

**FT.com site : Keeping up with Gisele.**

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My children aren't allowed to watch TV at home. They think this is oppressive and unjust. I disagree about the former, but can't deny the latter, because I watch television all day long at the office. That is why I can report that last Monday morning, as Wall Street teetered from a subprime debacle which threatens to push the US economy into recession, not to mention the minor matter of a power grab in Pakistan, America's TV news screens were devoted to communicating the essential information that supermodel Gisele Bundchen is demanding to be paid in euros.

I saw the story first on CNBC, illustrated, of course, with images of the lovely Brazilian sucking on a flower and rolling around in what looked to me like a bikini (to be scrupulous, I should admit that it may have been lingerie). Before CNBC's report was over, the story flashed up on CNN, also featuring Bundchen in a bikini top, although in this case wearing a transparent jacket over it. Next I spotted a photo of Bundchen in a low-cut dress on a WSJ blog. That reference linked to a Bundchen image on forex analyst Kathy Lieu's site, and was accompanied by the sweetly frank admission - "it'll drive some traffic to her [Kathy Lieu's] site, (which is why we're posting a Gisele pic ourselves)". Britain's Daily Telegraph posted a photo of Bundchen in a bikini on its website, where the story was the second most popular item of "business news" by lunchtime in New York. The FT's Tim Harford picked up the story in his blog this week too. I eventually traced the scoop - at least in English - to that uber-business tool, Bloomberg.

Part of what I observed was a textbook case of the global power of celebrity, as turbo-charged by the internet. But I can't help but think that the physical charms of this particular star speeded the story's proliferation. And that aspect of this week's Bundchen news blitz is part of what feels to me like a wider trend - scantily clad babes seem to have become practically de rigueur on the kind of TV channels and websites we watch at work.

I suspect, for instance, that it is no accident that the enthusiasm for the Bundchen story comes just a few weeks after the launch of Fox Business News. As Slate critic Troy Patterson aptly observed, "any serious discussion of Fox Business... must address the pulchritude and presentation of its female talent". (To be fair, Slate has itself been known to get in on the act: one of its recent online slideshows was devoted to "The Darling Derriere".)

I have a few theories as to why we're seeing more babes on our office TV and computer screens. One is that the internet has made it easier to satisfy one of our deepest human urges: looking at other attractive humans. Check out a website like Hot or Not, on which people post what they claim are photos of themselves to be rated by the online community, to get a sense of the wider cultural vibe which is spilling over into the working day. Another influence is the fact that, a generation after the feminist revolution, America seems to be getting over the anxious political correctness of that era and the awkward androgyny it sometimes prompted.

That's a wonderful thing. But living in a time when it is OK to show footage of a cavorting model in a bikini and call it business news does pose a couple of challenges for the ordinary working girl. One is that, at least in can-do America, even regular gals can feel pressure to try to keep up, and that is no mean feat. Indeed, economist **Betsey Stevenson** recently speculated that her finding that women have become less happy than men could be connected with the effort to keep up appearances, while also keeping up at school or the office. In an interview with The New York Times she called it her "hottie theory" and wondered whether, especially for adolescent girls, the effort to be both "hot" and smart accounted for their lower reported levels of happiness than among the boys.

The bigger paradox is that, while even married matrons like me can't dispute the fact that Bundchen brightens office TV screens considerably more than fellow dollar bears like Warren Buffett, we need to remember that what works for a supermodel probably won't get you to the executive suite. A team of psychologists at Wisconsin's Lawrence University led by Peter Glick has studied how people respond to women kitted out in the kind of outfits favoured by the Fox foxes. They found "sexily attired" female managers were rated as "less competent than the neutrally attired manager". (Interestingly, sexy clothes had no impact on the perceived competence of women in lower-status jobs.)

As far as I know, the Lawrence University researchers didn't look into whether "sexily attired" women had any impact on the competence of the people working around them. Mullahs and nuns have long had views on the distracting possibilities of this sort of thing, and I can now contribute one fresh comment to that debate. When Jonathan Wheatley, the FT's Brazil correspondent, called Bundchen's New York agent, Anne Nelson, to confirm the euro story, she told him: "No, it's not true. Some Brazilian journalist wrote that and nobody bothered to check."

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