

Chicago Tribune

**SURPRISE, SURPRISE
HOME PARTIES PROVE THAT, EVEN IN THE MOST
DEMURE LIVING ROOMS, SEX STILL SELLS**

By Lisa Black, Tribune Staff Writer.

In a comfortable, middle-class ranch house in Bartlett -- where guests are asked to remove their shoes before stepping across new vanilla-colored carpeting -- the 22 women sip wine, nibble hors d'oeuvres and await the arrival of the sex lady.

They are not sure what to expect when Carol Gurrieri, 29, makes her appearance, hauling in suitcases and clear plastic boxes containing her wares. She arrives in a red Cherokee Jeep, this woman who once sold potatoes from her grandpa's pickup, and tonight she is professionally attired in a bright two-piece suit and carefully coiffed blond hair.

Gurrieri gets right to business, passing around a bowl of penis-shaped erasers.

"Don't worry," she assures, as the women fill out the preliminary paperwork. "You're not going to get any Penises R Us catalogs in the mail."

By the evening's end, the women are doubling over with laughter, and Gurrieri leaves \$800 richer in sales.

The Elgin wife and mother is top saleswoman nationwide for Surprise Parties Co., which employs about 475 people from its base in Mt. Juliet, Tenn. The company specializes in selling exotic, sensual aids to women, ranging from lotions, lingerie and lubricants to the battery-operated equipment your mother never told you about.

In a day when home parties have carved a niche in the direct sales market and created careers for women selling kitchenware, candles, books, baskets, makeup and knick-knacks, it was inevitable that sex, too, would sell from one living room to the next.

The concept grew from the women's sexual liberation movement in the 1960s, with home parties introduced about 15 years ago, according to those in the industry. Initially, many catered to women under 25, but in recent years party organizers have found a market in targeting older, more established wives and mothers within America's mainstream.

It's not that these women only recently discovered sex. The idea is that the home parties offer privacy, a comfortable environment and a nonsexist atmosphere, according

to human sexuality experts. Sales through the Internet and catalogs are enjoying success for similar reasons, but they still require giving out credit card numbers and mailing addresses.

"This is viewed by women as fun," said Dr. Bean Robinson, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota Medical School's Program in Human Sexuality.

"I think this is really the women's version of a non-sleazy, positive, comfortable way for them to be able to have some fun with sex. I think they are places that offer a nice atmosphere to get these materials. I don't think women will be interested in walking down 42nd Street in New York, going into a sex shop and ordering materials."

The companies most successful in appealing to women are run by women, she said, citing catalogs that offer non-sexist, high-quality products. Most sex stores, by comparison, cater to men, she said.

Target audience

Gurrieri's parties are aimed at middle- to upper-class women who would rather wear curlers to church than be caught buying steamy stuff in public. No men or children under 18 are allowed to attend, and the hostess signs a "responsibility form" confirming that she understands the rules.

"We don't use innuendoes, we don't talk trash. We do a clean, fun show," said Donna Wittrig, vice president of Surprise Parties. She said the company earned \$9 million last year, and expects to increase profits another \$1 million in 1998.

Angel Welker, owner of Jeliqye Products Inc., which produces lubricants in Orting, Wash., has supplied home party companies for 15 years. She describes Surprise Parties as the largest and most professional among approximately 25 competitors. Welker said she knows the party companies are doing well because their requests for inventory have increased about 15 to 20 percent annually over the last decade.

"Women welcome this," she said. "Sex is a healthy thing. Everyone should feel good about it."

Surprise Parties saleswomen undergo training for the job, and their husbands are included in the interview process to ensure their understanding, Wittrig said.

"Our customers are women who are married and have 2.5

kids," said Wittrig, who added that most advertising comes from word-of-mouth. "They're primarily housewives, mommies who have been in a relationship with their husband for years and want to spice things up."

Gurrieri seeks to be professional, while putting women at ease with products whose names include the "Love Glove," "Tasty Tattoos" and "Mighty Mite." Her quick, wicked sense of humor hasn't hurt, either. And she does have stories to tell.

"I went to this party in Elgin," she said. "These ladies were in their 70s, and they all bought lingerie. They all bought their husbands glow-in-the-dark underwear.

"They said to me, 'Honey, we've got to light their fires.' " At her Bartlett party, Gurrieri explains the "private shopping" concept that has made the selling so successful. After she describes the products to the group in rapid-fire comic style, she will meet with each woman individually, in a separate room, where the customer will select the items she wishes to buy. Each woman then departs with an identical paper bag. "Otherwise, no one would buy anything," she says.

"I have a staple gun to staple your bag shut," she adds, "for those of you with aggressive friends who try to get into your bag."

Those attending the party were women in their mid- to late 30s. Most were married. Several had already been to Gurrieri's parties and said they returned for the fun of it.

"I swore I would not have Tupperware parties, candle parties or any home parties again, because I hate to have my friends or family obligated to buy anything," said the hostess, asking to remain anonymous because her 10-year-old son thought she was having a kitchenware party.

"But this is different. They're here because they want to be."

Patty Keegan, 34, of Elk Grove Village, agreed: "It's more fun, and your husbands don't give you any grief about going. He said, 'Oh, don't worry. I'll take care of the kids.' " The women said, though, that there were certain limitations to having such a party.

"I couldn't invite some of my prudish neighbors," said one 37-year-old from Bartlett, also declining to use her name. "They hold little candle and basket parties. But I tell you, the other parties are boring compared to this. I've been to Tupperware parties and candle parties, but I've never seen turnout like these things."

Gurrieri, who grew up on a farm in southern Illinois, said that after moving to the Chicago area she was working full time as an office manager when she discovered Surprise Parties four years ago.

Cashing in

"After my second show, I gave my two-week notice," she said. "I cleared \$800 in 2 1/2 hours. I was making \$25,000 a year. I've tripled that income since."

Her husband, John, now helps his wife load the Jeep with products and cares for their 10-month-old daughter, Cora, on party nights.

Gurrieri also has entered management; she trains and oversees 21 saleswomen in Illinois and Indiana. An average party in the Chicago area reaps \$550, compared with \$300 elsewhere in the nation. But lest Chicagoans puff with pride, Rockford women hold the record, averaging \$1,000 a party, she said.

Are we as a nation preoccupied with sex, or what? Not necessarily, though media coverage often prompts frank discussions about sex -- from Dr. Ruth's column to sexual scandal in the White House, some experts said. "The media have been very effective at helping people become more comfortable with their sexuality and dealing with it," said Mark Schwartz, director of the Masters & Johnson Institute in St. Louis.

Schwartz had never heard of the home parties, but said they make sense because the products are hard to find. "Women have been much more likely to talk with other women about these things, so it sounds like good marketing," he said.

Gurrieri agrees that not everyone could do her job, nor would everyone want to attend her parties.

Before she bought a vehicle with tinted windows, she said, she caught some people gawking at her products in the supermarket parking lot. "I just walked on by," she said. Another time, she hit the brakes too quickly at a toll booth. All of the battery-operated appliances went off, rumbling against the plastic boxes encasing them.

"Vibrators," she said to the tollbooth operator with a shrug.

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