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## Mary Kay putting on a fresher face

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A visitor to the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, which hosts the annual Mary Kay leadership conference this week and next, could see a few 20-somethings slip behind the wheels of shiny pink Cadillacs.

The face of the 40-year-old company is not quite as old as its wrinkled stereotype.

Young women are the fastest-growing segment of the direct sales force for Mary Kay, which sells the dream of independence, work flexibility and wealth to a global sales force now 1.1 million strong.

"What do you expect to see?" said Bill Brown, vice president of eBusiness for Mary Kay. "Pink lipstick, white hair and a pink Cadillac? Now, you see blondes and brunettes."

One of them is 27-year-old Kimberly Walker-Roop, an energetic blonde from Prosper, Texas.

As a national sales director, she is at the top of the global direct-sales hierarchy. She gets to wear a bright pink jacket, is widely admired and whispered about by her cohorts, and, you guessed it, drives a pink Cadillac.

"I feel like Mary Kay is for everyone," she said, while taking a break from the sales troupe's national convention. She dismisses the notion that Mary Kay is a brand only for mothers and grandmothers.

About 12,000 of the company's top salespeople, white hair or not, will descend on the Opryland convention center this week and next. There are so many of them, the convention is being split into three sessions.

The hotel's parking lots are filled with pink Cadillacs. Inside, there are clusters of women in different outfits, each with a bit of pink, either in a scarf, a jacket, or on jacket trim. Mary Kay sells each woman a different outfit to wear throughout the year based on her sales level and the number of new recruits under her wing.

Every year the color code changes and the outfits must change.

In a convention conference room, senior vice president Gary Jinks basks in pink lights and yells to the crowd: "Are you ready to be the best you can be?" Hundreds of women pump their fists in the air and scream, "Yeesss."

National sales directors parade across the stage to resounding applause. They wave and blow kisses.

A video of the late founder, Mary Kay Ash, and her accomplishments is played on a giant screen. The consistent message is female empowerment. "When God made men, he was just practicing," Ash once said in an interview.

The overwhelming majority of Mary Kay salespeople are women — with a handful of men sprinkled in. Most of the men in the convention-going crowd this week were just along for the ride, toting bags of makeup for their top-

selling wives.

For the most part, "it's women helping women," said the president of sales and marketing, Tom Whatley.

Entry-level "beauty consultants" buy the skin lotions, lipstick and perfume wholesale from Mary Kay and sell it to customers. The company pays their sales directors, or team leaders, a commission on the sales.

Last year wholesale sales grew to a record \$1.8 billion, up 10% from the year prior. The company now has independent salespeople in 30 countries.

Sales associates who enter the business often worry about how they will go about selling the stuff. One strategy is to invite an acquaintance to a meal.

"Sometimes, they can say: 'I'd like to meet you for lunch and let you know about nail care,'" said company spokeswoman Yvonne Pendleton. Or they might organize a party of friends and acquaintances and then show them how to apply makeup and sample skin lotions.

Women attracted to Mary Kay often come seeking flexible work hours so they can care for children.

One top seller on hand in Nashville was a single mom who worked in a shotgun shell factory before she turned to a Mary Kay sales career. The company says some 200 women have earned more than \$1 million annually.

"They come in it looking for income or to supplement income, but they stay in it for other reasons," said Karen Ford, the national sales director from Brentwood. "Empowering others is such a rewarding part of what we do."

When her son Justin was born with a heart defect, Ford quit her second-grade teaching job so that she could care for him around-the-clock. She met a Mary Kay saleswoman while shopping 17 years ago, and began selling the brand herself.

The most successful salespeople get trips to sun-bleached locales or gifts such as computers and home-office furniture. The company won't estimate average earnings.

The most successful get the use of the company's fleet of 10,000 cars. The Pontiac Grand Prix and Pontiac Grand Am are among them, but the pink Cadillac is truly the jewel. General Motors makes the color just for Mary Kay, a shade called "pearlized pink." "It's a little less pink than in years past," Pendleton admits. And even younger women seem to go for it.

Thirty-two-year-old Robin Tucker of Longview, Texas, drives one and sees the Mary Kay sales force becoming more youthful.

"A lot of women are looking to get back into the home, take care of their family," she said. "A lot of people are graduating from college and not finding a job."

Virginia Shanklin-Hester, a friend of Tucker's, is 26 and had worn Mary Kay products for 10 years before she decided to sell them.

"I saw it as a way to make a great income and stay at home," she said.

About 110,000 of the company's salespeople are in Shanklin-Hester's age group, between the ages of 18 and 26; that's 17% more than a year ago.

One factor in the growth may be the way sales incentives work. The incentive is for a woman to recruit more and more beauty consultants so she can get a percentage of their sales. Young people recruit their friends, and so on,

supplying an ever-increasing cadre of Mary Kay enthusiasts.

The sales force not only is getting younger, but also it's selling to younger customers. Two years ago, Mary Kay introduced a line called Velocity geared toward the 14-year-old-and-up group. Its fragrance, Eau de parfum, was the second-best launch in the company's history.

Bill Crittenden is an associate professor of business strategy at Northeastern University in Boston, and he has studied direct-sales companies. He's not surprised that Mary Kay is getting younger.

"Clearly the economy has been such that inexperienced workers with just a high school degree or even a college degree often have to gravitate to selling," he said.

His main criticism is that direct-sales companies such as Mary Kay aren't very selective in choosing salespeople, which can lead to resentment if someone flops financially.

Overall, he thinks Mary Kay has done a lot to provide people with flexible hours and opportunities.

"They do a phenomenal job in terms of their enthusiasm, the integrity they espouse and the quality of their product and the service they provide," he said. "They have indeed enriched the lives of women worldwide."

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