



“WE DIDN’T SPEND \$60,000 ON COLLEGE FOR YOU TO PEDDLE LIPSTICK.”

How is unglamorous, below-the-radar Mary Kay Cosmetics all of a sudden attracting well-educated twentysomethings to its sales force? Katy McColl gets in on the action. Never mind that pink is death on redheads.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX TEHRANI

I'm surrounded by pale-pink Cadillacs in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn Select at 8 a.m. on a Saturday and I don't, as they say in Texas, have my face on. This is Big D, where women wear their diamonds (if they have them) and lipstick (which everyone has) to go jogging. It's a pantyhose town, it's my hometown, and it's a place where, growing up, I never felt pretty. Dallas is also the birthplace and headquarters of Mary Kay Cosmetics, the \$3.2-billion-a-year beauty giant whose products are sold everywhere except in stores. Jane told me about her MK-lady neighbor in North Carolina and her tacky pink house, tacky pink curlers and tacky pink birdcage, then she sent me packing.

My research into the world of Mary Kay begins by paying \$45 to attend a daylong seminar given by Robert Jones, a

blond makeup artist who freelances for Mary Kay. There are about 200 racially diverse ladies from their teens to their 60s gathered here, many of whom look straight out of my mom's book club and all of whom love Robert, who says things like, "Choosing makeup based on your 'season' is so 1988. Let's leave it there," with flamboyant authority. But then I spy a woman in her 30s across from me—she has prominent cheekbones and a diamond pin that she got from the company for a job well done. It spells out "\$300,000." She's the kind of girl who intimidates the bejesus out of me. She's Grace Kelly. I'm Welleesley-era Hillary.

When Robert breaks for lunch, I find a table where red plastic glasses filled with iced tea are waiting and sit down with two "independent beauty consultants" and an ►

"independent sales director." Directors recruit and mentor other consultants, in addition to selling products, and they wear special suits to identify themselves—right now they're purple, but the new ones are black with hot-pink satin piping. Everyone is *really* excited about those. A young brunette wearing more than enough pale-blue eyeshadow and a Hindu-goddess-patterned blouse that would be perfect for a rave comes over to chat. She's greeted by a chorus of compliments on her shoe-and-bag combo (worthy), and she jokes that her family thinks she wears too much makeup since she joined MK (also worthy). I feared that I might have to struggle to keep the conversation—about husbands, barbecue sauce recipes and church—moving. But I can barely keep up with the clever banter. The end of lunch is signaled



Mary Kay Ash in her museum, where you can see 20-year-old foundation

by a flurry of clacking compacts. Newly fluent in the lexicon of MK, I lean across the table and ask to borrow a lipstick called Red Salsa. Everyone agrees that the color brings out the natural auburn lowlights in my hair.

During the afternoon session, consultants get a chance to ask Robert questions like, "I have a customer with ivory skin and dark hair who insists on wearing Eggplant. What should I tell her?" (Answer: ultimately, it's her face.) And "What would you recommend for a drill team if they really want to 'pop' onstage?" (Answer: more color on the lips and a good false lash.) "Metallic lip liner is for bronze and ebony skin tones *only*," Robert suddenly decrees. A fair-skinned woman raises her hand and says, "Everyone's looking at me because I wear metallic. But I like the way it looks."

"You like to look dead?" he retorts. No comment. The day's other high-drama moment comes when Robert brings up the Dixie Chicks and people actually boo. What's that?

After seven hours of this, I now have solutions for friends (you know who you are) who complain of hooded eyelids, appearing raccoon-like in photographs and "pregnancy mask." Call me. By day's end I, a deeply frugal woman who washes her face with Dial and expects her lipstick to double as rouge, literally run across the room to buy a \$17 heated eyelash curler after Robert blithely mentions that he's brought some, but not enough for everybody.

I am also feeling oddly emotional.

Mary Kay Ash the woman started selling cleaning products via home demonstrations in the 1930s to support herself and her children after her first husband divorced her. As a salesperson, she rocked. But when the male assistant she trained was promoted above her at twice her salary, she set out to start a company that wouldn't hold women back. She was a Baptist who also advocated balance in women's lives. Her motto was, "God first, family second and career third."

Mary Kay the company, founded in 1963, is now the best-selling brand of cosmetics in America. Worldwide, MK has over a million beauty consultants and directors. They are

independent business owners who work on commission, buying MK products wholesale and selling them for twice as much. Then there are the prizes, like jewelry and fax machines. But the real money comes from recruiting other women, because bonuses are paid based on the sales of each member of your "team." And we're talking about big money here. I get my hands on a copy of MK's monthly magazine, *Applause*, which has a picture of a wedding cake decorated with lipsticks and nailpolishes on the cover and reads, "Wedding Bells Can Sweeten Sales." Inside, amid a how-to story about making gift baskets for the "Scene Queen" (whatever that is) and an inspirational profile of one director who's "finding amazing love and support, the Mary Kay way," I learn that some MK women are taking home \$67,000 a month.

Unlike in a pyramid scheme, there's no limit to the number of women who can be on top at MK. The highest possible level is national sales director, and there are currently about 200 of them. They wear royal-blue St. John suits and can choose any Cadillac model in whatever color they want. You have to keep meeting your stellar sales quotas in order to hold on to the ride, though—this came up during a public relations disaster when a lower-level director had her Grand Am repossessed while she was pregnant and battling cancer. MK says they didn't know she was sick and reduced her quotas as soon as they found out, but she still sued and a jury awarded her \$11 million last year.

Anyway, one fast-rising director in her 30s says she's working on a Hummer.

Here in Dallas, I meet old-school MK directors who still recruit new team members through potluck "TACO" nights, where you learn about a "Totally Awesome Career Opportunity." But the new breed of young, professional women coming into Mary Kay from failed dotcoms and downsized jobs use phrases like "sample marketing." I'm relieved to learn they do not do potluck, because I don't either.

"We don't throw parties," says Ashley Knee, 29, a former marketing exec, sounding appalled. Ashley has invited me to a skin-care class at the training center she helps run on the ground floor of a tall building. Ashley is an ambitious Southern Methodist University grad with a Louis Vuitton attaché in one hand and a Styrofoam cup with a

lipstick-coated straw in the other. She's the kind of woman who hangs her clothes up at the end of the day. Ashley joined MK after being laid off from two Internet start-ups and hearing about the company from a sorority sister she respected. That was 15 months ago, and already Ashley is a



Who ever thought taking your work home would look like this?

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pink-Cadillac-driving independent senior sales director. "I will never be laid off again," she says with conviction.

Ashley recruits other executive types, like Renee Gilmore and Anna Clark, both 30. As a trio, they are friendly but guarded and extremely good-looking. Next to them, I am disorganized, bare-legged and unkempt. Anna used to be a consultant for IBM. Until last month, Renee worked insanely long hours as an information technology director for an insurance company. The two of them can now structure their work schedules so they have every afternoon off.

"People say, 'Selling lipstick, how pathetic is that!'" says Carey Unruh, 25, a full-time MK consultant and *Jane* reader in Tyler, Texas. "I'm blunt, so I'll say, 'It's a lot easier to try before you buy at home than dealing with the bitches at the cosmetics counter.'" A friend of Carey's spent a year trying to get her to sell the stuff. "I was like, 'Hell, no—are you on crack? I'm not a salesperson, I don't like people, and I don't like makeup,'" she says. Then she tried it part-time, while working as a receiving supervisor at Barnes and Noble. "I've probably quadrupled my income with minimal work," she says.

When Heather Plasencio was considering MK, her family said, "We didn't spend \$60,000 on UCLA for you to peddle lipstick." Her husband wasn't too keen on it either, until he was laid off and they needed the money.

You get used to hearing stories like this at MK events, which are surprisingly uplifting, like church. Instead of preying on insecurities—like the non-MK facialist who told me there was no way she could do everything that needed to be done to my face in only an hour and a half—these women make it their business to pay attention to each other and make clients feel like friends.

At the end of Ashley's skincare class, we all file up to a STEPS TO SUCCESS banner to say how much we earned this month or what we think is most appealing about "the Mary Kay opportunity." I'm nervous going up to the front with Ashley, who's introducing me, until I see Heather smiling and nodding at me encouragingly. I have no idea what I said, but people clapped. When I sit down, I can feel my heartbeat in my ears.

Back home in New York, a suitcase-sized hot-pink box is waiting at my desk. It's my \$100 MK starter kit, stuffed with full-size cleansers, moisturizers and anti-aging potions with names like TimeWise 3-in-1 Cleanser, reference materials about bookkeeping and a jillion makeup samples.

I call some friends and invite them to my first skincare class. They, in turn, demand to know if they'll be expected to buy anything before agreeing to come. How rude!

Since new consultants usually work with experienced ones first, I ask Jessica McKenna, 26, who's been "doing" Mary Kay in Manhattan for six months, to help. Jessica is impressed with the cotton balls I've strewn down the hallway to my living room, where everyone's pink "face cases" hold mirrors and Styrofoam trays filled with different products.

Jessica also likes the way I've scrawled YOU LOOK GORGEOUS in Jazzy Plum lipstick on the living room mirror. I serve mini bottles of Moët and Chandon with colored bendy straws and play spa music. My roommate thinks it's strange I'm so nervous, but I really want it to go well. If Ashley, Anna, Renee, Carey and Heather can make money and have all this free time, maybe my life can be "enriched," too.

Jessica had advised me to memorize key phrases and practice my lines before the guests arrive. "Otherwise," she warned, "it sounds really stilted, like you're reading from a script." Since I'm the sort who has trouble collecting money from people when we get together and order pizza, I really should've practiced saying, "I accept Visa, MasterCard and Discover" with a straight face.

When I take my friend Amanda aside, hand her an audiotape of Mary Kay success stories and ask, as suggested in my MK literature, "Is there any reason you won't listen to this tape and give me your opinion of it?" she snorts and says, "Yes, Katy, there are several. I will

e-mail them to you tomorrow." This is why MK teaches consultants how to network—so your business doesn't depend on your friends.

Jessica says she doesn't do classes like mine in Manhattan—in New York, people don't go to each other's apartments unless they're sleeping there. Instead, she holds drawings for free products at all-female gyms, collecting the names of dozens of potential clients. It isn't Neiman Marcus, but

Jessica nets \$400 in a good month from just a few hours of work a week.

And there are other benefits. Aside from the practical things I learned about reducing the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, once I dropped the snotty, sophisticated New Yorker act, hanging out with these sweet, supportive and supple-skinned MK women (even the one with the cheekbones) also made me feel like one fine-looking broad. They just kept telling me how gorgeous I was so often that, eventually, I was forced to agree with them. Roll your eyes all you want, but if I can make an extra \$400 a month for ruby slippers or a surprise trip for two to Maine and feel better about myself, then sign me up. And not just me, either. When I e-mailed my unemployed, unattached friend Mary to invite her to my skincare class, she wrote back: "You're barking up the wrong tree, honey." Note to self: Mary's ripe for recruiting. ■



Renee, Ashley and Anna's Mary Kay experience is more beige than pink.

