

IT AIN'T AVON CALLING SURPRISE PARTY SELLS ADULT TOYS IN HOME-PARTY ATMOSPHERE

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STAFF WRITER

Each woman leaves the party with a brown bag in her hand and a smile on her face, but it's not leftover hors d'oeuvres they're taking home. Instead, they're loaded down with new purchases scented body oils, nubby massage gloves, lacy lingerie and perhaps even fur-trimmed handcuffs chosen from the offerings of the "Surprise Lady."

The women's participation in a home party without a Tupperware product in sight is proof that sex sells, and in the case of the Mt. Juliet-based Surprise Parties Co., it sells quite a lot. Company president Sue Rhea, with husband Joe, started the business 10 years ago, and it now employs more than 500 people nationwide. This year's earnings are expected to top \$10 million, Rhea said, up a cool million over 1997. "We're building not only women's sexuality and sensuality, but also their self-esteem," Rhea said.

The way they do it is to offer an invitation-only, women-only event where those attending from newlyweds to grandmothers can see, touch, smell and taste a variety of what might be called products for lovers.

Many would not be comfortable going to an adult products store, or even ordering by mail from a catalog. "We're not sleaze merchants," Rhea said. "We're empowering women by offering them a way to spice up their romantic lives in a respectful, private way." "We really do sell romance," said Michelle Douglas, Surprise Parties district manager for Middle Tennessee.

But why, in a society where sex has become more and more public, do women have a need to make these purchases in private? "In our society, women are not supposed to be that interested in sex, which was never true, of course, but that's been the perception," said Dr. Jeannette Heritage, professor of psychology at Middle Tennessee State University. "Bachelor parties for men where they bring in a dancer or a woman who jumps out of a cake have been accepted for a long time." The appeal of a Surprise Party is that "you're there with a group of women, all of you kind of know what you're there for, you can be open and free to look at different items that you simply would not look at in a store even Victoria's Secret," Heritage said. Today's woman is often "not only interested in sex, but is looking for a way to express that and still be

acceptable." Some of Heritage's students in a class on psycho-sexual adjustment have told her about attending Surprise Parties. "Every report I've gotten is that it wasn't dirty or salacious, but it was very private and very enjoyable," she said.

The women who attend Surprise Parties are not seeking to create the same mood in their relationships that might be suggested by the male-dominated sex industry. Most products that Douglas, a long-married mother of four, pulls out of her three suitcases of samples suggest gentle, playful lovemaking with the gratification of the female partner on par with that of the male. "My work has been like doing a sexual survey for five years," said Lisa Wooley, a senior at MTSU, whose work as a Surprise Lady supports her while she finishes a marketing degree. "A lot of women want a heterosexual, monogamous relationship, but they want it exciting and spontaneous."

There's also the historically taboo topic of "sex for one," which Surprise Parties data suggests many of their customers enjoy. "In today's society, women are comfortable in choosing to self-stimulate," Wooley said. "If you sell someone a vibrator or toy, you cross over a line of intimacy that enables them to share what becomes a rewarding experience for them." That is, women feel free to talk about something that's sometimes hard to talk about (although they stopped short of talking on the record with a newspaper reporter).

That's important to Wooley, Douglas, Meredith Mushman who easily convinced her mother, Sylvia Harper, to host a party and other Surprise Ladies because there are strict rules that they must follow in their party talk. "We don't do personal testimony," said Wooley. "We're there to entertain people." So, the Surprise Lady will not tell you if or how she has used a particular product, but she can tell you a story that someone has related to her with no identifying details, of course, so the customer's privacy is protected.

While the Surprise Lady talks to partygoers in a room together, purchases are made in private following the show-and-tell sales session. At Harper's home, Douglas went through her suitcases of wares, beginning with lingerie in regular sizes and "realistic sizes," then lotions and potions, followed by gag gifts and novelty items. Finally, there were vibrators or, as Rhea refers to them, "BOBs, or battery-operated boyfriends." "This last suitcase separates the ladies from the little girls," Douglas told the group, although no one turned away as the items were passed around the circle.

After a couple of hours, the women, who have had an

order form to make notes on during the party, go into the shopping room one at a time. "They can ask questions about anything they're curious about in private," Douglas said. They make their purchases and, unlike working with the Avon lady, they get their goodies right then no waiting for home delivery. "I carry a pretty large inventory to a party," Douglas said. "I put the items they've chosen in a brown bag, seal it up and they walk out. No one sees what they bought unless they want to show them." Theoretically, a woman can attend a Surprise Party, buy a jar of Creme de Massage (cherry or bubble gum rum), a book of Sexual Secrets, and Wascally Wabbit (we can only tell you that it's a BOB) and go straight home for a romantic evening. "You don't even have to stop at Wal-Mart for a candle," Douglas said. "We sell those, too."

PARTY TIME

If you're interested in hosting a Surprise Party, or in pursuing a career as a Surprise Lady, call the Mt. Juliet-based company at 754-1419.