



“Enriching Women’s Lives”: The Mary Kay Approach to Beauty, Business, and Feminism

Beth Kreydatus

In 1963, Mary Kay Ash founded Mary Kay Cosmetics with the stated purpose of “enriching women’s lives.” Mary Kay sales consultants, 99 percent of whom are female, work as independent beauty dealers by selling cosmetics and skin care at small parties. Although sales supervisors make use of “feminist” language to encourage and enlist consultants, the company combines an emphasis on female self-empowerment with politically conservative rhetoric. Mary Kay also employs motivational psychology, “family values,” and Christianity to attract and direct consultants. I have interviewed Mary Kay consultants and examined promotional literature and product campaigns to chart the company’s ideological development. In this paper, I explore Mary Kay’s surprisingly coherent ideology of feminism and conservatism, a blend that has made the company accessible to its consultants and customers for over four decades.

All of us believe in our mission. Our mission is to enrich other women’s lives. And that’s what we do. That’s our mission. It gives you a purpose. So many women today don’t know why they’re here. . . . We have a mission. We have a purpose. And it’s all under the heading of Mary Kay and it’s not just makeup. Makeup is the vehicle that we use.¹

At Mary Kay Cosmetics, a direct sales company specializing in skin care, makeup, nail color, and perfume, “enriching women’s lives” is the official mission statement.² The sales staff is almost universally female, and sales

¹ “Gretchen,” Westgate, Williamsburg, Va., interview with author, 29 March 2004. Note that to encourage frankness during my interviews for this paper, I informed consultants and directors that I would use pseudonyms.

² Vice-chairman Dick Bartlett described enriching women’s lives as the company mission in his preface to Jim Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac: Mary Kay Inc.’s Nine Leadership Keys to Success* (New York, 2003), x. See also Mary Kay Cosmetics, <http://www.marykay.com> (accessed 25 Jan. 2005).

Beth Kreydatus is a graduate student in American Studies at the College of William and Mary; email: bkomski@yahoo.com.

consultants and their directors describe themselves as part of a “sisterhood.” Mary Kay was twice included in a list of *The 100 Best Companies to Work For*, with reviewers remarking, “Because it’s run by a woman, male chauvinists need not apply. Few do.”³ More than one commentator has described Mary Kay Ash—the chief executive of the company from the time she founded it in 1963 until she retired in the mid-1990s—as a “de facto feminist.”⁴ Critics, however, describe Mary Kay Cosmetics as a socially conservative corporation that exemplifies backlash against feminism. Historian Alice Clarke, who has written on Tupperware direct selling in the 1950s, described Mary Kay as a company that “embraced religion and domestic subordination in a far more orthodox fashion than Tupperware had.”⁵ How is it that Mary Kay could make such a strong case for the potential of women in the work force, and simultaneously enforce “domestic subordination”?

An examination of Mary Kay Ash’s corporate philosophy reveals how a Texas businesswoman selectively appropriated and rejected elements of feminism to shape late twentieth-century beauty culture. Ash built a successful multimillion-dollar business by patching together a strong belief in women’s economic empowerment with an equally fervent conviction in the “rightness” of normative gender roles. Her company philosophy responded to the incipient feminism of middle-class women who were frustrated by the “feminine mystique,” especially in terms of the professional limitations this mystique placed on the ambitious suburban homemaker. Like liberal feminists, Ash demanded recognition of and rewards for women’s professional abilities. When it came to women’s social roles and participation in beauty culture, however, Ash parted ways with most feminists, particularly radical feminists. Ash believed that to earn respect as businesspeople, women must demonstrate their respect for male authority within their families and workplaces, in part by wearing “feminine” clothing, makeup, and hairstyles. By clinging to a pre-feminist aesthetic standard, Ash reassured observers that, though Mary Kay might facilitate women’s entrance into the business world, the company stood as a bulwark against further social change. Yet, because Ash defined consultants’ participation in the business world as progressive and liberating, her company ideology allowed consultants to view themselves as empowered women who simultaneously conformed to “traditional” gender roles.

³ Robert Levering, Milton Moskowitz, and Michael Katz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* (Reading, Mass., 1984), 200. See the company website for awards and honors won by the company, “Milestones, Awards and Honors,” Mary Kay Cosmetics, http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Company/Milestones_1.asp (accessed 25 Jan. 2005).

⁴ “Carol Flake, “Evangelicals and Feminists,” *The Nation* 233 (12 Dec. 1981), 645.

⁵ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 193.

The experiences of Mary Kay Ash and her salespeople offer valuable insight into the opportunities and drawbacks women faced when working within beauty culture in the late twentieth century. By studying a beauty business owned and operated by women, we can examine how and why women collaborated in creating a sexist, racist, and heterosexist beauty culture. To better understand these experiences from a variety of perspectives, I interviewed seven Mary Kay consultants and three sales “directors” living and working in the Tidewater region of Virginia. With such a small and regionally specific sample of opinions, these interviews do not provide a representative survey of the Mary Kay sales staff. However, in this paper I focus on the corporate image and philosophy Ash created when building her business, and the interviews help clarify how that image was presented to, and received by, the sales team. The women I spoke to offered helpful insight into the experience of selling beauty products for a conservative, female-centric beauty company.

Mary Kay Cosmetics is organized through a system of multilevel marketing. In other words, independent contractors, or “beauty consultants,” sell all of the products. If consultants wish to make substantial profits, they have to recruit more salespeople for the company, building hierarchical sales teams of consultants organized and managed by a “sales director.” Everyone within the company, from the newly recruited consultant to the national sales director, is encouraged to view recruitment as a major part of the job. All of the Mary Kay publications—the bulk of my sources for this paper—were written to make the company seem appealing to potential recruits. Furthermore, several of the consultants and directors I spoke with tried to recruit me into the company, and almost all of them offered to sell me products.⁶ I have kept the profit motives of the salespeople and the company in mind, since those motives shaped the way they described and experienced their company. The women of Mary Kay Cosmetics have been motivated to work in this beauty business primarily in hopes of financial reward.

Financial rewards are hard to come by in direct sales. While Mary Kay Cosmetics entices new recruits by focusing on the pink Cadillacs and millions of dollars earned by some sales directors, few beauty consultants make it that far. Annual turnover rates among the sales consultants have been as high as 80 percent.⁷ By the 1980s, most consultants worked part-

⁶ “Betty,” Barnes and Noble, Williamsburg, Va., interview with author, 12 April 2004; “Gretchen.”

⁷ In 1984, the authors of *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* estimated that Mary Kay lost 80% of its sales consultants annually. Less than a decade later, the same publication suggested that the turnover had declined to 40% annually, suggesting that the company had found a means of retaining consultants. We can explain the change, in part, by the management’s efforts to retain consultants who sold very few products. By the early 1990s, 70% of consultants were working part-time. Nevertheless, at 40%, turnover was still

time for the company. In 1981, *Forbes* reported “most consultants are lucky to earn \$1,500 a year in a 9-hour week; the more active ones; perhaps \$4,000.” “And heaven help the disillusioned consultant who wants to return her unused beauty kit for a refund. She’s given seemingly endless pep talks before the company comes across with the money.”⁸ Direct selling is hard and discouraging work, involving endless rejection. Consultants describe direct selling as “a numbers game,” saying, “if you approach ten people, about one of ten of those would agree to do a facial.”⁹ Sales directors spend much of their time motivating their consultants to persist in the face of defeat.¹⁰

Nevertheless, observers note the infectious enthusiasm shared by consultants and their sales directors. Much of this “Mary Kay Enthusiasm” originated from the company founder, Mary Kay Ash.¹¹ Ash was a retired white, middle-aged widow and grandmother when she began the company with \$5,000 in savings in Dallas, Texas. Until her death in November 2001, Ash served as the charismatic spiritual guide, mentor, and mother figure to the sales force and employees. Photos of the immaculately coifed and made-up founder appear in almost every Mary Kay office. Ash used her own appearance and lifestyle as recruiting tools. For instance, when she published her autobiography, *Mary Kay*, she was well aware that her writings were as much about the company’s image as her own. Her son and company co-founder, Richard Rogers, referred to his mother’s autobiography as “a philosophical book about how women should conduct their lives.” However, he also revealed another purpose the book might serve, saying: “What if we sell a million copies in 1982?

quite high. Mary Kay lists its inclusion in these compilations in a chronology of its achievements, implying that the company does not dispute this estimate of its turnover rate. The publication noted that some competitors, such as Avon, have even higher turnover rates: Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *100 Best Companies*, 201; Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* (New York, 1993), 271.

⁸ Currently, the company offers a 90% buy-back guarantee for all the products (excluding the starter kit) that the consultant purchases, should she decide to leave the company (if the products were bought within the year). However, the company discourages consultants from this decision by making it impossible to reactivate Mary Kay membership when a consultant has taken advantage of the refund; Howard Rudnitsky, “You Gotta Believe,” *Forbes* 127 (22 June 1981), 105.

⁹ “Laura,” Williamsburg, Va., interview with author, 30 March 2004.

¹⁰ “Managing the Mary Kay Way,” *Working Woman* 20 (April 1995), 49, 82.

¹¹ “That Mary Kay Enthusiasm” is the title of a company song, which consultants sing at meetings for encouragement. Ash explained that, in the early years of the company, she sponsored a song-writing contest and chose this tune as “a theme song.” To hear the song, ask almost any consultant for a performance or watch “The Pink Panther,” *60 Minutes* (produced by Jim Jackson, CBS News, 1979); Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay*, 3d ed. (New York, 1994), 44 [references are to this edition unless otherwise noted].

What do you think *that's* going to do to recruiting?"¹² Indeed, her autobiography has sold over two million copies, and the consultants I spoke with had either read it or intended to.¹³ When Ash retired as chairperson emeritus in 1995 due to poor health, company executives admitted to a readjustment period, when senior management briefly lost "the Mary Kay way." However, the company now confidently calls upon the substantial body of teachings Ash left behind to motivate the sales force and guide company policy.¹⁴

Mary Kay Ash founded her cosmetics company (originally "Beauty by Mary Kay") at a pivotal historical moment. The early 1960s are commonly associated with American liberalism, as New Left and Civil Rights activists led vocal grassroots movements and Democratic presidents occupied the White House.¹⁵ In Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at one of the most memorable rallies of the Civil Rights movement, calling for freedom, jobs, and justice for African Americans. Furthermore, second-wave feminists, not yet part of a cohesive women's movement, were openly challenging normative gender ideologies. In 1963, the year "Beauty by Mary Kay" opened its doors, Betty Friedan's book on middle-class women's discontent, *The Feminine Mystique*, hit the bestseller lists. During the same year, the President's Commission on the Status of Women, appointed by president John F. Kennedy and led by Eleanor Roosevelt, published a report that drew national attention to discrimination against women in the workplace. In addition, female activists in the New Left and Civil Rights movements were laying the groundwork for feminism in the late 1960s.¹⁶

¹² Rudnitsky, "You Gotta Believe," 105.

¹³The company currently gives away copies of Ash's autobiography when recruits place their first \$600 minimum wholesale order (if the order is placed immediately after signing their "Independent Beauty Consultant Agreement"). See "Press Room: 2004 Corporate Press Kit," Mary Kay Cosmetics, http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Pressroom/Press_2004FactSheet.asp (accessed 1 April 2004).

¹⁴ Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, 192.

¹⁵ One of the most memorable and infamous events of the early 1960s occurred right in Dallas, Texas. In November 1963, a mere five weeks after Ash founded her company, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy occurred several miles from her new business at Exchange Park.

¹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963). See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1979); William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1980); and Cheryl Greenberg, "Twentieth-Century Liberalisms: Transformations of an Ideology," in *Perspectives on Modern America: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harvard Sitkoff (New York, 2001), 53-79, for a few works that focus on the 1960s as a time of political and social liberalism.

Nevertheless, in Ash's hometown of Dallas, Texas, grassroots activists were pursuing a more conservative agenda. In her work on Southern California conservatism, historian Lisa McGirr characterizes the early 1960s as the "origins of the New American Right." McGirr describes the Sunbelt region—highlighting Dallas, Texas, specifically—as an area that "had a tremendous influence on the national scene, providing many of the rank-and-file supporters of the libertarian and Christian Right." She argues that Sunbelt conservatives were not just reacting to liberal change, but were also creating a conservative philosophy that appealed to a broad range of Americans. McGirr defines Sunbelt conservatives as free-market capitalists opposed to the expansion of federal government (except in matters of national defense). Most of these conservatives also advocated male authority within the family, religiosity, and individual responsibility.¹⁷

Elements of this conservative philosophy were particularly resonant within Mary Kay Ash's direct sales company. Ash, like many entrepreneurs, had economic incentive to support politicians who favored unregulated capitalist expansion.¹⁸ In her 1984 work, *Mary Kay on People Management*, Ash quoted her son Richard at length:

Over the years I have given many Mary Kay speeches related to our free enterprise system. I feel our free enterprise system is important because without it you would not be here. I would not

¹⁷ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 13-14. Indeed, by 1964, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* competed for sales with Phyllis Schlafly's first bestseller, *A Choice Not an Echo* (Alton, Ill., 1964). Schlafly quickly earned a reputation within the Republican Party as a grassroots activist, a leader of conservative women, and a "pro-family" opponent of feminist change. For a discussion of Schlafly's balancing act of conservative activism and gender traditionalism, see Catherine E. Rymph, "Neither Neutral nor Neutralized: Phyllis Schlafly's Battle against Sexism," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, 5th ed. (New York, 2000), 501-7.

¹⁸ The company has been careful to keep government regulation at a minimum. Like other network direct sales organizations (DSOs), Mary Kay defines consultants and directors as "independent" contractors, and therefore the consultant is considered "self-employed" and assumes responsibility for Social Security, income taxes, and all other dealings with state and federal government herself. During the late 1960s and 1970s, DSOs fought the IRS in court to preserve their right to declare direct sellers independent contractors for federal tax purposes. The Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 upheld this designation, exempting DSOs from paying FICA and making business expenses incurred by recruits tax-deductible. See the "Independent Beauty Consultant Agreement" (Section A-5) that new consultants sign for explanation. Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago, 1989), 185n49.

be speaking. Mary Kay Cosmetics would not exist. And the Mary Kay dream would never have become a reality.¹⁹

Richard Rogers went on to describe the benefits of living in a nation whose “founding fathers...were determined to set up a free citizenry rooted in the natural law of supply and demand with minimal state and federal interference. They envisioned the right of everyone to succeed or fail according to his or her own initiative, drive and ability.” Ash described listening to her son’s speech, given in the early 1980s to consultants and directors at the annual Seminar, with tears of pride in her eyes.²⁰

Not only did Mary Kay match the economic conservatism of the Sunbelt, but she also incorporated much of the social agenda of the Sunbelt conservatives into her business philosophy. Mary Kay Cosmetics has regularly reminded consultants to share the company’s priorities by placing “God first, family second, career third.”²¹ Clearly, religion and family authority are high priorities within the company; so high, in fact, that the company encourages its female sales force to fulfill familial obligations before working on their careers.²² Ash regularly stressed in her writings and speeches that consultants should take time away from their work when their families needed them, and she reassured consultants that their positions in the company would not be lost.²³ While Ash named

¹⁹ Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management* (New York, 1984), 110.

²⁰ Ash, *People Management*, 110.

²¹ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 60.

²² Mary Kay Ash, described by others as “a traditionalist,” described herself as a “square;” “Mary Kay Cosmetics’ Mary Kay Ash,” *Chemical Week* 117 (6 Aug. 1975), 40. In 1995, Mary Kay Ash wrote an advice book for women, entitled *Mary Kay: You Can Have It All: Lifetime Wisdom from America’s Foremost Woman Entrepreneur*. In her introduction, she commented on the unpopularity of stressing “old-fashioned values” to modern women, since “feminists” don’t want to be told to prioritize (xi). Nevertheless, Ash never shirked from advertising her own priorities of “God first, family second, career third.” For example, Ash warned modern women against putting their careers before their (future) families by postponing childbearing. “My advice to every young woman is to consider this issue carefully and make a definite commitment to her plan. Then she won’t give up what may be the most precious gift God gives us.” Ash, *Mary Kay: You Can Have It All: Lifetime Wisdom from America’s Foremost Woman Entrepreneur* (Rocklin, Calif., 1995), 29.

²³ See the work by the Independent National Sales Directors of Mary Kay, *Paychecks of the Heart* (Dallas, Texas, 2000), for endless examples of the company (and its founder) supporting individual consultants when they chose to put their families first. Note the story of Virginia Robirds, who was supported through two family crises by her sister consultants (43-44). However, in 1998 the company faced a lawsuit by sales director Claudine Woolf, who was asked to relinquish her directorship and requalify for the position after a drop in sales when she struggled with breast cancer. (The fact that she was pregnant and chose to have the baby, despite increased danger to her health and against the advice of several doctors, aggravated her condition.) While the company changed

“God” as the top priority, she suggested that working for Mary Kay Cosmetics and religious devotion would never conflict. Mary Kay Cosmetics also prioritized patriotism. Ash drew attention to her nationalistic pride by saying, “I know in some circles it’s not considered good taste to wave the flag at company gatherings. I disagree. We think it’s a healthy emotion, and a message that can never be told too often.”²⁴

Like many Sunbelt conservatives, Mary Kay Ash viewed problems like poverty, unemployment, or lack of education as the responsibility of the individual rather than of society. During the early 1980s, when feminists were voicing concern about the feminization of poverty, Ash proudly sought “to counter negativism by emphasizing *what’s right with America*.” She refuted social criticisms, saying “there are more opportunities today, especially for women, than at any other time in history.” In fact, she optimistically declared, “Opportunities *have* always and *will* always be around. You simply have to take advantage of them.”²⁵ Ash may have emphasized the unlimited opportunities available in America because she wished to encourage women to view direct selling—especially selling Mary Kay Cosmetics—as a possibility to which they could always turn.

Sociologist Nicole Woolsey Biggart notes that direct sales companies flourish in times of economic depression, when salaried work is harder to secure.²⁶ During the Great Depression, for example, companies like Avon and the Fuller Brush Company absorbed new recruits from the ranks of the unemployed. By implying that unemployed women could always “choose” to work in direct sales, Ash constructed poverty as willful laziness or irresponsibility. Certainly, direct selling did not offer regular wages or benefits like insurance or health care.²⁷ However, presumably, through diligence and dedication, the hardworking beauty consultant could earn a good income. Moreover, when women did not succeed, it would be a lack of diligence or dedication on their part rather than societal problems that held them back.

As a direct sales organization, Mary Kay Cosmetics was neither exceptional nor especially innovative when it opened its doors in September 1963. Other direct sales companies such as Tupperware, Avon, and Stanley Home Products had used elements of the Mary Kay formula, especially emphasis on female networks, conservative family values, and corporate religiosity. All of these companies imitated the successful direct sales systems of early twentieth-century African American beauty

course on the directorship by renewing her position, Woolf sued for wrongful dismissal. See “Kayoed by Mary Kay?” *People Weekly* 50 (10 Aug. 1998), 129.

²⁴ Ash, *People Management*, 111.

²⁵ Ash, *People Management*, 113, emphasis in original.

²⁶ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 33.

²⁷ Today, directors (not consultants) qualify for some insurance and health benefits.

entrepreneurs such as Madame C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, even if they did not acknowledge the debt.

Malone and Walker developed hair treatments that reputedly nourished, straightened, and styled African American women's hair. Due to a discriminatory job market that left African American women with few opportunities for advancement, Walker and Malone found many women eager to sell their hair treatments to earn extra money.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, retail stores favored white toiletries and cosmetics to the disadvantage of black products. The African American community, therefore, embraced the opportunity to purchase products from Walker and Malone's independent sales forces, who sold products door-to-door or through the mail. Walker and Malone created and managed cosmetic empires, giving employment to thousands of African American women and making hundreds of thousands of dollars. Like Mary Kay Cosmetics half a century later, Walker and Malone attracted women with an opportunity to build a business without much credit or capital and secured the loyalties of those businesswomen by offering them gifts, public commendations, and a sense of membership in a sales-based sisterhood.²⁸

In the postwar era, direct sales work for Mary Kay, Avon, Tupperware, and Stanley Home Products appealed particularly to the ranks of white, lower middle-class, married women.²⁹ In a 1963 speech, the vice-president of Avon's sales, Norman Chadwick, explained:

Among married women with children between the ages of six and eighteen, only one in twenty has a steady job. Here is where the Avon opportunity fits dramatically into the scheme of things. It is the women who cannot take a steady job who find in Avon an opportunity for gainful endeavor on a part-time basis. And it will be from the ranks of these people that we will draw the Avon Representatives of tomorrow.³⁰

Avon executives assumed that married women would join the ranks of the sales representatives with the intention of putting "extra money in the family sugar bowl," or acquiring a little "pin money," rather than fulfilling personal ambitions or creating an independent income.³¹ Nevertheless,

²⁸ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998), 67-77.

²⁹ For a discussion of Avon's development in the first half of the twentieth century, see Katina Manko, "A Depression-Proof Business Strategy: The California Perfume Company's Motivational Literature," in *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York, 2001), 142-68.

³⁰ Norman C. Chadwick, "Heritage of Avon" (speech given at Pathways Achievements conference, 1963) 19-20, Administration Policies/Misc.—Products box 110, record group 2, series 1, Hagley Archives, Wilmington, Delaware.

³¹ Although companies like Avon often assumed that its female sales representatives would be married mothers, single mothers such as Mary Kay Ash

Avon officials reassured these representatives, “YOU ARE AVON in your territory,” and boosted their enthusiasm for the sales work with motivational literature preaching self-empowerment.³² In 1963 Avon Cosmetics was the acknowledged leader of cosmetic direct sales, a position it had won by stressing the convenience of having an attentive door-to-door saleswoman deliver inexpensive products right to the customer’s home.³³ Avon left a window for Mary Kay by marketing a broad range of toiletries at low prices. “Beauty by Mary Kay” cleverly capitalized on a gap in the Avon market by highlighting luxury skin-care products; however, the Mary Kay sales force came from the same population as Avon. Particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, Mary Kay Ash and her directors recruited lower middle-class white women in the Sunbelt region.

Before starting her own company, Ash herself had worked for Stanley Home Products, another female-staffed direct sales organization. During the 1940s and 1950s, Stanley Home Products introduced the very successful “party plan” to the world of direct sales. Whereas most direct sellers, such as Avon Products and Fuller Brush Company, sold their products door-to-door, Frank Beveridge, the founder of Stanley Home Products, directed his salespeople to present their products (household cleansers) at small “parties” in neighborhood homes. The salesperson would encourage an acquaintance to “hostess” a party in her home, inviting her friends and neighbors for light refreshments and a presentation by the salesperson. The party plan allowed Stanley Home Products salespeople to make their sales pitch to several women at the

(a divorcee) relied on direct selling in the 1950s to support themselves and their children. Avon, *Outlook*, Campaign 11 (1960), back cover. From box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives.

³² Avon “I Am Avon,” *Outlook*, Campaign 7 (1960), 2. From box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives. For a discussion of Avon’s reliance on motivational literature, see Manko, “A Depression-Proof Business Strategy.”

³³ Both the customer and the salesperson were assumed to be married women, usually young mothers. For example, Avon’s magazine for salespeople, *Outlook*, informed representatives in 1960:

Many times you call just in the nick of time...just when your service is most needed...the baby’s down with a cold...the dishes are waiting...and there’s housework to do...she’s upset, depressed. And then the doorbell rings...it’s YOU...her Avon Representative...with a warm and friendly smile...just the thing she needs to take her mind off her troubles...just the time she really needs the convenient, time-saving, home service you offer.

Outlook Campaign 7 (1960), 3. From box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives. For a discussion of Avon’s sales strategy, see also, Ramona Behts, “Avon Shifting to ‘Value’ Ads to Combat Declines,” *Advertising Age* 44 (8 Oct. 1973): 1. The sales brochure took center stage for Avon because the company had such a vast range of products that the saleswomen could not carry all of them with them. Mary Kay Cosmetics has always made a point of keeping its range of products narrow, in an effort to supply customers immediately upon purchase.

same time. Furthermore, parties often created a sense of peer pressure, and attendees might purchase products to “keep up with the Joneses.” At every party, the salesperson could encourage individual guests to “hostess” the next party.³⁴

The parties thrown by Mary Kay representatives are most comparable to the direct selling style developed by Tupperware Home Parties Incorporated. Brownie Wise, the vice-president of the Tupperware corporation and the brain behind the business between 1951 and 1958, turned a small kitchenware company into a direct sales giant by enhancing the sociability, conviviality, and communal materialism of the direct sales party. Wise played upon stereotypes of femininity and domesticity, encouraging attendees to swap recipes and engage in games such as “Clothes Pin,” “Waist Measurement,” “Game of Gossip,” and “Chatter.”³⁵ Even though Tupperware reinforced the idea that women’s “place” was within the home, many feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s described Tupperware direct sales parties as a welcome opportunity for “housewives who don’t get much chance to go out.”³⁶

Mary Kay Ash agreed that the party plan was the perfect sales tool for selling cosmetics and skin care, because sales consultants could use and create female networks to find customers and new recruits. Ash instructed her consultants to limit their sales parties (also called “facials” or “classes”) to a maximum of six guests, in order to give each attendee close attention.³⁷ The consultant deliberately uses the “party” atmosphere to

³⁴ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 42-43.

³⁵ Clarke explains that the meaning of these games was to reinforce a sense of “female” domestic culture, by emphasizing “overtly feminine issues.” By invoking stereotypes of femininity, the games presented guests with a common language, an icebreaker, and a means of getting involved in the “party.” In addition, the use of Tupperware products to play the games gave guests an opportunity to handle and admire the containers before purchasing them. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 107-8. See also *American Experience: Tupperware!* (produced, directed, and written by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt for WGBH Boston, PBS, 2003).

³⁶ Dee Wedemeyer, “There’s a Tupperware Party Starting Every 10 Seconds . . .,” *Ms.* 4 (Aug. 1975): 73; Elayne Rapping, “Tupperware and Women,” *Radical America* 6 (Nov./Dec. 1980): 39, 48-49.

³⁷ Guests, as friends of the “hostess,” have special incentive to buy products, because their purchases would help their “hostess” earn gifts and prizes. “Sandra,” a Mary Kay director, described the “hostess thank you system” as an opportunity for women who could not afford the products to earn free merchandise. If they host a party, they receive rewards for merchandise their guests buy, and for the number of their guests who agree to host future parties. “Sandra,” Barnes and Noble, Williamsburg, Va. interview with author, 5 April 2004. Mary Kay products are more expensive than the makeup and skin care sold at drugstores or by Avon, but they are somewhat less expensive than brands (including Clinique, Estée Lauder, Elizabeth Arden, and Makeup Art Cosmetics [MAC]) sold in high-end department stores (like Macy’s). “Mary Kay: The

suggest that the guests are not viewing a sales presentation, but instead participating in a “girls’ night” makeup ritual. Ash insisted, “Our emphasis is on teaching,” specifically, teaching skin care and cosmetic skills to potential customers.³⁸ She explained, “If you go into a department store and let the person behind the counter make you up, you can no more recreate what that person does than you can fly to the moon. . . . At our shows, you are taught why and shown how to apply your makeup. You do it yourself, make mistakes, wipe it off, try again.”³⁹ By stressing the primary importance of “teaching” skin care at beauty parties, Ash continued to imply that her motive was giving women opportunities, not earning profits. Ash clearly recognized the potential of a small, streamlined beauty party. The beauty consultant would immerse potential customers in the “party” atmosphere, and ideally, the customers would be eager to buy many of the products they had already sampled. They might even be willing to speak to the consultant about starting their own Mary Kay careers.

Mary Kay Ash incorporated her evangelical background as a Baptist and her own faith in God into her sales philosophy, and she used her faith to inspire and recruit women with similar backgrounds. In fact, Ash often treated her company as a convenient vehicle for proselytizing to her sales representatives. In a 1979 news piece on the *60 Minutes* television show entitled “The Pink Panther,” host Morley Safer commented that “no Mary Kay person, including Mary Kay herself, lets more than a minute go by without invoking God. It’s as if the road to heaven is paved with cosmetics sales.”⁴⁰ During his interview with Ash, Safer asked: “Do you think that’s really fair in terms of marketing to inject God into it as though there was some religious experience involved . . . ?” Mary Kay responded, “Let me say this, I really feel that our company is where it is today and has been blessed beyond all belief by the fact that God is using our company as a vehicle to help women become the beautiful creatures that He created.” Safer then queried, “But do you think in a sense that you are using God?” Ash answered quickly, saying, “I hope not, I sincerely hope not. I hope He’s using me instead.”⁴¹ Ash clearly viewed evangelizing as a key component of “enriching women’s lives.”

In 1952, Norman Vincent Peale wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking*, popularizing a trend toward “practical” religion, wherein believers could focus their energy and prayer on the problems of everyday life. Peale, a

Mixture’s Odd, But Its Success Is Gratifying,” *Dallas Morning News*, 7 July 1974, p. 11B.

³⁸ “Lessons of Leadership: Flying High On an Idea,” *Nation’s Business* 66 (Aug. 1978): 42.

³⁹ “Lessons of Leadership,” 43.

⁴⁰ Morley Safer, narrator of “The Pink Panther,” *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 1979.

⁴¹ Directors drew my attention to this exchange as evidence of the company’s Christian mission. Safer and Ash, “The Pink Panther”; interview, “Betty.”

Methodist minister, taught that success required only optimism and faith in a Christian God.⁴² Positive thinking mostly appealed to lower middle-class Protestant women; yet, it was also particularly resonant among salespeople, whose work required that they project enthusiasm to potential customers.⁴³ Sociologist Nicole Woolsey Biggart argued that positive thinking was a common element of all the direct sales organizations she studied.⁴⁴ It makes sense that direct sales companies would use positive thinking to inspire salespeople; not only did the work require a high degree of personal ambition, steadfastness, and confidence, but the salespeople were often the same lower middle-class Protestant women who followed Peale.⁴⁵

Mary Kay directors address beauty consultants with Peale's philosophy from the time they sign their contracts. The company uses positive thinking to encourage consultants to take personal responsibility for their sales results. Mary Kay Ash hinted that low sales were the fault of the consultant, rather than the result of external economic circumstances, or—more important—of the company's product or policy. However, company officials reassure consultants that they can overcome failure through the right attitude, prayer, and persistence. In a speech entitled, "You Can Fly, Don't Forget. Thinking Makes It So," Ash explained, "The only difference between a Consultant who never holds that first show and the Director who builds a million-dollar unit is BELIEF!"⁴⁶ Ash wove encouragement and this message of personal accountability into most of the company literature, combining Peale's writings with Biblical stories and American success stories (such as Thomas Edison and J.C. Penney) for examples of the "right" attitude.⁴⁷

⁴² Carol George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York, 1993), viii, xi.

⁴³ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York, 1994), 241.

⁴⁴ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 136.

⁴⁵ Companies such as Avon, Tupperware, Stanley Home Products, and Amway incorporated Peale's message into sales meetings and pamphlets, and some invited Peale to speak to their salespeople; Clarke, *Tupperware*, 150-51.

⁴⁶ Excerpts from Mary Kay's 1985 Seminar speech, photocopied from *Applause*, (n.d.) author's private collection.

⁴⁷ By the late 1960s, Ash's chief role in the company was as a motivational speaker. In 1968, Mary Kay Cosmetics realigned management positions. Ash became board chair, and her son Richard Rogers, (at the young age of 24) was elevated to company president. "Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 Jan. 1968, p. 5B. A quick look at Mary Kay Ash's writings and speeches conveys these themes of self-reliance and persistence in the face of defeat. See, for example, "Green Pastures," Mary Kay's Seminar Speech from 1972, author's private collection. In 1978, Norman Vincent Peale awarded Ash the "Horatio Alger Distinguished American Citizen Award," through

Positive thinking has proven so useful to direct sales companies largely because it is an extremely popular and non-denominational method of appealing to conservative Christians. Biggart described direct sales organizations generally as being in “the business of belief.” By investing the entrepreneurial activity of direct selling with “moral and social meanings,” direct sellers offer both “a sense of meaning that escapes many bureaucratic workers” and comfort for the relatively frequent economic disappointments that come with this discouraging line of work.⁴⁸ Ash firmly believed that “the Golden Rule” (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) would set her company apart from its competitors. She did not merely remind consultants that God was their chief priority, but also implied that the consultants were serving a higher purpose as “beautifiers” introducing women to cosmetics.⁴⁹ She explained, “In the early 1960s God gave me the responsibility of helping women to see that not only could they be feminine but that they could be successful at the same time.”⁵⁰ Ash referred to God as the company’s “partner,” and claimed, “He has blessed us because our motivation is right.”⁵¹

In her autobiography and at company functions, Mary Kay Ash openly discussed her own faith.⁵² Yet she maintained that her company was open to people of diverse religious backgrounds, saying, “I’m careful to remember that we *are* a business and that I must avoid preaching to our people. After all, as a company with so many associates, we are represented by every faith and denomination.”⁵³ Certainly, there are consultants who are not Christians, as the *Yahoo!* web group “MaryKayPagans,” “For Mary Kay Beauty Consultants who are Pagan rather than Christian,” illustrates.⁵⁴ The directors I spoke with insisted that nonbelievers are welcome.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Mary Kay Ash and her

the Horatio Alger Association, which he had founded to honor American success stories; Ash, *Mary Kay*, 197.

⁴⁸ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 102-3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-13.

⁵⁰ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵² Though Ash was a devout Baptist, she was married, sequentially, to a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jew. Richard Hattwick, “Mary Kay Ash,” *Journal of Behavioral Economics* 16 (Winter 1987): 61.

⁵³ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 60; emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ “Mary Kay Pagans,” *Yahoo!* Groups, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MaryKayPagans/> (accessed 12 April 2004). Interviews, “Laura” and “Betty.”

⁵⁵ Marci Chitwood, a self-proclaimed atheist, wrote bitterly of her experiences at “a Mary Kay (cosmetic) rally.” Chitwood rebuked a director’s efforts at recruitment by calling attention to her own atheism. The director responded, “Well, if you’re an atheist, I suppose you wouldn’t make a very good Mary Kay consultant.” This comment confirmed Chitwood’s belief that Mary Kay was “minimizing fine minds.” See Marcia Chitwood, “Me and Mary Kay,” *The Humanist* 58 (March-April 1998): 3. Interviews, “Betty” and “Sandra.”

sales directors were frequently evangelical, and consultants who do not share a belief in a Protestant God were likely to feel like unwelcome minorities. Consultants explained that in many units every meeting begins with a Christian prayer. Most of the consultants and directors I spoke with were devout, evangelical Protestants, and they described Mary Kay's evangelicalism as a primary reason they joined the company.⁵⁶

In order to fulfill all of their obligations to God, family, and career, Mary Kay consultants had to manage their time wisely. The successful businesswoman needed to be self-abnegating and self-motivated. While Ash advised consultants to sacrifice their personal time to the presumably worthier needs of their church, family, and business, she promised that, ultimately, these sacrifices would bring personal happiness. In her autobiography, Ash described her own struggles as a working mother who eliminated most socializing, relaxation, and fun from her schedule to find time for work and family.⁵⁷ Ash suggested that ambitious consultants join her "Five O' Clock Club," waking up at five every morning to get more accomplished.⁵⁸ Ash also encouraged consultants to turn to motivational tapes and books (such as writings by Peale and his imitators) for inspiration.⁵⁹

While in the 1960s and early 1970s isolated middle-class homemakers might have viewed direct sales parties as a welcome social outlet, demographics shifted in the 1970s and 1980s, requiring Mary Kay to adjust its sales style. By the late 1970s, most women expected to work full-time outside their homes for most of their lives (even if that meant working in low-paying, "pink-collar" jobs).⁶⁰ Mary Kay recruitment and sales dropped as more white, lower middle-class married women got full-time, "nine-to-five" jobs away from the home. Not only was it harder to find women willing to work as direct sellers; it was increasingly unusual to find women at home during the day for sales parties. The direct sales party as a social outlet seemed less appealing to a generation of extremely busy women trying to balance work inside and outside the home. To win recruits in the face of this downturn, Mary Kay offered larger commissions and bonuses, but it also encouraged women to sell cosmetics at an occasional party or to close friends and family, part-time, to supplement their full-time wages. Whereas only 33 percent of the sales force had held

⁵⁶ Interviews, "Betty," "Gretchen," "Laura," and "Kendra," Barnes and Noble, Newport News, Va., interview with author, 25 March 2004.

⁵⁷ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁹ Directors built on this recommendation by encouraging their consultants to look to motivational literature while "training" for their business. Interview, "Betty."

⁶⁰ See Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, eds., *Through Women's Eyes: An American History* (New York, 2005), appendix A-38.

other jobs in the early 1980s, nearly 70 percent did so by the end of the decade.⁶¹

During the late 1970s and 1980s, with the loss of consultants to full-time positions, Ash and her directors aggressively recruited beauty consultants. Ash and her directors billed Mary Kay Cosmetics as a progressive company that offered opportunities to former homemakers who lacked education or job skills, working-class women, and women of color.⁶² Nancy Tietjen of Minneapolis joined the company in 1971, and during the late-1970s and 1980s her story was invoked as evidence of the rags-to-riches possibilities of Mary Kay Cosmetics. The company's recruitment literature regularly pointed to Nancy's previous job, where she had worked the "graveyard shift," "packing shotgun shells on an assembly line, making much less than \$100 a week, living in a one-room apartment, and supporting two teenaged daughters."⁶³ Tietjen described her work with Mary Kay as a personal transformation, saying, "It's really been a self-improvement course for me."⁶⁴ Ash and her directors also publicized the success of women of color, such as Ruell Cone-Dunn, who eventually went on to become a National Sales Consultant after joining in April 1971. A 1982 article in *Essence* magazine pointed to the "ten free Cadillacs and two full-length minks as well as diamonds and other jewels" won by Cone-Dunn.⁶⁵ Mary Kay promotional literature often paired Cone-Dunn's success story with a description of her poverty before joining the company, noting that her family had been sharecroppers and that she had struggled even to furnish her home.⁶⁶

In her autobiography, Ash proudly explained, "Mary Kay does work in the lives of all kinds of women—every age, every background, every race, color, and creed."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, race and class play an important role in the make-up of individual sales units. "Laura," a white consultant, explained that, by making consultants and directors "independent" of the company, directors tend to build units with racial and cultural backgrounds similar to their own: "There's the white directors and their

⁶¹ Jay Pederson, ed., "Mary Kay" *International Directory of Company Histories* vol. 30 (New York, 2000), 308.

⁶² Ash did an interview for *60 Minutes* in 1979, published her autobiography in 1981, and a book on "people management" in 1984, in an effort to appeal to wider audience. "The Pink Panther," *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 1979; Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed. (New York, 1981); Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*.

⁶³ Cheryl Hall, "National Directors Sold: Mary Kay Called 'Way of Life,'" *Dallas Morning News*, 14 Aug. 1975, p. 7D; "Lessons of Leadership," 46. See also *There's Room at the Top: The Success Stories of Some of America's Leading Businesswomen* (Dallas, Texas, 1987), 16-17.

⁶⁴ Hall, "National Directors Sold," 7D.

⁶⁵ Vanessa J. Gallman, "Cashing In on Door-to-Door Dollars," *Essence* 13 (June 1982): 24.

⁶⁶ *There's Room at the Top*, 19.

⁶⁷ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 170.

little white minions . . . sometimes you can get other ethnicities under the white directors, but most of the time with the black directors, they're mostly black." Laura, who began purchasing products in the late 1990s, argued that the company has only recently expanded its product line to include a wider variety of products for nonwhite women: "I've seen a lot of improvements. . . . When I first started getting involved with Mary Kay, not necessarily selling it, there weren't a lot of foundation shades, that was a major problem with women of color. . . . if it's too light, they look ashy, if it's too dark, then it just looks really bad." Nevertheless, she argued that the company has "really made an effort to find lots more shades for women of color [since the late 1990s]." Laura also argued that the company does a "really good job" appealing to diverse readers of company publications. She joked that *Applause* (the company newsletter) and product brochures reminded her of college advertisements, because they consistently picture women of various races together on the cover.⁶⁸

Laura described the company as "definitely equal opportunity, because every woman has skin and every woman needs products and every woman wants to feel good about themselves."⁶⁹ Kendra, an African American consultant, added, "it's like a melting pot, basically."⁷⁰ Indeed, since the 1980s the company has encouraged women of color to join the ranks of the sales consultants, publicizing their success stories as models for new recruits.⁷¹ Company publications portray membership in this direct sales organization as the salvation of women who face "real-world" disadvantages such as poverty or racial discrimination. In the warm fold of Mary Kay Cosmetics, those "disadvantages" would be immaterial, because the company promises success to anyone willing to work hard.⁷²

Despite the company's efforts to recruit working-class women, Ash clearly tried to cultivate an image of the consultants as middle-class "ladies." When Nancy Tietjen described Mary Kay as a "self-improvement course," she commented on the role Mary Kay tried to assume in consultants' lives. Rules forbidding smoking and gum chewing enforce a middle-class sense of propriety among the consultants. The "Cinderella" gifts with which the company rewards top sellers—such as the Cadillacs, jewelry, and fur coats—hint at the company's efforts to link Mary Kay

⁶⁸ Interview, "Laura."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Interview, "Kendra."

⁷¹ Mary Kay advertised in *Essence* magazine by the early 1980s. See advertisement, *Essence* 13 (May 1982).

⁷² Rosa Jackson, a Senior National Sales Director, explained to Jim Underwood that Mary Kay "personally got involved" in encouraging her career, by saying "Rosa, I apologize for our society. I believe we are all equal in the sight of God. You can go to the top in this company, so don't let a few narrow people discourage you." Jackson concluded: "We were an equal opportunity company long before it was fashionable." Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, 173.

consultants with the leisure and glamour associated with the 1950s. “Gretchen” described a company cookbook that featured menus for formal “teas,” a social occasion that smacks of refinement and wealth. She joked, “Who does teas anymore? Mary Kay consultants!”⁷³ Furthermore, Ash has revealed some misconceptions about the realities of working-class experience. For example, she recommended that her consultants manage their time more efficiently by eliminating “penny jobs” like housework. In 1981, Ash suggested that the busy saleswoman should hire a housekeeper as soon as she could afford one.⁷⁴ Ash’s suggestion likely seemed unrealistic to the typical consultant, who, at the time, made an average of \$1,800 a year from Mary Kay.⁷⁵ Ash revealed her nostalgia for the social order of the early 1960s South, when poor Latina and Black women’s labor could be bought for pennies, giving white women—even middle-class white women—more time for leisure, nurturing their families, and volunteer work. Of course, Mary Kay recommended that her consultants hire housekeepers so that they could spend more time on their Mary Kay businesses.

Perhaps because they could not afford to hire housekeepers, the consultants I spoke to struggled to maintain their energy level and ambition. Kendra, who combines Mary Kay with a full-time job and an assortment of social and religious commitments, expressed her determination to find more time for her business: “Got to make it work. Got to do the work.”⁷⁶ Kendra aspires to make Mary Kay into a full-time career, but another consultant characterized Kendra as “a hobbyist”: she makes about \$20 monthly profits, and works about two and a half hours a month.⁷⁷ Some consultants described feelings of frustration with the pace of their business. Laura, a consultant who hopes to become a director, explained, “I tend to set goals that are too big—that are not achievable—and then I beat myself [up] for them when I don’t reach them.”⁷⁸ However, others found that success came easily. “Diane,” a part-time consultant, who sold \$32,000 of products in one especially successful year, insisted, “To me there is really no stress in Mary Kay.”⁷⁹ A director, “Sandra,” explained that, ultimately, Mary Kay’s greatest weakness might be “our own weakness . . . that you’re in business for yourself, and that you don’t have a boss telling you what to do, you don’t even have to show up

⁷³ Interview, “Gretchen.”

⁷⁴ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 83.

⁷⁵ Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *100 Best Companies*, 201. Granted, this average reflects the overwhelming number of women who work for Mary Kay part-time or as a pastime. By the early 1990s, sales directors were making an average of \$48,000 a year.

⁷⁶ Interview, “Kendra.”

⁷⁷ Interviews, “Gretchen” and “Kendra.”

⁷⁸ Interview, “Laura.”

⁷⁹ “Diane,” Williamsburg, Va., interview with author, 30 March 2004.

for work every morning.” Sandra implied that consultants frequently neglected their businesses, noting that while “your unit is meant to support you,” the consultant is responsible for the results. “We teach you to treat it like a business. You’re your own boss, your own treasury, you’re your own employee.” Sandra suggested that, while Mary Kay’s flexibility allowed women time for their families, it also led to disappointing sales. Consultants might fail to put consistent effort into their businesses because “sometimes this is the only moveable thing” in their lives.⁸⁰

It was a particular family structure that Ash urged consultants to prioritize: one in which husbands operated as Christian patriarchs, responsible for decision making, while wives served as domestic managers, caring for the children, preparing meals, doing the housework (until they could afford a housekeeper), and nurturing the hearts and souls of their family members. Ash explained that, although she was a successful company executive, she still viewed her husband, Mel, as the “chairman of the chairman of the board,” who expected her to be home every night to put his dinner on the table.⁸¹ Many consultants and directors agreed that their primary role was within the home. Ila Burgardt, of Wichita, Kansas, appreciated the fact that at Mary Kay, “we can remain feminine, loving wives and good mothers.”⁸² Arlene Lenarz, of Plymouth, Minnesota, left her career in nursing to become a Mary Kay consultant. She described her decision to join Mary Kay, saying, “I grew weary of always having to compromise my family for my job.”⁸³ These directors described Mary Kay Cosmetics as a company that would allow women to be “better” wives and mothers.

Many Mary Kay saleswomen did not share Ash’s belief that their primary obligation and purpose was to care for their children and defer to their husbands. Individual saleswomen described using the company to build a life and a career outside their family obligations, subverting Ash’s idealization of domesticity. Colene Shadley of Tustin, California, joined Mary Kay Cosmetics in September 1964 despite the fact that “[her] husband didn’t want [her] to work.” She was determined to start a career anyhow: “While I loved my children and enjoyed being a mother, I felt that I was drowning in a ‘little people’s world’.”⁸⁴ Fran Cikalo, of West Bloomfield, Michigan, suffered from “periods of such frustration” as a full-time homemaker and mother. “I noticed I had lost a lot of the confidence I

⁸⁰ Interview, “Sandra.”

⁸¹ Mel Ash did not work at Mary Kay Cosmetics; he was a vitamin industry executive and retired wholesale manufacturer’s representative in Dallas. See “Handbook of Texas Online,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/MM/dhm1.html> (accessed 24 March 2004). For quote, see Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 73.

⁸² *There’s Room at the Top*, 29.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

had as a young girl. I was trying to live my life vicariously through my children's activities, and I knew my talents went far beyond what I was presently doing."⁸⁵ Mary Kay Cosmetics seemed to be the solution to her frustrations. In the late 1980s, feminist novelist Fannie Flagg suggested that Mary Kay could be an empowering experience for insecure homemakers. In *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987), Flagg's novel about Southern women who endured insensitivity and even abuse in their marriages, protagonist Evelyn Couch joins Mary Kay Cosmetics and earns a pink Cadillac to gain self-confidence.⁸⁶

Rising divorce rates in the late twentieth century have made the two-parent, male-headed household idealized by Ash quite rare.⁸⁷ Several of the consultants and directors I interviewed explained that they joined Mary Kay to cope with painful divorces. Indeed, Ash herself first went into direct sales after a divorce left her feeling "like a complete and total failure."⁸⁸ When I asked one consultant why she joined the company, she explained, "I went through a divorce and I had some bills that I wanted to clean up and I was lonely."⁸⁹ Many consultants expressed appreciation for the emotional support they found through the company during their divorces:

That's really what got me through those first few years, just going over all the things I was learning about what [Ash] was saying. Because everything kept falling apart around me! . . . And I kept saying all the things that Mary Kay would say and kept going . . . and so . . . what she believed really helped me.⁹⁰

As Mary Kay "sisters," consultants entered into a stable relationship with their sales unit that offered both emotional and (some) financial support. One consultant even suggested that her Mary Kay friends replaced her husband, saying it's "almost like you have a marriage there."⁹¹ A national sales director, Dollie Griffin, of Stevensville Montana, credited Mary Kay with giving her the strength to leave an abusive relationship:

I was a battered wife and up until this time my self-esteem was in the minus. With Mary Kay I was learning to think positive, be positive and I realized that I didn't have to stay trapped in the bad situation I had been in for 15 years. I finally recognized that I

⁸⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁶ Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (New York, 1988).

⁸⁷ Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty* (New York, 1997), 302.

⁸⁸ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 17.

⁸⁹ Interview, "Diane."

⁹⁰ Interview, "Sandra."

⁹¹ Interview, "Gretchen." Gretchen was careful to re-establish this relationship within heterosexual bounds, saying that this bond allowed "sister" consultants to discuss men.

hadn't been raising my son in a healthy atmosphere and was able to remedy that.⁹²

Many sales consultants and directors admitted that their families, and particularly their husbands, posed resistance to their association with Mary Kay. Arlene Lenarz recalled that her husband “was not as thrilled [about Mary Kay] as I was. In fact he quickly informed me that this was ‘my’ business, not ‘our’ business. Funny how fast he changed his mind though, when I asked him to stamp the backs of all my checks.”⁹³ Virginia Robirds of Atlanta, Georgia, concurred: “My family agreed I could try this new venture as long as I didn’t have any classes at night or bother them with it. My son wasn’t too sure he wanted his mother to work since I never had, but he soon became my best supporter.”⁹⁴ Idell Moffett, of Dallas, Texas, said, “My husband, Hershel, didn’t really want me to work because I had just re-established my fashion modeling and charm school and had quite a few students. I convinced him that it wasn’t work—just something fun to do—and I would still be there when the kids got home from school.” However, Moffett found that her husband would accept her career in sales if she made a lot of money. “There was no peace at home until I told him I’d become a Director.”⁹⁵

While the consultants and directors were not necessarily enjoying the domestic bliss Mary Kay Ash idealized, they did describe motherhood as a chief priority. Many joined Mary Kay to earn income without compromising their time at home with their children. Considering the business world’s resistance to flex time, direct sales is a rare opportunity for a woman to set her own working hours. Sandra explained that, when she joined the company 25 years ago, she was “looking for a way to support myself where I could be there with my children in the morning and the afternoon.”⁹⁶ Laura, who is planning to have children in the near future, described Mary Kay as a smart career move: “The eventual goal was to be able to stay home when we have kids and do this full time.”⁹⁷ Nevertheless, she hinted that this goal, which would require that she earn considerably greater profits, still seemed out of reach. The directors I spoke to estimated that three out of four of their consultants combine Mary Kay with other employment, usually full-time.⁹⁸ Even the consultants who paired direct sales with a full-time job described Mary

⁹² *There’s Room at the Top*, 69.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁶ Interview, “Sandra.”

⁹⁷ Interview, “Laura.”

⁹⁸ Sandra explained, “They can make money, it’s just that a lot of people today already have a job and they come into Mary Kay as something for fun. And then a few of those people decide, oh yes, I want more out of this.” Interview, “Sandra.”

Kay as an opportunity to improve their children's lives. Gretchen, who described her grown kids as "Mary Kay children," explained that her earnings paid for special treats for her family, saying, "My children have lived a very good life, thank you Mary Kay."⁹⁹

Ash, along with many of her consultants, believed that Mary Kay promoted "old-fashioned values" by encouraging women to conform to normative gender roles and acknowledging their obligations as homemakers.¹⁰⁰ However, Ash combined an idealization of "traditional" gender norms with enthusiasm for the successful "career woman." By working within the normative capitalist system to improve women's economic opportunities, Ash embraced ideals of female self-advancement that we might define as "liberal feminism." When Ash opened Mary Kay Cosmetics in 1963, she viewed her company as a corrective to the discriminatory practices she had encountered as a direct salesperson in male-dominated companies. Ash got her start in direct sales after her own divorce, when she began selling for Stanley Home Products to support herself and her three children. After retiring from Stanley, Ash decided to write a book about her experiences in direct sales, describing the best way to run a company "in which women had the opportunity to fully utilize their skills and talents."¹⁰¹ Reflecting on her own experiences, Ash commented, "In twenty-five years, I had seen countless capable individuals held back only because they were female."¹⁰² Ash discovered that her male co-workers assumed that, as a woman, she was not her children's breadwinner, and therefore did not require a family wage:

One company paid me \$25,000 a year to be its national training director, but, in truth, I was acting as the national *sales manager*—and for a salary much less than the job was worth. Then there were the times when I would be asked to take a man out on the road to train him, and after six months of training, he would be brought back to Dallas, made my superior, and given twice my salary! It happened more than once. What really angered me was when I was told that these men earned more because they had families to support. I had a family to support, too.¹⁰³

Ash soon expanded her goal of writing a book to forming a company. As she developed a business plan for Mary Kay Cosmetics, she was determined to make her company different from its competitors. First, Ash would encourage women to take the lead as salespeople and sales managers. "Instead of a tightly closed corporate door bearing the sign, "For Men Only," our company has an open portal that bears the invitation

⁹⁹ Interview, "Gretchen."

¹⁰⁰ Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have It All*, xi.

¹⁰¹ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 22.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 26; emphasis in original.

“Everyone Welcome—*Especially* Women.”¹⁰⁴ Ash also vowed to accommodate women’s additional responsibilities as mothers, wives, and homemakers. For example, Ash had found that assigned territories were a disadvantage to women, because women needed to rebuild their business from scratch if their husbands found work in another city and moved the family. Mary Kay Cosmetics does not limit sales consultants to territories, allowing women to keep their clients if they relocate. Also, she set up the sales system to assist women with sick children or hectic schedules.¹⁰⁵ Ash reprimanded the business world at large for its neglect of family obligations: “Employers need to understand that these *are* a woman’s priorities.”¹⁰⁶

Ash has frequently compared her company’s accomplishments to those achieved by feminists: “In 1963, the women’s movement had not yet begun—but here was a company that would give women all the opportunities I had never had.”¹⁰⁷ “Opportunities” in Mary Kay Cosmetics include the flexibility of self-employment combined with the possibility to climb a ladder in sales unimpeded by a glass ceiling. As Ash frequently reminded her sales consultants, the only thing preventing a consultant from becoming a “Mary Kay Millionaire” was her own lack of ambition. (Although observers might wonder if a woman’s presumably time-consuming obligations to God and family might slow her down, too.) Company officials acknowledge women’s double day by encouraging what they describe as flex time—essentially, flexible working hours that the sales consultant sets herself. Recently, Mary Kay Cosmetics has gone (slightly) farther than mere accommodation to women’s unequal domestic burdens; company literature encourages “Mary Kay” husbands and children to assist with the tasks that wives and mothers usually shoulder. The Mary Kay website counsels women to “Give the small tasks to the kids and your hubby—making it a team effort will help you have more time to spend with

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 32; emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁵ While sales women had to meet quotas to win prizes, they did not have to sell to stay in the business. Moreover, they could depend on their sister sales staff for assistance in emergencies through the “dovetail plan.” This plan enabled saleswomen with a family emergency to split the profits from a pre-arranged party with a fellow consultant who took over the event. One director recommends that consultants fill out a weekly schedule, marking off “pink time” for Mary Kay meetings and training, “green time” for the time they spend earning profits from their business, and time for family and prayer. She explained that she would counsel her consultants to follow the Mary Kay priorities of “God first, family second, career third” to balance these obligations. Interview, “Betty.”

¹⁰⁶ Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 60. In *People Management*, Mary Kay encouraged businesspeople to acknowledge the importance of family to their employees.

¹⁰⁷ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 7; emphasis in original.

your family in the end.”¹⁰⁸ Of course, by the early twenty-first century, feminists had been calling for equal distribution of household work for several decades. Mary Kay’s advice implies that women should still assume responsibility for domestic management and any “big tasks” the kids and “hubby” will not do.

Mary Kay has frequently drawn attention to the absence of “glass ceilings” for women consultants.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, unlike companies such as Tupperware and Stanley Home Products, at Mary Kay women do hold the highest positions in sales.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, men have held senior management positions in the company since Mary Kay began it in 1963. As recently as 1992, women held only 39 percent of managerial jobs at the Mary Kay headquarters in Dallas.¹¹¹ In a 1981 *Forbes* magazine article on Richard Rogers, Mary Kay’s son and long-time company president, Howard Rudnitsky interpreted the company’s management style, relying on gendered language and concepts. Rudnitsky asserted, “If Mary Kay is the heart of Mary Kay Cosmetics, her son is the operational brains.”¹¹² It is unlikely that Ash or Rogers would have found this gendered heart/brains binary misrepresentative. Richard’s department of “financial” managers—made up mostly of men—was separate from Mary Kay’s sales staff, in both

¹⁰⁸ Ash made a point of sending personalized letters home to the husbands during the week their wives attended Seminar, thanking them for taking on additional household chores during the week their wives were gone. “Beauty Biz Basics: Part three: A Delicate Balance,” Mary Kay Cosmetics, <http://www.marykay.com/CareerPath/Archives/bizbasics3.asp> (accessed 1 April 2004). Hattwick, “Mary Kay Ash,” 67; Independent National Sales Directors, *Paychecks of the Heart*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ “Mary Kay” museum brochure (Dallas, 1996), 6.

¹¹⁰ While Mary Kay was establishing her own business practices, Tupperware followed a practice of recruiting the husbands of successful Tupperware dealers and shaping the business around “Tupper Families,” rather than promoting women independently to the rank of distributors; see *American Experience: Tupperware!* In 1989, Nicole Woolsey Biggart reported that distributorships were still largely assigned to husband-and-wife teams, rather than to successful women sellers; Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 94. Mary Kay Ash described her own frustrating experiences with glass ceilings in her autobiography, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 24.

¹¹¹ “Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management,” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 Jan. 1968, p. 5B; Levering and Moskowitz, *100 Best Companies*, 271.

¹¹² Mary Kay’s second husband, who had intended to run the financial aspects of the company, died a month before the company was to open its doors. Richard Rogers, then a mere 20 years old, offered to take on this role. In 1968, at the age of 24 years, Richard was promoted to company president. Ash changed her own title to board chairman. “Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management,” 5B; Howard Rudnitsky, “The Flight of the Bumblebee,” *Forbes* 127 (22 June 1981): 105.

ideology and geography.¹¹³ Mary Kay explained, “The people at the other end of the building are involved in financial arrangements. I only see the IBM sheet once a month. The rest of my time I spend trying to help women find themselves and achieve their goals.”¹¹⁴ Richard’s primary responsibility was attending to profits. His role as the company’s “brains” allowed Mary Kay to devote herself more fully to matters of the “heart,” confident that her son would keep the profits pouring in. “My goal is to see women achieve self-respect,” Ash explained. “As far as money is concerned that’s Richard’s . . . problem.”¹¹⁵

Ash would have characterized her attention to matters of the heart as a “feminine” style of doing business, and she generally minimized the importance of profits, and Richard’s management role, in her public statements. She claimed that her feminine style of management appealed to women and befuddled men. Ash frequently suggested that women were naturally more sensitive and humane than were the men who ran most American businesses. For example, Ash introduced an adoptee system—again, using a family analogy to describe the relationships between consultants—that requires sales directors to “adopt” and train consultants who live too far away from the director who recruited them. The adoptive “parent” does not receive any compensation for this effort (the recruiter, rather than the trainer, is rewarded for the consultants’ sales) except the reassurance that her geographically distant recruits would receive similarly good treatment elsewhere. Ash asserted, “Now this [adoptee] system is almost unexplainable to men, I’ve found. But it works. Everyone helps everyone else.”¹¹⁶ Ash met with criticism from her “CPAs” for sending birthday cards to all of her employees (who numbered in the tens of thousands by the early 1970s). She scoffed at their criticism of the cards’ cost, saying, “That’s men’s thinking. What they don’t realize is that my birthday card may be the only birthday card she receives.”¹¹⁷

Ash celebrated virtues she understood as uniquely feminine—such as piety, warmth, and compassion—as superior to “masculine” ethics that stressed competition and conquest. Ash encouraged women to view their “femininity” as a tool of empowerment, particularly in the world of business. Indeed, she demanded that the male-dominated business world change to accommodate and encompass feminine business styles. In 1984, Mary Kay Ash published her *Guide to People Management*, which she dedicated to “those millions of women who have entered the job

¹¹³ While reviewers have favorably noted that “male executives are carefully screened to determine their ability to work with women as peers,” they also observed that “most of the company’s vice-presidents are men.” Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *100 Best Companies*, 200.

¹¹⁴ “Mary Kay: The Mixture’s Odd.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Lessons of Leadership.”

¹¹⁷ “Mary Kay: The Mixture’s Odd.”

market over the past two decades, generally at the lowest levels of entry.”¹¹⁸ Ash explained that she wrote this management guide because women think “differently” than men. She was careful to point out that women’s differences are not a sign of inferiority or superiority: “Although I believe that women can learn a great deal from management books written by men, it is not possible for us to clone ourselves from our male counterparts, because *we are different*. From early childhood our culture has made us different!”¹¹⁹ Here, Ash sidesteps debates about whether gender difference is inherent or cultural. However, she makes it clear that even in the world of business, we should celebrate, not discourage, women’s differences.

Mary Kay executives remind consultants that at Mary Kay, “thinking like a woman” is a requirement, not a disadvantage.¹²⁰ Ash defined her own image as “motherly,” for her nurturing, sympathetic style as a people manager.¹²¹ Ash baked cookies for directors-in-training and sent personalized cards and gifts to her sales force.¹²² She developed an informal management style that she described as feminine for its emphasis on nurturing and “praising people to success.” Ash refused to answer to a title; everyone called her Mary Kay. She contrasted her company with the corporate world by insisting that, at Mary Kay, P & L stood for “People and Love,” rather than “Profit and Loss.”¹²³

Ash’s efforts to “enrich women’s lives” through beauty products and direct selling opportunities has been rewarded by the enthusiasm of women who wish to work in a company that they view as woman-centered and woman-run.¹²⁴ Within the sales teams, almost all supervisors are women, or “sisters,” in company parlance. Sister consultants do not compete against one another; instead, the gains of one consultant add to

¹¹⁸ Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, xix.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

¹²⁰ For example, Ash argued that “women have a special, intuitive quality that most men don’t possess,” and that exercising this intuition improved their business skills. Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 106. Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, xviii. Also, see Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, xii.

¹²¹ Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, 38.

¹²² In his review of *People Management*, James Cole commented, “While most top executives would not bake cookies for their people, I’ve heard of several who have developed strong organizations through effective use of departmental barbecues and office picnics, often at their homes.” Cole’s comment suggests that he viewed “cookie baking” as a feminine endeavor, but backyard grilling as appropriately “masculine” and businesslike. James Cole, “Put on a Happy Face, You Managers,” *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern ed.) 204 (15 Oct. 1984): 30. For evidence of the importance of Ash’s cookie baking, see Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, xii-xiii.

¹²³ Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, xi.

¹²⁴ Almost all of the consultants I spoke with used the company motto, “enriching women’s lives,” when discussing the company.

the profits and the reputation of the whole team. In fact, the company annually gives a highly coveted award to the most selfless saleswoman, recognizing the best team player with the “Miss Go-Give Award.”¹²⁵ Ash and her sales directors established a variety of rituals meant to inspire their consultants to work harder and maintain their enthusiasm for the company. Directors encourage their consultants to attend faithfully the weekly meetings meant to encourage and applaud their efforts. Consultants find that criticism is rare; instead, directors use praise and rewards to inspire good work. Consultants favorably compared their Mary Kay meetings, where they “feel welcomed” and their coworkers literally embrace them, to the “mean” and “bitter” world of their full-time jobs.¹²⁶ However, Ash believed that women should put on a happy face in times of trouble, rather than agitate for change. In other words, no matter how supportive Mary Kay meetings were, they were not supposed to serve as consciousness-raising sessions.¹²⁷

Among the consultants and directors I spoke with, there was no consensus as to whether a woman-centered and woman-run company was “feminist” or not. Many of the consultants and directors expressed an aversion to feminism, arguing that it undermined family values or included a “radical” and aggressive quality that was unappealing to them.¹²⁸ Several consultants clearly believed that “feminism” privileged women and discriminated against men, or that it was a movement only for women. Diane explained, “there are men in the company, so it’s not like it’s totally all women and there’s absolutely no men in the company.”¹²⁹ Gretchen clarified, “my sons are as enriched as my daughters are by what mom does.”¹³⁰ Sandra, a director, insisted, “She’s supporting women, she has an opportunity for women to succeed. [But] Mary Kay has never put down men, Mary Kay has never put down home or family, and I see in some feminist organizations that tends to be put down a little bit, [women are] criticize[d] if they want to stay home.”¹³¹

Nevertheless, Sandra and several consultants did define themselves and their company as “feminist.” “What Mary Kay did, as a great feminist in her way, was to provide a way where the woman could stay home, take care of her family, be a wife and mother, and still go out and work and make money.”¹³² Gretchen defined a feminist as “someone who truly wants women to have the opportunity to do anything a man can do that she chooses to and get paid equally for it and recognized equally for it.”

¹²⁵ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 4.

¹²⁶ Interview, “Kendra.”

¹²⁷ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 51.

¹²⁸ Interviews, “Diane” and “Betty.”

¹²⁹ Interview, “Diane.”

¹³⁰ Interview, “Gretchen.”

¹³¹ Interview, “Sandra.”

¹³² Interview, “Sandra.”

When asked if she'd use this description to define herself and her company, she said, "Sure, absolutely."¹³³ Finally, several consultants seemed to connect "feminism" to "femininity." Everyone agreed that Mary Kay exuded "femininity." Laura explained: "I think feminism is just being able to embrace womanhood in whatever you do." She went on to say, "I guess even Mary Kay was kind of her own little feminist movement, I mean . . . she really changed the roles of the woman in the workplace" by allowing women to "be their own boss and not have to worry about men and the corporate glass ceiling and all that."¹³⁴ Betty, a director, explained that Ash created a perfect world, where employees could simultaneously enjoy a successful career and the responsibilities and privileges of womanhood.¹³⁵

While her sales staff expressed contradictory perspectives on feminism, Ash rejected the label outright. Mary Kay's sales team remembered Mary Kay frequently saying, "We don't have to burn our bras to make a point." Her National Sales Directors claimed, "Mary Kay did more to liberate more women than any other woman in American history." However, they also proudly insisted that Ash "was no women's libber. She didn't like it when the women's movement urged women to begin acting more masculine—in their dress, demeanor and language."¹³⁶ Ash clearly conveyed her disapproval of feminists who rejected normative beauty standards, and implied that this rejection of "feminine" attire indicated "deviance," or even lesbianism. Ash frequently expressed her concern about career women "failing" as wives and mothers, and she interpreted "manliness" in attire as the first warning sign:

Their zeal to be up there with the big boys changes them to such a degree, they may even lose the expression of their femininity by the way they dress. In their effort to imitate men, they compromise a major asset, their womanliness, and they are no longer good role models for their own daughters. Their aggression even carries over into family life. It begins to show up in their homes, and eventually, the subtle feminine touches essential to being a loving wife and mother are noticeably missing.¹³⁷

According to Ash, erosion of beauty standards among women was the first deadly step toward gender disorder. Ash believed "women's libbers" advocated "masculine" dress and "unwomanly" behavior, and were therefore to blame for this unwelcome social change.

While Ash wished to offer economic opportunities to women, her business philosophy glorified rather than challenged gender norms. Ash developed an elaborate code of feminine aesthetics that she expected her

¹³³ Interview, "Gretchen."

¹³⁴ Interview, "Laura."

¹³⁵ Interview, "Betty."

¹³⁶ The Independent National Sales Directors, *Paychecks of the Heart*, 299.

¹³⁷ Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have it All*, 48.

consultants to follow. She defined “femininity” as conformance to middle-class and evangelical Christian rules of respectability. For example, consultants are discouraged from cursing, chewing gum, smoking, or drinking as representatives of the company. However, in Ash’s eyes, appearance largely determined “femininity.” Consultants described a “feminine” dress code, (defined as “a business skirt, a blouse, pantyhose, and heels, and they have to be closed-toes, closed-back heels...a professional appearance [with] hair and makeup done”) as “the one thing that Mary Kay really wanted.”¹³⁸ By having women dress conservatively, Ash attempted subtly to influence both the consultants and their beholders to behave “conservatively.” Ash imbued her dress code with the power to change consultants’ lives, saying, “We know that if a woman feels pretty on the outside, she becomes prettier on the inside, too. In addition, she goes on to become a better member of her family and her community.”¹³⁹

Ash argued that late twentieth-century men and women were too casual and promiscuous in their relationships, and she hinted that women’s wardrobes were largely to blame. By dressing in “sexy” clothing or in pants, women had encouraged men to treat them either as sex objects or as “one of the boys.” Women could resume their place as “ladies,” and earn the right to men’s “respect” for their sexual propriety and social status, by wearing conservative clothing.¹⁴⁰ In addition, by forgoing “masculine” pants, consultants performed and celebrated feminine difference from men.¹⁴¹

Clearly, at Mary Kay, the company dress code has much to do with its product. Ash explained “We’re selling femininity, so our dress has to be ultra-feminine.”¹⁴² Indeed, the Mary Kay dress code is “ultra-feminine” in that it harks back to norms of femininity from the postwar period, requiring that women wear skirts and dresses rather than pants, a “unisex” style that was increasingly understood as “feminine” during the 1970s. In the early 1980s, at the time Ash was explaining her company dress code in books such as her autobiography and *Mary Kay on People Management*, many conservative Americans were idealizing the postwar period.¹⁴³ Even

¹³⁸ Interview, “Laura.”

¹³⁹ Ash obviously felt that much of a woman’s femininity was conveyed through her appearance, and she criticized women who did not make the most of their looks: “Some women give no thought to their appearance when they’re around their husbands and children—even though these are the most important people in their lives. Most of their ‘dressing up’ is for strangers. Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Ash, *People Management*, 179; Ash, *Mary Kay*, 28.

¹⁴⁰ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 109.

¹⁴¹ Judith Butler has argued that all gender is socially constructed, and that clothing is one tool for “performing” gender; Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, Mass., 2004).

¹⁴² Ash, *Mary Kay*, 110.

¹⁴³ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, 1992).

into the late 1990s, postwar beauty culture—the beauty culture of Ash’s youth—shaped her standards for both her consultants and her customers. Postwar middle-class white aesthetics provided a symbolic way for Ash to promote postwar race and gender codes. In other words, by requiring women to wear dresses and skirts, Ash implied they should also strive for (what she understood as) the 1950s white suburban middle-class lifestyle, and stay at home to raise their children. By failing to develop a full range of cosmetics for women of color through the late 1990s, despite the fact that a growing number of women of color worked within the company, Ash continued to enforce racist postwar beauty standards, which defined women of color as inherently “unattractive.”

Mary Kay Ash had little tolerance for women who violated her code of feminine aesthetics. She described an interview she conducted with an author, a woman with “impressive” credentials and a “worthwhile” book project, to whom she gave the pseudonym “Dr. Smith.” When the writer came to Ash’s office in slacks, no makeup, “sneaker-type shoes,” and a “masculine haircut,” Ash was appalled. While Ash might have refrained from commenting on a casually dressed man, she argued that Dr. Smith’s appearance undermined her professional credentials. Ash’s hasty and harsh judgment suggests that she interpreted Dr. Smith’s “masculine” appearance as a sign of something more “deviant” than sloppiness. Indeed, her emphasis on Dr. Smith’s “masculine” hairstyle and dress suggests that Ash assumed that the author was a lesbian. Ash described her son Richard, the company president, as “so turned off by her appearance that he didn’t want to give her the time of day.”¹⁴⁴ By describing Richard as “turned off” by Dr. Smith, Ash reveals the emphasis she placed on women satisfying an explicitly heterosexual male gaze. According to Ash, a woman’s chief means of impressing observers, especially her most important critics—heterosexual men—was through her appearance, not through what she had to say or do. In the end, neither Mary Kay nor her son was willing to spend much time on the interview because of the author’s appearance, and they felt justified in brushing off the woman because she had “carelessly” dressed for their first interview.¹⁴⁵

Despite its great importance to Ash, consultants disagreed about the meaning and even the existence of the dress code. Gretchen denied that there was a formal “dress code,” but observed that “Mary Kay asked us that we always remember that we’re women and that we dress that way, and that means that we’re in dresses.”¹⁴⁶ Sandra, a director, expressed

¹⁴⁴ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 110-11.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. One consultant I interviewed described at length a presentation on attire she had attended at a Mary Kay “Career Conference.” The “twin” study compared the sales success of a woman wearing pants to that of a woman wearing a dress, finding that the woman in the dress was immensely more successful. Interview, “Laura.”

¹⁴⁶ Interview, “Gretchen.”

frustration with enforcing the dress code, noting, “I find it’s a little hard to get across to some women” the importance of wearing a dress or skirt.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Kendra, a consultant in Sandra’s unit asserted, “You can wear pants, so it’s not . . . just limited to skirts and dresses.”¹⁴⁸ Other consultants in the same unit were quite certain that the company required them to wear skirts and dresses. Ultimately, though consultants disagreed on the details of the dress code, everyone agreed that the company required “feminine” dress. Furthermore, they defended Mary Kay’s right to require this: “She [Ash] asks so very little of us that it would seem to me that for all the riches that she gives us by allowing us to be a part of her company that’s a very small concession if somebody objected to it.”¹⁴⁹

While even directors admitted that the dress code “seems like it’s a little outmoded,” many of the consultants I spoke to expressed enthusiasm for the requirement.¹⁵⁰ When I asked Gretchen if she found the dress code onerous, she responded, “Not at all, that’s what I’m all about, I’m a woman, I’m not a man. Proud to be one. Wouldn’t want to be a man. And I would want to be treated only as a woman.”¹⁵¹ Like Ash, Gretchen believed that by wearing a skirt, she reminded observers that she was a “lady,” and therefore sexually and socially respectable. Furthermore, by dressing “as women,” Gretchen believed consultants visually opposed any effort (feminist or otherwise) to erase social differences between men and women. Laura agreed, “We don’t have to be men in a [man’s] world. I mean we can be successful business women and still dress like a woman.”¹⁵² Several consultants argued that wearing a dress or skirt improved their business opportunities, calling the dress code “dress[ing] for success.”¹⁵³

Kendra, who believed the company permitted pants, compared Mary Kay’s expectations favorably to those of her full-time employer. Her full-time job required a uniform, and she described herself as “fed up” with wearing the same pants and blouse forty hours every week. “With Mary Kay you can dress pretty and dress nice and businesslike . . . and I want more of that, [and] my husband wants to see me doing more of that.”¹⁵⁴ Whereas Kendra’s regular work uniform (black pants, a green smock, and a black or white shirt) served to remind customers that she was a working-class employee available to serve them, her Mary Kay attire was supposed

¹⁴⁷ Interview, “Sandra.”

¹⁴⁸ Interview, “Kendra.”

¹⁴⁹ Interview, “Gretchen.”

¹⁵⁰ Several of the consultants and directors I interviewed alluded to consultants who resisted the dress code; certainly not everyone shares the enthusiasm for it. Interview, “Sandra.”

¹⁵¹ Interview, “Gretchen.”

¹⁵² Interview, “Laura.”

¹⁵³ Interviews, “Laura” and “Diane.”

¹⁵⁴ Interview, “Kendra.”

to remind observers (including her husband) that she was a respectable “lady.”

Ash did not reject the term “feminism” only for its association with lesbianism, “masculine” appearance, and “aggressive” manners. She disagreed with the belief, shared by most feminists, that gender norms contributed to women’s oppression. Ash wanted women to succeed at business, but she wanted them to work within the rules of the gender system. Ash deftly used normative femininity to her advantage, skillfully playing on gender expectations to make money in a male-dominated capitalist system. Moreover, she strived to teach other women how to do the same thing. For example, she counseled her consultants on succeeding in business: “Men will often give a woman a little extra assistance. And a woman who dresses attractively gives herself an even greater edge.”¹⁵⁵ Ash thought that, by teaching women how to benefit from beauty culture, she really was enriching women’s lives.

Mary Kay Ash believed that her consultants wanted the business opportunities fought for by feminists, without the “unladylike” attire or “deviant” sexuality she associated with feminism. Ash advocated equal opportunities for women as long as those opportunities did not interfere with her code of feminine aesthetics or her conservative and Christian beliefs. By combining liberal feminist rhetoric and conservative social values, Ash found a business style that appealed to large numbers of conservative Protestant women, particularly those living in the Sunbelt. Many consultants found ways around Mary Kay’s aesthetic, gender, and religious prescriptions, and focused solely on the company’s female-centric structure to carve out a business opportunity for themselves. Despite the ambivalent relationship between Mary Kay’s philosophy and feminism, Ash’s financial success and business acumen did enrich many women’s lives.

¹⁵⁵ Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1st ed., 109.