

Chicago Sun-Times

Unmentionables

Many women find that when it comes to shopping for certain accoutrements of romance, there's no place like home

By Susan Frick Carlman
STAFF WRITER

It's not exactly news that sex sells. It's just that its paraphernalia turn up in the darnedest places. Like the living rooms of nice, middle-class folks.

Some merchandising of the stuff transpired in Rose Spiller's Joliet home one recent Friday evening. Following a few suggestions delivered by Surprise Parties sales representative Heather Fennig, the half-dozen women who came to the party stocked up on lingerie, toiletries, scented candles and other items designed to add a bit of spice to their most private of lives.

Assisting Fennig was Lori Dyar, a Lockport resident and one of several local representatives for the nationwide company. Dyar, who spends her days as a secretary at Harrah's Hotel in Joliet, has been with the company since October. She is completing a sort of internship period that is required before representatives can conduct presentations on their own.

"This is my fun, kind of getaway-from-it-all kind of thing," said Dyar, 54, a nicely groomed, bespectacled mother of two grown children. "We really have a good time with it."

Although she acknowledges that some of the inventory she brings along to the ladies-only parties isn't for everyone, Dyar believes that nearly everyone who comes to the gatherings can find something of interest. The lingerie line comes in two size ranges, extending up to 3X. That's not the kind of thing that's readily available in conventional retail outlets, although Dyar believes maybe it should be.

"Larger women want to feel sexy too," she said.

Dyar and Fennig's supervisor is Carol Gurrieri, manager for the territory that includes Illinois and Indiana, who has been with the company for about seven years. Like the 100 or so other Midwestern sales representatives, Gurrieri has a party routine that relies heavily on humor to lighten the mood and relieve any unease the guests might feel at the outset.

"We try to put people into an environment where they feel comfortable. Because the things we're selling are pri-

vate, we try to add a little humor in," she said.

Levity does seem to prevail during the one-hour presentation. Gurrieri emphasizes that the company does "presentations, not demonstrations," and notes that direct discussion of the personal use of the products amounts to a violation of the representative's contract. Most references to the function of the items being offered are quite discreet, often framed in a joke, and the sales pitch makes it implicit that the merchandise is aimed at indulging a healthy human tendency shared by committed people.

When guests opt to make purchases, they head one at a time into a room in a part of the residence that is separate from the presentation area. All purchased merchandise is sealed into bags of a uniform size - and stapled shut if the patron so wishes.

"All sales are final," Fennig told the women assembled in Spiller's living room. "I don't have an end-of-the-year, only-used-once sale."

The representative doesn't charge a fee, instead earning a commission from the sales logged at each event. The woman who opens her home for the party also gets a little something for her troubles.

"The hostess gets \$75 in free products for inviting a bunch of friends over to spend two or three hours having a great time and laughing," Gurrieri said.

Of course, there's something in it for the rep as well. Fennig was an engineer at Motorola until two years ago, when she gave up her day job to work for Surprise Parties full time.

"We're paid on average about \$65 an hour to stand up here and laugh," she said. "This is like my dream job."