

## spertus.html

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### Wit Helps Women in Computer Science Combat Ignorance

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As a minority in the upper levels of the computing profession, women are sometimes mistreated through ignorance or malice. Some women have learned to respond with wit and panache.

When Janet Wixson, an executive director of academic computing, was first hired, her boss called a meeting to discuss problems at the computing center. All others attending were males with positions at the dean level. The discussion was quite heated, with adamant remarks about the problems in computing on campus. As the meeting wore on, one of the attendees pounded on the table and invoked the names of the previous male directors of the center, ending with the comment, "No offense meant, Janet, but we need a man in this job." Her response? "I'm willing to do almost anything to fix the problems in the computer center, but a sex change operation is out of the question." Her remark both broke the tension and succinctly made her point.

The same Ms. Wixson received a mail advertisement for disk drives, accompanied by a box of Havana cigars. Clearly, the company assumed its mailing list of CIOs contained only men. Rather than just get angry, she wrote to the company's VP of marketing, advising him that a competitor was trying to undermine his organization by sending cigars to female decision makers in his company's name. Two days later, she received a Federal Express delivery: a bottle of perfume with a letter of apology. (This was back in the days when cigars and perfume were considered appropriate gifts.)

When Professor Linda Ott began teaching at Michigan Tech 20 years ago in the same department as her husband, students frequently referred to her as "Mrs. Ott," despite her also having a PhD. One day with the department head sitting in on her class, she was called "Mrs. Ott" once too often. She asked the offending student, "What do you call Karl?" He replied "Dr. Ott." She told him she'd appreciate his using the same title for her, since she had the same Ph.D. degree. The unrepentant student retorted, "And what does Karl think of your feeling that way?" Her reply was retold around the campus. "It doesn't matter what he thinks. It was a helluva lot harder to get a Ph.D. than it was to get married." She was not addressed as "Mrs. Ott" for quite some time.

When Marty Hiller was a MIT graduate student in computer science, a memorable industry recruiting poster appeared on campus. It showed two men in shirts and ties who had dropped a printout all over the floor as they ogled a woman in a miniskirt. The caption was, "We think about more than just work here at Rockwell International." Outraged women began tearing the posters off the walls, until in a stroke of brilliance, they decided to make photocopies and plaster them all over campus. The recruiters finally figured something was wrong and tried desperately to get rid of the posters. A number of women went to the company's campus recruiting talk to disrupt it but found they were the only ones attending! Several spoof posters also appeared. One had two women in business garb poring over a printout, ignoring a scantily clad beach boy walking by. The caption was, "We think about more than just sex here at Rockwell International."

There's another class of stories in which the offending behavior is so ridiculous one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. A woman interviewed professors in charge of first-year computer science courses, trying to assess the environment for women. One professor was certain there were no problems for women in his department, and his every response reinforced that conviction. But the interviewer had trouble being polite while recording his replies, because every time she looked up at the professor, she found it impossible to ignore a huge computer printout of a naked woman covering the door immediately behind him. He was framed by this printout of a silent naked woman during the entire interview, while he was denying any sex bias in his department.

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A frequent indignity to which women in computing and other traditionally male fields are exposed is being addressed as "Mr." A few incidents are classics. A female computer scientist once received such a mis-addressed letter. The body of the letter was: "I attended your presentation at the IEEE Conference on Computer Workstations. Please send me copies of your related technical reports." Either he didn't really attend her presentation, or he just didn't notice that she was not a "Mr."

When I received an award from MIT's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science for my writings on women and computer science, the congratulatory letter was addressed to "Mr. Ellen Spertus." And even during my current job search, I received a similarly-addressed envelope, and it contained an affirmative action form!

Women also receive letters that open with "Dear Sir." I urge all women to do what I do when I receive such a letter: I return it to the sender with a polite note saying that it must have been sent to me in error, since I am not a man, and I wish them luck in getting their message to the intended recipient.

Perhaps the most outrageous story along these lines was reported to Systems, the mailing list of women in computer science. A graduate student applying for faculty positions reported her frustration with receiving a letter from one department misaddressed to her as a "Mr." What made this otherwise all-too-common offense unusual was the department head who signed the letter was also a woman!

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