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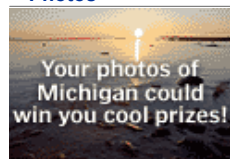
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John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

GM's Hamtramck plant, where Kenneth Mitchell works on the assembly line, builds about 800 pink Cadillac DTS sedans annually.

## THINK PINK

Mary Kay loves GM for its eye-popping Cadillacs

Brett Clanton / The Detroit News / The Detroit News

Advertisement

Right now, hundreds of thousands of Mary Kay cosmetics sellers are competing for a unique trophy that has distinguished the best among them for nearly 40 years -- the keys to their very own pink Cadillac.

And next month, on a stage in Dallas, a few misty-eyed winners will claim their reward.

The honor of producing the Mary Kay Cadillac has not been lost on General Motors Corp., which through the years has fought to keep the account amid competition from suitors and a slump at its Cadillac brand during the 1980s and 1990s.

But the relationship may be equally important to Mary Kay, whose brand identity

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has been tied to the luxury car marque from the cosmetic company's earliest days. Rewarding top sellers with, say, a pink Lexus just wouldn't be the same.

While the pink is not so pink anymore and GM is not the same company it was when the program began, the pink Cadillac has endured as the ultimate prize for the Texas makeup purveyor as the company has grown into a global empire.

Along the way, the pink Caddy has also become an American icon, immortalized in songs by Bruce Springsteen and Aretha Franklin, dropped in movies and used as a ride for Barbie. But it is perhaps best known as an unmistakable symbol of the self-made businesswomen.

So, every few months, as it has for years, GM gets the call to build a new batch of big pink sedans. Workers at GM factories in Detroit and Lansing retrieve a special vat of paint marked "OGU," pink Cadillacs roll down the line, sandwiched between white, black and red models, and the tradition continues.

#### It's the car sellers hope for

The ritual traces its history to 1968, when, as the story goes, a young and ambitious woman named Mary Kay Ash strode into a Cadillac dealership in Dallas with an unusual request.

Pulling a compact out of her purse and pointing to the "Mountain Laurel" pink blush inside, she said she wanted a car in the same color.

The dealer complied, painted the car on-site and Ash had a rolling advertisement for the small cosmetics business she had started five years earlier at the age of 45 with \$5,000 -- her life savings.

The following year, with her sales team growing and business taking off, she rewarded her top five sellers with a 1970 model year Cadillac Coupe DeVille -- bathed in bright pink paint.

The rest, of course, is history.

Today, Mary Kay Inc. rakes in more than \$2 billion in annual sales and has 1.6 million employees from Uruguay to Ukraine.

But the United States, where 700,000 of Mary Kay's "independent beauty consultants" are based, is still the company's biggest market -- and one of only a few nations where a pink Cadillac is still the top prize.

"It's the car that everyone hopes to receive," said John DeLuna, a Mary Kay marketing and sales analyst who works with the car reward program.

GM has built about 100,000 pink Cadillacs.

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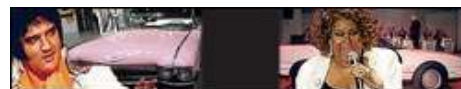
Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

The honor of producing the Mary Kay Cadillac has not been lost on GM, which has fought to keep the account amid competition. [See full image](#)

#### An American icon

The pink wheels have driven their way into pop culture.

In 1955, Elvis bought his first Caddy. It was pink. The car was immortalized by Aretha Franklin in her song "Freeway of Love."



[See full image](#)



Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

The Cadillac's hue is exclusively owned by Mary Kay. Customers cannot buy a pink Cadillac from GM or ask a dealer to paint

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The attention the automaker shows the Mary Kay account is on full display at GM's large car factory in Hamtramck.

The plant annually builds about 800 pink Cadillac DTS sedans -- the top award for Mary Kay's star sellers. That makes Hamtramck the biggest producer of pink Caddys, dwarfing the output at GM's Lansing Grand River plant, where pink versions of midsize Cadillac CTS sedans are built for Mary Kay.

In Hamtramck, a pink Caddy is pampered in a way that the Buick Lucerne and other DTS models made on the same assembly line are not. A special tri-coat paint job takes more than twice as long as the normal three-minute treatment. And the cars get some exterior components, including rearview mirrors, delivered to the plant in Mary Kay pink by parts suppliers.

"At one point, making these vehicles used to be a big disruption," said Gregory Pratt, paint area manager of GM's Hamtramck plant.

But GM factories are much more flexible today than they once were, so Pratt and his team can respond to a Mary Kay order in seconds, rather than minutes and hours.

Through the years, the appearance of the Mary Kay Cadillac has also changed. No more fins. No more DeVille, which was phased out last year to make way for the DTS. And, most surprisingly, no more pink. Or at least not much of it.

Mary Kay pink has been updated six times in four decades, evolving from bubble-gum pink in the early years to a "pearlescent" shade today that is pink only in the right light. The rest of the time, a Mary Kay special might look like just another white sedan.

And not all of Mary Kay's legions of sellers are happy with the transition.

In the late 1990s, these cosmetics road warriors pushed back when a new shade was introduced that they felt was just too pale. "There were some people out there who wanted it a little pinker," DeLuna said.

So in 2000, the company rolled out a pinker pink to placate the miffed vendors.

Today, Mary Kay is working on a seventh-generation pink for award cars. GM says the new hue will be closely guarded until it is unveiled.

An interesting thing about the Mary Kay pink: Regular customers cannot buy a pink Cadillac from GM, nor have one painted by a GM dealer. It is an exclusive shade owned by the cosmetics company.

In addition, winners of a Mary Kay Caddy must return the cars after a two-year lease expires, at which time the company repaints them and sells them at auction. Those who choose to buy the pink cars must agree not to resell them to anyone other than approved dealers.

#### **Account is valuable to GM**

Keeping the Mary Kay people happy may be important to GM now more than ever. After losing \$10.6 billion last year, GM is trying to scale back sales to image-killing rental car agencies, and beef up profitable fleet sales to corporate customers like the well-known cosmetics firm.

Along with the pink Cadillacs, Mary Kay buys hundreds of Pontiac Vibe hatchbacks and Pontiac Grand Prix sedans every year -- all painted red -- that are given as rewards to a second tier of top sellers.

Beyond the sales boost, though, GM and the Cadillac brand benefit from being connected to one of the best-known corporate award programs in the world, said Siobhan Olson, head of non-traditional marketing for Frank About Women, a consultancy in Winston-Salem, N.C.

"What brand wouldn't want to be known as a reward?"

one. [See full image](#)



Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

This 1956 pink Cadillac sedan is on display at Fox Automotive in Rochester. The Caddy tradition was born in 1968, when Mary Kay Ash asked a Dallas dealer for a car the same color as the blush in her compact. [See full image](#)

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To get an idea of how seriously GM views its relationship with the cosmetics company, look no further than GM's Renaissance Center headquarters. There, the automaker has a whole team -- headed by its own vice president -- to oversee the Mary Kay account.

Every week, the group has "Pink Tuesday" strategy meetings where team members -- including the men -- are encouraged to wear pink.

The team will do anything it can to better understand the women who will drive these cars, said Sharon Dudley-Parham, GM's fleet account manager of the Mary Kay business.

"We are sensitive to the fact that this is a long-term account," she said. "We are not interested in losing this business."

Mary Kay's DeLuna said there have been moments through the years when the makeup maker thought about going in a different direction.

"I hesitate to tell you," he said, "but we've considered it."

Mary Kay has always returned to GM because of the care it gives the account and competitive price, DeLuna said.

At this point, it would be hard to swap the Caddys for another model and have it mean the same thing.

Crisette Ellis, a national sales director for Mary Kay who lives in Bloomfield Hills, knows this all too well.

After winning four pink Cadillacs and qualifying for a fifth, she decided to take a cash prize rather than the car, an option that allowed her to buy a sleek Mercedes-Benz convertible.

After a while, though, she missed the recognition she got from wheeling around in a pink Cadillac and the sense of achievement that came with it.

"You can't show people the cash," said Ellis, 42, who now is in her fifth pink Cadillac.

In two weeks, thousands of Mary Kay sellers will gather at the Dallas Convention Center for the company's annual meeting, known as "Seminar," and a new crop of vendors will get their first pink Cadillacs.

As the moment draws near, women in the audience will make oversized steering wheel motions with their arms or hold mini-steering wheels to signal the time is nigh.

The winners will be called to the stage. Music will play. Tears will flow. And the dream that drove them to this point will be fulfilled.

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