

'I'm Kate. And I'm hot.
Because I did something
I never thought I'd do.'



How a year with Mary Kay turned a shy writer into a gutsy moneymaker. It wasn't the lipstick.

BY KATE SILVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM VOORHES

TURNING PINK

"OK, LADIES," Elizabeth Dahlgren says. "It's that time!"

You can tell from the stretch of her smile that this is a moment she's been waiting for. Wearing a pressed grey Mary Kay Inc. business suit, her layered and blown-dry blonde hair bounces in anticipation, and her eyes look wide and bright—thanks in part to well-positioned eyeliner and mascara.

Five ladies join her at the front of the room. The remaining 10 in the audience stand up. I guess I should stand up with them.

"Ready?" It comes out as a high-pitched sing-song. Elizabeth's excitement hangs like perfume: When it's there, everybody knows it. The more

animated she gets, the more worried I become. What exactly are we getting ready for?

Then the cheering begins.

Elizabeth leads the five women in front as they step side to side, left to right, clapping rhythmically, and calling out "We're red hot! We're red hot! And once we start we just can't stop we're hot! We're hot!"

She looks out at the rest of us, nodding expectantly. "Ladies? Everybody now!" They—we—start clapping, too.

I only do it to blend. It's kind of my lifetime M.O., blending. Camouflaging. Observing.

But Elizabeth needs more: "Now I want you to all introduce yourselves and say what you did

this week that makes you red hot!” My palms sweat. So much for blending.

It starts with the front row. “I’m Flora! And I’m hot! Because I did 30 faces in 30 days!”

“Whooh!” everyone screams. Everyone but me, that is. I didn’t bargain for this. Makeup? Sure. Camaraderie? OK. But...cheering?

This is the kind of thing I’ve put much energy into avoiding for the past 29 years. Shyness has always tripped me. The memories whoosh over me like a wave. I’m sitting in kindergarten, watching my classmates march up to my teacher’s desk and read to her. Those who succeed walk across the room to select a reader from the bookshelf. Those who fail slink back to their seats. Though I’d been reading at home for well over a year, I feign illiteracy. Just so I can slink back to my seat. Flash forward to college, when, two weeks before graduation I break my ankle. *Ahh*, I think, actually relieved, as my foot dangles freely from my leg. *Now I won’t have to walk across the stage.*

That’s it! I think as the red-hot dance gets closer. *I could break something again!* But that would only draw even more attention to me. My shoulders hunch in subconscious effort to make myself shrink.

“I’m Emily! And I’m hot! Because I sold an Ultimate Miracle Set!”

“Whooh!”

Now I’m mixing my fear with self-doubt. Even if I somehow live through this cheer thing, how

can I teach other people to make their eyelashes look nice when I still consider those metal curler things a torture device? “Beauty” has never been a priority in the lives of the Silvers. Even in my youth, I’m not sure the word “pretty” was ever used in my home. We were encouraged to get good grades and be good people and, sure, to look presentable. My sister and I weren’t tomboys, but we weren’t exactly clad in pink, either. If our father had ever called us “princess,” I think we would have made barfing noises until we went hoarse.

Back in high school, when most girls were really primping and peacocking, I was accidentally oversleeping and then throwing on a uniform on my way to all-girls Catholic school. Where I didn’t exactly hang with the cheerleaders. I was on the fringe of a number of groups: the athletes, the weirdos, the smart girls. I was never quite sure where to sit at lunch. At my progressive college, makeup was considered un-feminist, and that was just fine by au-natural me. I don’t think I styled my hair until about four years ago. Now I’m surrounded by women who live to do just that—and more. Worse, *They’re chanting about it.*

The next red-hot dancer is up. Three more until they get to me. She has a mane of black hair, a perfect tan, and a beauty-queen smile. She would have hung with the cheerleaders. I’m sure of it.

“I’m Christina! And I’m hot! Because I had a \$200 day!”

“Whooh!”

The only heat I feel is washing over me, starting with my back, whipping up to my forehead, and exiting through sweaty hands. I might pass out. What am I doing here?

I’M NOT entirely sure. Maybe it started with curiosity. I grew up in Texas, where Six Degrees of Mary Kay could have been an actual game. This is where Mary Kay Inc. began, and where the direct disciples of Mary Kay Ash live and apply blusher freely. If you weren’t a Mary Kay lady yourself, you knew someone who knew someone who had a cousin in Mary Kay who would be more than happy to offer you a free facial. I had never gone there before.

And I likely never would have gone there, until journalistic curiosity got the better of me. When I discovered a Mary Kay event about 15 minutes from where I live, I thought, *Here’s my chance to*

Tough Seller Mary Kay Ash, shown here in 1982, knew how to close a deal.

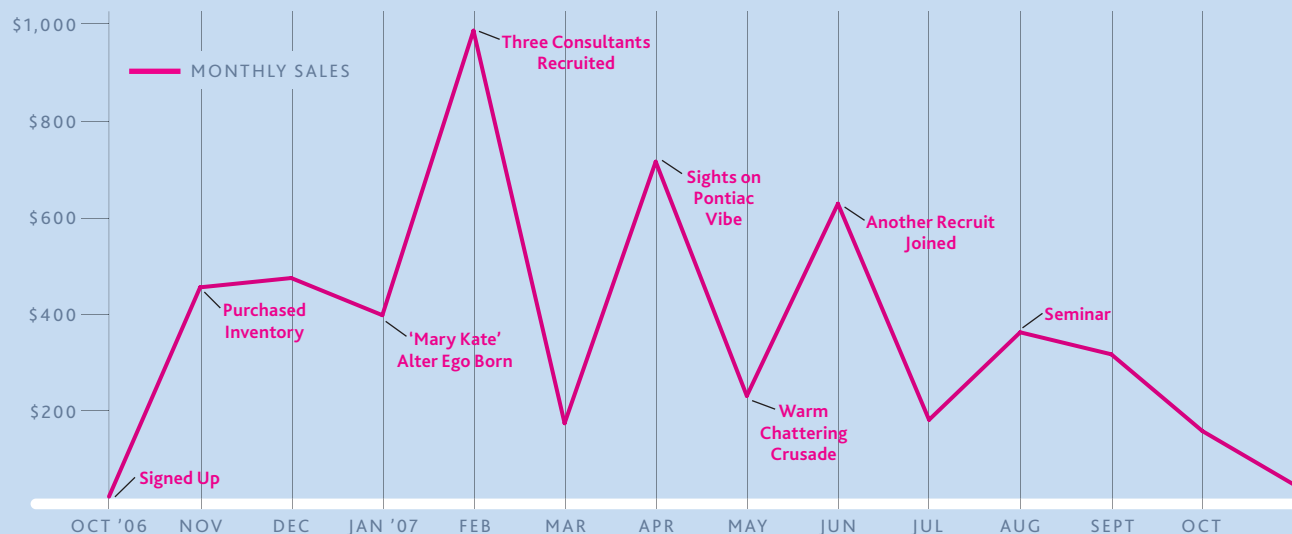




'I discovered a feminist side to Mary Kay that I never expected.'

Tracking the Transformation

Kate Silver went from zero to \$950 a month over the course of a year as a Mary Kay consultant. Her personal fever chart shows lots of rallies and setbacks. The one constant? Chutzpah.



find out what this phenomenon is really all about. I decided to attend.

It turned out to be a full-fledged cosmetics revival, where a Mary Kay celebrity, kind of a cross between Blanche Devereaux and Tammy Faye Bakker, crooned about her successes to a rapt audience. When she signed up three decades ago, she said, she was so broke she could barely write the \$100 check to purchase the starter kit. She had 30,000 people under her and had earned \$9 million since she first joined the company. It was the perfect rags-to-riches tale. Two-hundred women in attendance progressed from mildly interested to bum-rushing the podium to sign up and become just like this Mary Kay lady. I developed a craving for the Kool-Aid, too. It wasn't so much the \$9 million (though that would be nice). It was the subculture: I never knew selling makeup could be so exciting and uplifting to women. I wanted to know more. I wanted to be more. Could I actually become an independent beauty consultant? In mid-pondering, I met Marti Andersen. I liked her immediately. A petite sexagenarian brunette with a certain sparkle in her eye, she used to be the head of marketing at a medical office. She invited me to her weekly Success Meeting here, at Studio Pink.

Where they're closing in on me. I try to decide on the spot whether to cheer or to flee. It doesn't help that the woman to my left is proclaiming her hotness.

"Whooh!"

So long, comfort zone. I swallow, breathe, and—my rhythm is off. So is my stepping. And I think I may have stopped clapping as I struggle to get the words out: "I'm Kate. And I'm hot." My voice is a clumsy, flat baritone. I can sense their sideways glances. "Because last week I joined Mary Kay."

"Whooh!"

Exhale. It feels like a baptism of sorts. Now I am truly an independent beauty consultant.

Gulp.

Can I really pull this off?

IT'S EASY to find Studio Pink: The parking lot in a strip mall outside of Las Vegas generally contains at least one bubble-gum pink Cadillac. Feathery pink boas form the main décor of this estrogen-filled studio, arranged on tables and lining the walls along with large cutout letters that spell "I Believe." Mirrors line the shelves, reflecting pink and white Mary Kay products. These are just the side-dishes to the real meat of the room: On a podium, like a kind of shrine, sits a poster-sized, gold-framed photo of the eternally blonde, ever-smiling prophet of profits.

Mary Kathlyn Wagner was born in Hot Wells, Texas, in 1918. Even as a child Mary Kay was a hard worker, caring for her invalid father while her mother managed a local restaurant. She was married by age 17 and then had three children. When her husband returned from World War II

as “personality indicators.” She talks to anyone who will listen about Mary Kay, trying to sign them up for a facial.

“The old you would hate the new you,” a friend dryly points out. She’s probably right. The old me is still in there, knocking around, mortified by the red-hot dance and the idea of an in-depth discussion about the pros of lip gloss. But that me seems to be shrinking. With the

makeup lessons, the professional attire, and my bevy of lotions, ointments, and salves, I actually start to feel prettier. I get compliments from my friends on my skin and how healthy I look. The topic of makeup begins entering my daily conversation, replacing the writer’s diet of politics and crime. I’m starting to morph into a girly girl stereotype—and I’m starting to like the transformation.

At first, the pleasure conflicts with my ingrained feminist paradigm. So I start sneaking the makeup past my own cerebral programming. If a touch of Pink Diamonds lip gloss and a dab of Hazel-nut eye shadow makes me happy, is that so wrong? Pretty soon, my own way of thinking begins to change. I begin to see a feminist side to the company that I never expected. It teaches business skills and presents new and different opportunities to women. It allows women to work from home, earning money while raising their children. And the founder and role model was herself a single mother who built an enormous enterprise that in 2007 had \$2.4 billion in wholesale sales. What’s more feminist than that?

For my first month I commit to Marti that I will perform 30 facials in 30 days in order to jumpstart my business. I break out the cyber-Rolodex and flip open my phone. I’m more nervous about finding time for the appointments than I am about finding people to fill them. Mentally counting friends and family, and friends of family and family of friends, the first 30 will be cake. It’s the second and third 30 that make me bite my freshly manicured nails.

“Hi, Kim. So, I just joined Mary Kay and—”

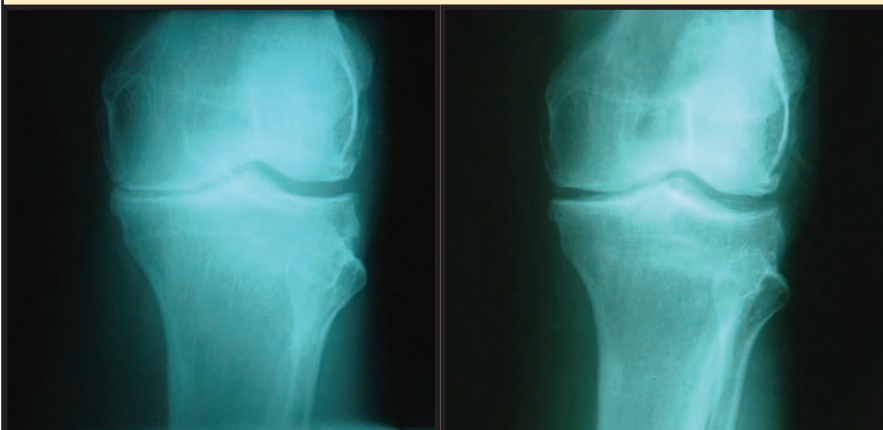
“What? You?”

“— and I’ve been challenged by my director to do 30 facials in 30 days. Would you mind helping me out?”

Every day for a month I take my bag of tricks and my flipchart script to a different house and recite the spiel. And for 30 days every single person who puts those products on her face likes it. I like it, too. Because as they apply the TimeWise solutions and marvel at their soft skin we catch up on each another’s lives and gossip and we laugh. Even if the sessions are prompted by business, the visits are also personal, harkening back to the days before cell phones and e-mail when friends would actually spend time with each other.

And I’m making new connections, too. Marti’s Miracle Makers become insta-friends. I’m seeing a core group of about

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seven women sometimes three times a week at Success meetings, speaker events, and parties. They are teachers, stay-at-home moms, saleswomen, and retirees, and with our common goals, we become like a support group. Sharing the red-hot dance will do that to you.

The more “girlfriend time” I spend with the women, the more I get to know and appreciate them. They use crockpots and host potlucks. They bring homemade jam to meetings to share with the Miracle Makers, or T-shirts that their kids made. They volunteer to watch one another’s children. I realize that something had been missing in my life, and how positive wholesomeness feels.

IN MY NEW ROLE as saleswoman I must also get out of my shell and schedule parties of my own. My very first party is my own “debut.” Much as a debutante’s coming-out party announces her entrance into society, my debut is a celebration of my position in Mary Kay. It’s

a way of proclaiming to the world, “Now selling eye shadow!” Because I’m still so green, Marti volunteers to emcee the party. This means that though I’ll plan the soiree, she’ll do all the talking while I simply pass around the lotion.

Every consultant plans her debut differently. Some invite 50 of her own friends, while others find a friend who will play hostess and then invite her friends to the party. The choice was a no-brainer: option two. If I had invited 50 of my own friends then I would have immediately squeezed the proverbial foundation tube dry. Who would I call upon the next time? Whereas if a friend hosts a party for me, she introduces me to an entirely new group of potential customers, leaving my friends in a cosmetic rainy-day fund.

I don’t even have to call in a favor to find a host. My friend Jennifer knows that if she hosts a party she’ll receive her choice of a free gift or drastic discounts on products. So as soon as she learns

of my Mary Kay involvement she volunteers. On a Sunday afternoon I show up to her two-story home. I’m wearing a black beauty jacket—picture a lab coat but cuter—with pink buttons and pink “Mary Kay” embroidery. The house smells of fresh chocolate chip cookies, which, along with other snacks, fill the kitchen.

Marti pulls up in her pink Cadillac and totes a rolling suitcase full of beauty products into the living room. On a table we set up a comely display of lotions. Eight women arrive, and each of them comments on the pink Cadillac outside. smiles and says, “I can teach you how to get one, too.”

It’s the perfect note to start the party. Marti introduces herself and then me, before going around the room and asking the women to share why they think I will make a good Mary Kay beauty consultant. She then invites them to look around the room and think about which one of them would make a good sales-



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and asked for divorce, she obliged. Now a single mother, she hiked up her skirt and got a job as a saleswoman, selling books door-to-door, and, later, cleaning supplies for a company called Stanley Home Products.

Though Mary Kay was a natural, her employers kept promoting the men and passing her by. She never let it affect her work ethic, but it got to her personally. When she retired after 25 years in sales, she decided to write a book instructing women on how to succeed in the male-dominated work world. She wished that she had worked for a company based on the Golden Rule—the notion of God first, family second, career third. Then she decided that she'd rather create this company than write about it. So she spent her life savings of \$5,000, and with the help of her son, Richard, started the company that she had imagined.

Mary Kay knew that women were primarily wives and mothers in 1963, positions that didn't exactly garner the most appreciation. The enduring philosophy of Mary Kay Inc. is that rewards and recognition will motivate sales.

"Praise people to success," she would say.

But the emphasis of Mary Kay Inc. has always been about the culture as much as the products. Mary Kay was part motivational speaker,

part revivalist, part queen. And it worked. She became a modern-day prophet by speaking in Yoda-like aphorisms and giving women a chance to have a hand in their own business.

"Don't limit yourself," she said. "Many people limit themselves to what they think they can do. You can go as far as your mind lets you. What you believe, remember, you can achieve."

She also taught life skills. In the cosmetics biz, appearance is everything. Mary Kay extolled the value of being a "lady." And to her, that meant wearing skirts, pantyhose, and close-toed shoes. She decried alcohol consumption and gum chewing, and encouraged her beauty consultants to only speak positively and to arrive 10 minutes early for all events. And they should always—always—have their faces on.

"Nothing happens until somebody sells something," she said. And who's going to buy makeup from a slob?

Although Mary Kay died in 2001, she lives on in studios pink across the country. That's where slob-like me learn to be Miracle Makers; the caterpillars turn into butterflies; the fringe girls molt into cheerleaders. I just pray that it happens quickly, because in my first few weeks of meetings I'm still feeling awkward. My skin is pale, my T-zone—the area from the forehead to the

*Not bad, I think, glancing
in the mirror. My skin
tone is even, and my eyes
have depth and definition,
but without looking like
Liza Minnelli's.*



nose and chin, shaped like a T—erratic. With my unkempt eyebrows and nails I'm not just a fish out of water; I'm a carp in a flock of doves. I'm hardly wearing any makeup aside from lipstick, whereas the Mary Kay ladies have a halo of pretty around them. Their eyes sparkle, complexions dewy and flawless, their gold and diamonds accentuating the theme. Them? Glamorous. Me? Unruly galumph.

And Studio Pink attire is much more professional than anywhere I've worked. Snazzy abounds. It's a mix of the Mary Kay dress code, though the colors change every year or so: grey suits (directors with a team of at least 30), red jackets with black skirts (team leaders and star recruiters with a team of at least three); and white blouses with black shirts or a black dress (everybody else).

Plus pantyhose and close-toed shoes. I own neither.

If I want to hang with the makeup girls, I have to look the part. I buy a straight black skirt at Ann Taylor, along with some black hose and shoes, and am back on the road to blending. Though the pantyhose rule was revoked in 2007, units across the country still uphold the expectations of their founder.

Now for the makeup. Everyone I've met so far in Mary Kay has a natural glow. Their skin is flawless, eyes sparkly, lips plump. Still, I can't shake the blue eyeshadow images of my youth, where foundation looked as though it was applied with a putty knife and lashes are so thick with mascara they may as well be tarantula legs. Putting my own glamour in their hands is a leap of faith, but it's one I have to make if I'm really going to pull this off. Every Thursday, Marti (a pink Caddy driver and director of Marti's Miracle Makers, the unit I'm in) and Elizabeth (cheer-leading director of the Elizabeth Queen Believers, a sister unit) co-host these Success Meetings at Studio Pink, and they encourage us to bring along guests for free facials.

"Facial" is the enticing code word for a product demonstration, around which the meetings revolve; they are a way to bring in Mary Kay virgins and get them to try out the goods. I have a hard time even imagining any of my friends willingly attending a two-hour session devoted to self-pampering. Mary Kay ladies have a no-touch rule, so they simply hand you the product and instruct you on how to use it. I can see it now: "Hi, Alyssa, would you like to have a free facial?"

"Free! Sure!"

"OK, here's your moisturizer and here's your cleanser. Just put it on, and you'll love the way your face feels!"

"I thought you said it was a facial?"

Fortunately, since I'm new to the business, I get a free pass from bringing a guest. Instead, Marti gives me a facial so that I can learn how to do it for my own customers (knock on wood).

I sit at a table with three other women. No time for small talk: Marti immediately

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sets a small mirror in front of me and a Styrofoam tray, on which she squirts five squiggles of different creams. She places a shiny, colorful card next to the tray. My tablemates receive the same treatment from their own Mary Kay representatives. At the front of the room, another Mary Kay director leads the facial by reading verbatim from a flip chart.

I follow along, cleansing with a circular motion to increase my skin's radiance. My face softens as I apply TimeWise Day and Night solutions to diminish signs of aging. It practically plumps with hydration as I swath it in TimeWise Age-Fighting Moisturizer. The last squiggle is foundation, which I smear on in a circular motion, as directed.

"Now how does your face feel?" Marti asks. "Isn't that the soft, smooth feeling you love?" Yes. Yes, it actually is!

"And that's just after using these Mary Kay products once. With all the additional anti-aging benefits the Miracle Set offers, just think how your skin will look

My Mary Kate alter ego is developing. She's bubbly, says things like 'soap is a four-letter word,' and refers to wrinkles as 'personality indicators.'

and feel when you use it every day." I'm thinking, I'm thinking!

Next she tells us to lift the shiny cover on the card she gave us. Underneath the plastic I find smudges of lipstick, blush and eye shadow, each with its own applicator and instructions. It's genius. My guard lowers when I see that the eye shadow is brown, not the swimming-pool blue I remember from my youth in Texas.

Following the instructions on the sheets, I build three layers of color around my eyes, starting with light and adding on the dark tones. The other three women at my table are reading the instructions just as intently as I am. Feeling a little more confident, I streak the blush across my cheek and then blend, blend, blend, followed by a finger full

of lipstick and a nice pucker. Not bad, I think, glancing in the mirror. My skin tone is even, and my eyes have depth and definition, but without looking like Liza Minnelli's.

"Now," Marti says, "I want everyone to turn to the person next to you and give them a compliment."

The woman to my right is still looking at her reflection, and it's easy to see why. She's glowing. "Your skin looks so soft and smooth," I say.

She smiles shyly. "Your eyes look really beautiful. They really stand out." Touched, I say, "Aww, thank you!"

MY MARY KATE alter ego is developing. She's bubbly, says things like "soap is a four-letter word," and refers to wrinkles

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woman. "Mary Kay said there's at least one Mary Kay consultant at every party." Marti grins and lets the message sink in.

Then it's showtime. After five years in Mary Kay, Marti has her speech down. "The United States has declared a war on terror," she smiles sweetly. "Well, Mary Kay has declared a war on wrinkles." As the women titter, I remind myself to develop shtick. "We call these our mini facelifts," she coos as I pass around samples of TimeWise Day and Night solutions, followed by a battery of other hydration tools.

It's clear to me why Marti has that pink Cadillac. She believes each and every word she's saying, and she makes me believe it, too. She really loves these products. Can I love these products?

Between moisturizers Marti talks about the benefits of joining Mary Kay; the Cadillac is at the top of the list. She explains the recruiting process: While selling products is one of the goals in Mary Kay, "building your team" makes

the real money because you get a percentage from what your team members order from the company.

This may sound like a certain flat-sided structure with a point on top, but each and every Mary Kay lady who's serious about her business will tell you within minutes of meeting, "It's not a pyramid." They call it "direct sales" rather than multi-level, because each consultant, from the bottom to the top, purchases inventory directly from the company—there are no uplines or downlines. Pyramids have no tangible end product, whereas Mary Kay has more than 200 different end products. But nobody's going to get rich selling firming eye cream. Every time a consultant signs someone up, she receives a percentage of what her recruit spends on inventory. And that, rather than actual sales, is how women reach the top in Mary Kay.

The more people you recruit and the more products you sell, the more prizes you get, the Cadillac being the grand-

mamma of them all. It's part of the enduring philosophy of Mary Kay Inc.: Rewards and recognition will motivate sales. With mink coats, diamonds, and of course the infamous pink Cadillac, Mary Kay motivated her team and thanked them for it. It was a winning combination of incentives and inspiration that awakened women's hopes and dreams, coupled with the sense of community and support to make it happen. A lot of managers out there would be wise to follow suit.

And if the ladies she was courting weren't after cars and they weren't after praise, Mary Kay had a secret weapon in reserve. "When you join Mary Kay," Marti adds, making it sound like an afterthought, "you receive a 50 percent discount on all of your products."

A rumble of interest goes around the room. Marti whispers to me, "We're going to get you some team members."

A few minutes later Marti asks if anyone would like to make a purchase. Dawn, a stay-at-home mom who I swear



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wasn't a plant, pipes up. "Why spend \$50 today on different items when for \$100 you can have a starter kit and then get 50 percent off whatever you want?"

My first official recruit is born. Dawn joins my team.

Following the party, we clean up and deconstruct the event. Nobody bought anything, but I don't let that get under my skin (or my Ivory 204 foundation). I'm invigorated by the possibilities: Two other women also expressed interest in joining! The natural high has me twitting on and on. Mostly I'm in disbelief that we just spent two hours talking about and trying on moisturizer. I can't remember the last time I hung out with a group of women I didn't know on a Sunday afternoon playing with makeup, because, well, it had never happened. And the best part? It was fun.

I LEARNED an important lesson at my debut: Those lipsticks don't sell themselves. That's why at this week's Success Meeting we're talking about how to excel at "warm chatter"—MK code for walking up to strangers and trying to sell them stuff. The key, Marti tells us, is to say something that makes the stranger feel good. Follow that up with something to make yourself vulnerable. Then offer them something so they feel as though they've benefited from the interaction.

My palms sweat at the thought of it. Warm chatter feels creepy. As a consumer, I have never responded positively to the random approach of a salesperson. When strangers veer toward me in public, I lengthen my stride. And if I receive random compliments—"You have such beautiful skin!"—I get suspicious.

I'm not alone. Most of the women in the Miracle Makers unit avoid this part of Mary Kay. It's what's given us the reputation of yipping Yorkies barking relentlessly at women's ankles. But today Marti's having us role-play. Think group therapy with a sales bent. I get up in front of the half-dozen women in attendance and pretend that I'm shopping in a shoe store. Emily, a petite and bubbly blonde woman, joins me. "I always have trouble

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finding shoes," I say, pretending to rummage around. "I have such big feet."

"Oh." She says. Even though we're role-playing, she sounds worried, like a person would in real life if a crazy like me approached her on the street.

"You have such nice skin!" It comes out in an awkward burst.

"Thank you," she says, still fearful.

"Have you ever modeled for a Mary Kay class?"

"Noooo," she answers, with exaggerated meekness.

"Well, I'm a Mary Kay beauty consultant, and every week we invite guests to come and model for us. There's food and drinks and—would you like to join us sometime?"

She agrees, of course, and the scene ends. Marti compliments the interaction, detailing the ways I did it correctly: I showed vulnerability by talking about my oversized feet. I made Emily feel good about herself (or scared enough of me that she at least played along). And I

While my outer shell has toughened, I like to think that internally I've softened, become a touch more feminine. Mostly, I try not to take myself so seriously.

let her know how she could benefit with the promise of free food.

I test my skills a few days later. I meet up with a friend at Brendan's Irish Pub at the Orleans hotel-casino to hear a local band, Killian's Angels. To the tune of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia"—played by a tuba-wielding Irish band, no less—I decide that tonight I will warm chatter. While drinking my second pint of Bass ale I proclaim, "I'm going to get our waitress," a stunning brunette whose uniform is a kind of turquoise thong. My (non-Mary Kay) friends nod encouragingly, while exchanging semi-pained looks of "Whoa, boy. What's she gonna do now?"

The waitress has been friendly all night. We've all chatted. It won't seem

that random, I tell myself. I swill some more beer while rummaging in my purse for a sample of microdermabrasion.

She comes over to our table. My heart is racing in anticipation. And while I'm practicing my lines inside my head, she walks away.

Through "Danny Boy" and U2's "With or Without You," she doesn't come back.

And then, finally, she returns, asking if we need anything. I signal her over.

"Have you ever tried Mary Kay?!" I shout, cutting to the chase.

"What?!" she can't hear me over the tuba in the background.

Compliment, compliment, I remind myself in mid-chatter.

"You have beautiful skin!" I shout into her ear. "I'd like to give you a Mary Kay

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sample!" I hand her the microdermabrasion. She looks at it kind of strangely, and then thanks me.

"I'd love to bring you to a meeting so you can model!" I shout. "You'll get a free makeover and then you can show everyone how beautiful you look!"

I can't believe it, even as the words are coming out of me. What am I, hitting on this woman? To make a few dollars by selling her a lipstick?

She thanks me. I think something about "beautiful skin" might have come out of my mouth again before she left, but honestly, between the anxiety and the beer, it's all a blur.

"I'm. Awful." I bow my head. My friends are looking at me now, bemused.

"I could never do that," Beth says.

"Oh, have a few more drinks," I say.

The waitress never calls.

THE MARY KAY ladies have a formula for dealing with rejection. "What if you go up to nine women and they say no, but the tenth says yes, and she hosts a party and you make \$300," says the chipper Elizabeth, co-leading another weekly Success Meeting at Studio Pink. "That means for each 'no' you should thank that person and mean it, because that's \$30, and it's getting you that much closer to your next 'yes.'"

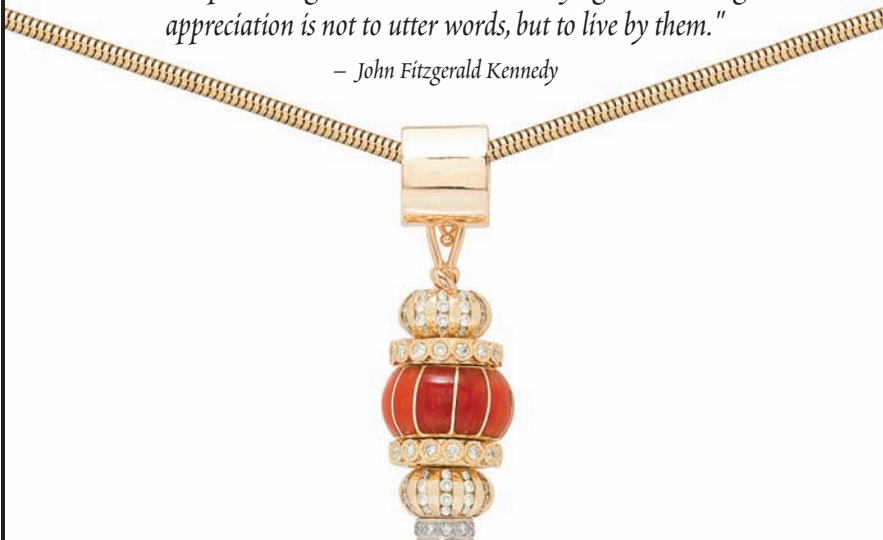
Turns out my next "yes" is right around the corner. I get an e-mail on my Mary-Kay-themed MySpace page—Mary Kayt, that is. A friend of a friend is having a make-up emergency.

"So how do I get a hold of some Mary Kay cosmetics?" Stephanie e-mails. "I was going to try to order online but would much rather contribute on a local basis."

I invite Stephanie—and any friends she wants to bring over—to my apartment for a free facial. I'm suddenly too proud to use the step-by-step flip chart that serves as the Mary Kay facial instruction manual. Why would they want to listen to me read something for 90 minutes, when I could be ad-libbing? I think I've got a good enough grasp of the Mary Kay material to wing it. Or do I?

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

— John Fitzgerald Kennedy



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Stephanie begins by asking me about “free radicals.”

“Hippies?” I respond, only half joking. When she mentions something about “emollients” I go with the old smile-and-nod routine. When they ask the difference between firming eye cream and age-fighting eye cream, I can muster neither smile nor nod. I feel like I’m losing them. This is a lot more difficult than I thought. Mary Kay said that knowledge is 20 percent of a sale and enthusiasm is 80 percent. I realize next time I’d better brush up on that 20 percent.

They nonetheless leave with \$200 worth of makeup and moisturizer. Two hundred dollars! Half of that is mine for about an hour’s work. Who wouldn’t want to do this?

I immediately e-mail Marti about my success. “Wow!” she responds. “You are a real Mary Kay HOTTIE!”

I keep on selling, and at my peak tabulate about \$950 in a month, half of which is mine to keep. Can you say sizzle? I feel

ready for more than Studio Pink. The ultimate Mary Kay dangling carrot (and carrot) is just around the corner. The big event happens once a year in Dallas. It’s called Seminar.

THE STAGE at the Dallas Convention Center is topped with two curved stairways and a giant throne. Men in tuxedos stand on every fourth or fifth step, offering their hands to support the glamorous ladies who are descending. The ladies, with sparkly eyes and shiny lips, look out to the crowd of nearly 8,000 and smile. Some blow kisses. Almost all of them do that characteristic wave, to the rhythm of elbow-elbow-wrist-wrist. It’s a salutation that we’ve practiced the entire year, while gathering at Studio Pink and other places like it. “Now, visualize you’re walking across a stage,” Marti told us. “Lift the arm that’s to the back of the stage, so you don’t block your beautiful face. Do you know why we wave in the elbow-elbow-wrist-wrist fashion, ladies?

That’s right, because we don’t want our arm fat to wave with us.”

These waving women have sold enough mascaras—and more important, encouraged enough other women to also sell mascaras—that they’re being recognized for their impressive achievements by the corporate office: These are the new Mary Kay Sales Directors! We go wild in the stands. We’re a supportive bunch.

Seminar, which is always referred to only as “Seminar,” is the Mecca of Mary Kay Inc. More than 35,000 of us travel to Texas from July to August to pay homage. That’s a greater number than the Dallas Convention Center can hold at once, so five seminars actually occur during those two and a half weeks, and are classified as Diamond, Ruby, Emerald, Pearl, and Sapphire.

In the audience, our gowns sparkle with satin and sequins. I give up trying to keep track of all the tiaras after I count 88. We watch as our sister consultants

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climb the ladder of success, reaching from independent beauty consultant to independent sales director to independent national sales director. The women who've reached that level are superstars-plus, and their names are passed around with reverence: Gayle Gaston, Kimberly Starr, Joy Epps Breen. They each take the stage with the assurance of Marilyn Monroe. These are women who have made \$45,000, \$57,000, \$62,000—in a single month.

Yet it's those success stories that illustrate how Mary Kay really did the thing she did. She was the every-woman, and so was each person she got to join the company. They were mothers, wives, struggling women looking to earn a few dollars. And now, thanks to their ability to recruit, they're up on a stage, being draped in diamonds and cooed upon.

But it's not the money, diamonds and elbow-elbow-wrist-wrist opportunities that grab me. It's the idea of a free car. The pink Cadillac gleams like a freshly chewed piece of bubble gum. One spins on a pedestal in a makeshift fountain outside of the convention center. More line the hallways, beckoning to the independent beauty consultants, "Come. Sit. Try me."

They're also on display in one of the large exhibit halls, and here it's not just Cadillacs. Different cars are available to different tiers of Mary Kay ladies. I sit in the red Pontiac Vibe and detect a twitter in my heart. *I will have this*, I vow.

I'm not that far from getting it. I've managed to convince four women to join Mary Kay, so far. (And only one was a family member. Thanks, Aunt Midge!) To begin the qualification process for the Vibe, I need to recruit one more person, and the six of us must purchase \$4,000 worth of products from the company in a single month. Over a four-month period I must recruit seven more people, and we must purchase \$18,000 in products from the company. Easy, right? Only, the most my team has spent in a month is about \$1,800. But if I can just speak with five people a week about Mary Kay I know I can get there. I know I can.

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BACK IN LAS VEGAS after Seminar, the pink cloud looms. I start befriend- ing drag queens on MySpace, offering them free facials. Having already tried to recruit my friends, I now leave messages on their mothers' voicemail. I spend a day at Dressbarn handing out carnations and free samples. I even deliver a basket to a nursing home, filled with bottles of lotion and my business cards, which

promise a free pampering session. I get no bites. Nothing.

Though I'd left Dallas drunk on the success of others, reality sets in. I've already exhausted the easy options for party hosts and customers. I've also proved to myself time and again that despite my best efforts, "warm chatter" with strangers isn't my greatest talent. One year into my beauty career, I stop

trying to solicit parties. I also quit send- ing solicitous e-mails with the subject line "MKdar!" and the text: "I sense you have moisturization needs." Marti, my unit leader, also eventually retired.

I joined Mary Kay because I wanted to understand the makeup world and the women who love it. What I found was a challenging job at which I genuinely wanted to succeed, and a wonderful group of women supportive of me doing so. Ultimately, I left because I had my writing career to fall back on, which, for me, is far more easy (and less wrinkle- inducing) than makeup sales.

But I still look in the mirror and see the mark that Mary Kay has left on me. With my freshly moisturized skin and lightly applied foundation, I have an air of natu- ralness, but it's more neat around the edges than it was a year ago. Even strang- ers notice the change. Every couple of weeks I hear, "You have such nice skin!" And no, it's not from a Mary Kay lady who's practicing her warm chatter.

And the changes aren't all physical. I can better shrug off rejection, now, tell- ing myself that a "yes" is right around the corner. While my outer shell has tough- ened, I like to think that internally I've softened, become a touch more feminine and a tad more accepting and open- minded. Mostly, I try not to take myself so seriously. After a certain age, shyness just feels weak and self-absorbed. "If you think you can, you can," said Mary Kay. "And if you think you can't, you're right." I think she's right.

Just a few weeks ago, I took my new puppy to obedience school, where we had to introduce ourselves and our dogs. One year previous this would have put me on the brink. But now? Even in this room full of strangers I could have waved pom-poms to the red-hot dance with my pup at my feet. When I think about blending these days, the first thing that comes to mind is my foundation. I know it sounds small, but I've come a long way.

Kate Silver, who among other journalistic tasks has stalked celebrities for People, moisturizes regularly in Las Vegas.

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