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Cosmetics and caring

By Cecil Johnson
Special to the Star-Telegram

Caveat, reader!

This roseate view of the corporate empire that has adopted the color pink as its emblematic pigment might give you an irrepressible urge to purchase a Mary Kay starter kit.

Jim Underwood, a Dallas-based business strategist and management professor, is not, however, a recruiter for Mary Kay, which appears to be doing quite well in that department on its own. Underwood's objective in writing More Than a Pink Cadillac, he says, was to make the case that the principles that underlie the success of Mary Kay can yield similar results for any business.

Underwood identifies the quintessence of Mary Kay-ism as the Golden Rule.

Founder Mary Kay Ash "believed that if she treated others -- employees, vendors, customers -- as she herself wanted to be treated, her company would thrive," Underwood writes. "It was this simple yet powerful principle that drove everything Mary Kay did and everything she taught people to do."

Underwood sees that adherence to the Golden Rule reflected in what he calls "The Six Virtues of a Great Leader" practiced by Ash: humility, seeking the best in others, expecting excellence, integrity, impatience with the status quo and an indomitable spirit.

Of Ash's fixation on seeking the best in others, Underwood writes: "She believed that the only way to maximize profits was to maximize people. Unless you are focused on seeking the best for others, beginning with your own people, you cannot be successful. In the early years of the company Mary Kay fought a lot of battles with investment bankers and others over this issue. They argued for an increased emphasis on the bottom line; she argued for investing in

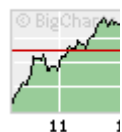
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people. And on that score she never gave in."

Underwood also finds what he calls "nine keys to success" at work at Mary Kay:

- Create and maintain a common bond.
- Shape the future (think and act strategically).
- Make me feel important (value people).
- Motivate others with recognition and celebration.
- Never leave your values.
- Innovate or evaporate.
- Foster balance (God, family, career).
- Have a higher purpose.
- You've got to be great (exceptional excellence is the only acceptable goal).

Making each independent beauty consultant, employee, manager or customer feel valued was one of the most important of those keys for Ash, Underwood writes.

"Mary Kay Ash used to advise her colleagues that they should think of every person around them -- superior, subordinate, peer, field sales representative, mail carrier, whoever -- as having a sign around her or his neck that said, 'Make Me Feel Important,' " he writes.

With regard to the pink Cadillacs that some super achievers are allowed to use, Underwood writes, the value of those cars to the women who get them has more to do with the recognition than it does with the dollar value of the cars.

"Recognition is one of the most powerful motivators," he writes. "Money may be the way we keep score but recognition is what puts fire in the belly."

The testimonials of Cadillac winners underscore the themes of recognition. They include:

- The independent national sales director who drove to the corporate headquarters of a major airline where she had worked and had been discouraged and parked the Cadillac in her former boss's parking spot to get his attention.

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- The INSD who picked up her Cadillac and headed straight for her local gas station, where she drove back and forth on the hose that rang the bell inside. The idea was to have the last laugh on the attendants who had laughed at her dreams as they put a dollar's worth of gas in her battered old klunker.
- Gu Mei, the first INSD in China and also that country's first pink-car driver. Gu began delivering her skin care products on foot with a showcase on each arm. She did that more than 12 times a week, and her shoulders were always black and blue. She was honored in 2000 as the first "pink Santana" driver. The Santana is the Chinese equivalent of a Cadillac.

Underwood concludes this hyper-flattering portrait of a successful company by calling upon the business world to embrace what he calls Theory MK leadership. He says it is about getting things done. He quotes Mary Kay Ash on that point: "Some people watch things happen, some people wonder what happened, and some people make things happen."

Cecil Johnson is a Fort Worth-based free-lance writer.



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