

Sisterhood Is the Most Beautiful Gift: The Social Meaning of Direct Sales

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What compels direct sellers to engage in the often-rewardless and socially difficult work of selling products to family, friends, and acquaintances?

BACKGROUND:

- Multi-level marketing work is not highly remunerative for most direct sellers. It is also stigmatized work, regularly criticized in the media. And yet, millions of women and men are drawn to it. Why?
- This is a study of multi-level marketing, but it is more so a study of the construction and maintenance of people who are willing and able to use their loved ones instrumentally for monetary ends.
- One window into how such people are created is by investigating the messages sellers receive in annual multi-level marketing conventions, where company leaders have the unique opportunity to engage directly with their sellers.

METHODS

- Observational data of five MLM conventions collected during 2019 and 2020.
- This poster is an analysis of just one of the conventions, hosted by Splendor (a pseudonym).
- Splendor, headquartered in the state, sells beauty and skin care products. It reports 1.5 million distributors throughout the world.
- The convention lasted three days and included messages from Splendor leadership, training and instruction from successful sellers, awards ceremonies, testimonials, music, and dancing.
- Compiled, the notes provide a first-hand record of multi-level marketing events from a participant's perspective, showing what messages companies provide to motivate direct sellers.



THE MESSAGES:

Message 1: Status, wealth, rewards, and recognition provide meaning, purpose, and validation.

High-achieving members can look forward to a sense of accomplishment and a tangible recognition of their achievements. High achieving members can gain worldwide recognition at convention for achieving different statuses. Winners make an appearance on the big screen and earn praise in the form of applause and screams from thousands of people at the arena.

- *Matthew (Splendor co-founder) is recognizing Summer, who achieved Black Status II. He praises her, saying she works hard at managing worldwide business. He lists some comments from her team members, who call her humble, honest, and wise. She leads with compassion but also shares the honest truth, they say. Another presenter says she loves Summer. "I appreciate you so much," she declares. Another remarks that Summer leads with love and grace.*

Message 2: Participating in the MLM provides an opportunity to transform oneself through personal development.

Splendor does more than provide a pathway to make money and be successful. It also helps create a better and worthy version of yourself, only possible through joining the company. This 'personal development' in turn, helps members thrive in the business.

- *Cindy, a convention speaker, states: "I want to encourage you to use the next couple of days to assess areas of business that need your energy. Learn from these speakers. This business is simple. Keep it that way. You decide what you want, and then decide to commit--to yourself, to your future. Are you going to put your foot on the gas, or are you sitting in the parking lot with the emergency break on? There's a lot going on in the world, and I'm not sure about most of it. But I am sure that you have it in you. Be the person you are destined to be."*



Message 3: Selling is a way to make a difference.

Aside from being the CEO of your own business, selling provides an opportunity to help a friend, a family member, or an abuse survivor's life. Selling gives meaning and purpose to members of the company. Splendor reminds us of our own innate, human desire to be generous. We too can be unselfish and kind. Splendor's mission, after all, goes far beyond selling makeup.

- *Kristie, the wife of one of the cofounders talks about how Splendor can help other women going through the challenges of abuse: "I'll bet you have some amazing ideas," she says. "You don't have to solve this problem on your own. But if we lock arms, we can do it together." She's emotional again. She shows a video, in which Melissa talks about feeling empowered after participating in a Splendor-sponsored retreat for survivors of abuse. "What happened to me [...] does not define who I am. I have value, and I do belong where I am..." Melissa says in the video. Kristie continues: "I believe, together, we can make a difference through a higher purpose—helping woman who are survivors of [...] abuse."*

Message 4: Selling with us lets you become a part of something big.

Splendor is like joining a sorority of sisters — who come together by laughing and connecting with one another at team meetings, luncheons, launch parties, messenger chats, Tik Tok, and other streams of communication. During the good times, they are recognizing team members' efforts and leadership. During the tough times, "Splendor Girls" are right there lending a shoulder to cry on.

- *We watch a video of Jade thanking her team of presenters, including the leadership on her team. "The sisterhood is the most beautiful gift," she says. "To get to do something that you love, and earn money, and to feel like you're making a difference... It doesn't get any better than that. It's not about a rank. It's so fulfilling and so rewarding. I am always going to be in awe of what we can do when we band together. It takes all of us doing a little bit to build this beautiful company."*

CONCLUSIONS

- Selling goes beyond makeup for many of these women; it easily becomes a commitment that disperses itself into personal facets of their lives ranging from status and wealth, familial relations, friendships, personal development and success, and devotion to the company.
- Conventions are an embodiment of who you can become. From the notable speakers involved and the numerous topics discussed, one leaves the program feeling inspired to become who they were destined to be. So long as one stays with Splendor, they are sure to find their purpose.

