EmPOWERed, and A Girl & a Gun. (One of them was a St. Louis blogger beginning to wade into conservative radio named Dana Loesch.) Beginning in 2012, according to one NRA board member, the organization’s seniormost women began deliberating about how to capture the potential of the Internet revolution. Just five years later the NRA plucked Loesch (who had also contributed to Breitbart) from obscurity and turned her into the most recognizable female face of guns in America as the organization’s spokesperson. Lightfoot describes the transformation with pride: “We laid out the welcome mat for women.”

Next Step: Television

Something else happened in 2014: The lobby group launched NRATV online. In programs like *Armed & Fabulous*, *New Energy* (Remington was an early sponsor), and *Tips & Tactics* (sponsored by Cabela’s), the Internet personae whom the NRA had been sponsoring now had a new platform, and they were given celebrity treatment. (Lightfoot, for her part, has been featured on *Tips & Tactics*.)

One of NRATV’s most popular programs, *Love at First Shot* (sponsored by Smith & Wesson), is hosted by Natalie Foster, founder of Girl’s Guide to Guns. Season three, whose pilot is called “The Journey Begins,” follows three young women as they wade into guns for the first time. “I’ll walk through this journey with them, to discuss the lifestyle and cultural elements of becoming a gun owner,” Foster says to the camera, as a montage shows the women inspecting handbags, firing weapons, and laughing playfully. Throughout eight episodes the intertwined narratives of Erin, Jasmine, and Natalie are interrupted by product showcases and supportive group chats. Gathered in a hip microbrewery, the group is permitted to express self-doubt. “I think you’re giving voice to what a lot of women feel when they’re first getting into firearms,” Foster soothes.

Huff says the marketing reflects the best of what she teaches her classes: “An HGTV framework with bright, white aesthetics.

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IS THE NRA WINNING OVER WOMEN?

In 2012, 40% of women said that owning a gun is more likely to protect someone from crime than to put their safety at risk. By 2014,

51%
thought so.

500
women participated in NRA-sponsored handgun clinics in 2000. In 2014, 13,000 did. Another study found that 47% more women are shooting today than 10 years ago.

But women are still the strongest gun-safety advocates:

60%
of all women (including gun owners) support stricter gun restrictions, compared with 40% percent of men.

A bubbly host who is equal parts friendly, inquisitive, knowledgeable. They’re signaling [gun ownership] is normal and acceptable.” The NRA’s message, she says, is that “getting together with girlfriends and going to a shooting range isn’t really that different from getting together and going to a spa.” (Attitudes aside, a day at the range is becoming more common. In 2000 just 500 women participated in NRA-sponsored handgun clinics; by 2014, 13,000 did—an incredible increase in just over 10 years)

The programming is complemented, of course, by carefully curated Facebook and Instagram campaigns. “Jasmine continues her journey to becoming a concealed-carry holder,” reads one Facebook photo of Elias and Foster, arms wrapped around each other. In another the four women hold hands in a freeze-frame sorority jump: “Kicking off the journey!”

Indeed, the industry’s online advertising has been mounting. In 2012 the NRA spent a few hundred dollars on Internet advertising (only \$300 on banner ads in the second half of the year), according to Pathmatics, a marketing research agency. These promotions didn’t feature a single woman until 2014, when ads appeared showcasing young moms guarding a crib or a pregnant woman imploring viewers not to take away her rights. By 2018 the NRA had spent more than \$4 million online before June on ads viewed a staggering 600 million times. About 23 percent of their Facebook ads targeted women, concentrated in metro areas like Los Angeles, Seattle, Boston, and New York City. Expanding their reach beyond Facebook—and using ad-buying technology that helps target specific demographic groups—the NRA hopes to reach women everywhere from the YouTube channels of female video gamers and children’s shows like *Doc McStuffins* to websites for companies like NBC, AccuWeather, DeviantArt, and even *Glamour*. (So much for that media embargo.)

Kristi Faulkner, who runs Womenkind, a woman-focused marketing firm in New York City, told me that the gun industry was mimicking what the best companies were doing starting in 2010: selling empowerment. “All of a sudden every product had to either empower women or give them confidence,” says Faulkner. That soon gave rise to a new buzzword: *journey*. “It’s the yoga message—it’s not a destination; it’s a journey,” she says. “In the wisdom of the NRA, it’s: How do we convert these women permanently? The journey simulates loyalty. We’re your partner.”

Faulkner doesn’t fault the NRA for expanding its base, as any company would do. “If I were the NRA’s CMO, I’d say: What’s the

biggest barrier for a woman buying a gun? Fear of using the gun. Fear of judgment. Fear that she's the only one," she says, almost Don Draper-like. NRATV, she continues, is a marketing creation in which the female buyer "has the support of other women, she has the comfort of other women, she has the affirmation of other women. They've nailed it. That's exactly how—God forbid, if they were my client—I would solve the problem."

The shrewdness of targeting women could also have a powerful ripple effect: In many households women have a "veto vote" on purchases. As in the case of Tashonia Williams, getting more women on board, Faulkner suggests, may bring along more men too.

Will Women Change the NRA?

Remember how gender is a strong indicator of anyone's views on gun control? That holds true even among gun owners, Pew research found last year. A full 60 percent of Republican women gun owners favor banning assault weapons. Nearly as many favor a government-backed national gun registry, the NRA's ultimate red line.

Could the NRA's newest recruits be the thing that changes its politics? While Prier is joining, Williams and Schartz have yet to plunk down the \$40 annual fee and become NRA members—and none of them are entirely opposed gun control. "I am *not* a Trump supporter," says Williams, who voted for Obama ("twice!"). "I'm not the type of person that, if [a candidate] is talking about gun control, I'm going to vote [for or against them] on that topic only."

But Lightfoot's next phase suggests where the NRA hopes to steer these women. This year she was elected to the NRA's board of directors, where a record 17 women will serve the next term. In the process of being courted by gun manufacturers, she says, "I became more politically..."—she pauses—"...educated." She has a vision to engage members in her national network of chapters, like the ones that found Williams, Schartz, and Prier, in new forms of political activism.

But the same outreach may be less effective this time around. Faulkner

points to research she recently conducted for Citibank: "The two words women were most offended by in advertising? *Empowerment* and *confidence*!" she says with a laugh. Why? "Because you never hear those words in ads to men," Faulkner says. "Ever."

Love at First Shot is replete with this kind of message. In one scene Jasmine passes the Texas concealed-carry exam. The exam is composed of 25 grade-school-level questions that can be completed perfectly in less than 10 minutes, yet the achievement is met with a splash of girl-power hugs. In the name of empowerment, NRATV seems to have made heroes of women and clichés of womanhood.

That was one reason Faulkner, who grew up shooting in Texas, gave up the sport. As she began considering careers and children, she realized her idea of womanhood had changed. "I believe that it's fine for people to own guns," she says. "I'm not that person who gave up guns for a political reason"—though the perspective of her 14-year-old daughter, who fears shootings like the one at Parkland, Florida, could happen at her school, has weighed on Faulkner. Instead, she says, "I outgrew them as a practical matter of course."

Anne Fosnocht is a 26-year-old graduate student at University of Pennsylvania and would be a perfect NRA recruit: She's a liberal, single woman in a big city who's also been skeet shooting a few times. *Glamour* asked her to watch *Love at First Shot* to see whether its message was tempting. "I actually think their marketing is kind of alienating," she reported after a few episodes. "In my mind, it's a little bit manipulative—playing on women's feeling of weakness, that they lack power. Women are disproportionately affected by gun violence, so it's a little ironic."

Fosnocht stopped midsentence, as if seized by her next thought. Eventually, it spilled out: "But you know that episode where the girl is doing the competition? I was like, Oh, that does seem kind of fun." She laughed: "It was a little bit outlandish, but I was thinking I'd like to do it." ●

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Cover Story TK

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