



Don't Think Pink
Alexa von Tobel, center, and her crew teach without talking down to their audience.

A Source of Their Own

The LearnVest team is adopting ideas from the likes of Weight Watchers and DailyCandy to help young women improve their fiscal fitness.

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BY DAN MACSAI

✦ **IN MAJOR U.S. CITIES,** women in their twenties are out-earning their male counterparts—the gap is as much as 17% in New York and 20% in Dallas. And yet, when dealing with money musts such as staying out of debt and planning for retirement, many young women have no idea where to start. This scenario hits home for Alexa von Tobel, 26. “There I was, about to start working at Morgan Stanley,” says the Harvard graduate, “and I still felt uncomfortable about my own finances.”

After speaking with dozens of women who felt the same way, von Tobel dropped everything to found LearnVest, a new Web resource that aims to make financial literacy relevant, and even exciting, to women like

her: busy, under 40, and wary of paying \$24.99 for Suze Orman-style finance books that, as she puts it, “aren’t exactly hip.” Less than a year old, the largely ad-supported site has amassed \$5.5 million in venture capital and is averaging 350,000 hits a month, according to Quantcast. The trick, says von Tobel, is borrowing elements from products and services that women already love—the high-gloss aesthetic of magazines like *Glamour*, the track-your-points monitoring of Weight Watchers—and applying them to personal finance. Here’s how it all works.

SETTING THE TONE

“We’re fixing serious problems,” says von Tobel, “so we didn’t want anything pink or glittery.” Instead, LearnVest newbies are greeted with stylish photos, similar to the ones in fashion mags like *Elle*, and a sleek interface in green, charcoal gray, purple, and orange. In “gender-neutral” industries, such as banking and autos, “the key to appealing to women is to cater to them without patronizing them,” says Bridget Brennan, CEO of the consultancy Female Factor and author of *Why She Buys*. “LearnVest strikes a great balance.”

STREAMLINING INFO

Once users select from a list of financial goals, such as “I want to be a better saver,” the site offers up material to teach the fundamen-

tals. The guides are written in a conversational style and filled with age-appropriate checklists and tips, à la DailyCandy: “Eat at home”; “avoid dry cleaning.” Each text is broken into sections, labeled with reading times that “make it all seem a lot easier to manage,” says one user.

SPURRING ACTION

Designed to be the financial equivalent of the trendy liquids diet Blueprint Cleanse, LearnVest online “boot camps” tackle everything from trading stocks to getting a mortgage. The programs are short (two to three weeks); strictly structured (users complete one task a day); and, unlike the cleanse, cheap (no more than \$7.99). Turning major projects into simple steps “is something women respond to,” says Brennan.

BOOSTING MORALE

Throughout the LearnVest site, there’s a huge emphasis on the kind of support (“We’ve done the work for you!”) and enthusiasm (users are assured they can “conquer” their savings) that are “the stock-in-trade of popular women’s magazines,” says Brennan. “You can practically feel the ‘You go, girl!’ jumping off the page.”

KEEPING TRACK

Instead of automatically pulling spending data from bank accounts, LearnVest has users enter the numbers themselves, much as they would with a Weight Watchers food journal. “It helps them really think about how they’re spending their money,” says von Tobel. Her next move: a call-in system so users can talk to live representatives—for a fee. **FC**