



EXECUTIVE FOCUS

Creating a culture of confidence: An interview with Sheryl Adkins-Green, CMO of Mary Kay Inc.



Victoria L. Crittenden ^{a,*}, Lauren Beitelspacher ^{b,*}

^a Babson College, 231 Forest Street, Babson Park, MA 02457-0310, U.S.A.

^b School of Business Administration, Portland State University



In addition to being a pioneer in the beauty industry, Mary Kay Inc. is a model for innovation, entrepreneurship, and empowerment. Mary Kay Inc. was founded in 1963 by Mary Kay Ash in Dallas, Texas, with a vision of inspiring women to realize their dreams and achieve success. Today, Mary Kay Inc. operates in more than 35 countries worldwide, with 3 million independent beauty consultants and over 200 premium products. Through this global network, women are empowered to explore lucrative careers and achieve true beauty from the inside out.

Sheryl Adkins-Green, chief marketing officer at Mary Kay Inc., helps lead the Mary Kay culture of confidence. Sheryl manages the company's global marketing strategy, brand positioning, new product development, advertising, digital marketing, product education, and customer insights to drive long-term growth. Sheryl has been recognized as one of the 25 most influential women in direct selling and as one of the 75 most powerful women in business by *Black Enterprise* magazine. She is active in non-profit communities for at-risk children and is an advocate for women suffering from domestic violence.

Mary Kay Inc. was founded with the goal of empowering women and engaging in positive change for the community. Sheryl Adkins-Green embodies

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: vcrittenden@babson.edu (V.L. Crittenden), beitel@pdx.edu (L. Beitelspacher)

that spirit with a passion for people and a passion for inspiring confidence.

Business Horizons: Welcome, Ms. Adkins-Green. Let's jump right in. Your career has spanned a variety of companies including Snapple Beverage Group, Alberto-Culver, Kraft Foods, Citibank, and now Mary Kay Inc. How would you summarize the way each company has shaped you as a leader?

Sheryl Adkins-Green: My career has focused primarily on consumers and their behaviors. When choosing a college major, I seriously considered psychology because I was very interested in people and what influenced them. I also had, from the time I received my first Barbie, an interest in fashion; at one point, I even entered a design contest sponsored by *Seventeen Magazine*. I finally decided to major in retailing. This was especially interesting to me as I had worked in retail throughout high school and loved watching the way people made decisions while shopping.

Interest in marketing and sales has always been in my DNA. The decision to go into brand management instead of an ad agency was very purposeful for me because I wanted the business responsibility of the brand, not just the marketing and sales role. When I was recruited for Citibank, it represented an opportunity to bring my marketing and sales experience to the table as the company looked to transition from a transactional/operational business to a more consumer-driven business. From a career standpoint, it was an opportunity to be responsible for a large organization of people. As I considered my career and the responsibilities I desired, financial services and banking were very important to me because the area complemented the marketing and sales experience I gained at Kraft. Citibank also gave me more in-depth financial responsibility, including the lending component of the business and risk management, as well as operational responsibility of about 35 branches: staffing, retail location selection, facilities decisions, et cetera. It was a logical continuation of building a general management skill set—an experience base—not to mention global experience. The global aspect appealed to me; for example, I was able to go on a trade mission with Governor Whitman to visit Citibank international operations in Singapore. Also at Citibank, I was able to learn by being a part of a larger global organization that really complemented my consumer product experiences at Kraft Foods. My career path was step-by-step, very well-thought-out and planned.

Noted by Direct Selling News (2014) as one of the most influential women in direct selling, you said in a profile interview: "I am very comfortable drawing on a broad set of 'hard' and 'soft' skills and abilities that have enabled me to successfully lead organizations and consistently deliver top-line and bottom-line results in a variety of consumer categories." How have your experiences and responsibilities at various companies translated into your role here at Mary Kay Inc.? Are you engaged actively with global operations?

My role now is responsible for leading brand strategy around the world, and my team is responsible for new product strategy and portfolio management. This is the core driver of growth internationally for Mary Kay. For example, when I surveyed the Mary Kay brands and tried to identify growth opportunities, I recognized that from a segmentation standpoint, the product portfolio needed to be broader. We needed additional sophisticated/premium/prestige types of products as related to positioning, price points, and technology. The TimeWise® repair line is an example of what we developed in that product segment.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there were certain markets with younger demographics and an emerging middle class that we needed to reach. We achieved this by developing some products in the Mary Kay At Play® portfolio with price points, product formulations, and packaging we believed would be meaningful to this audience. In doing so, we hoped to bring them into the franchise and concurrently have a core portfolio offering that appealed around the world to wider market segments. Providing innovative and new products to younger audiences has been an important growth and development tool for the Mary Kay business.

Almost everything we do here involves positioning and selling. Importantly, we have to learn to do this in a way that motivates people.

Motivation seems to be a keyword among Mary Kay employees; the people I've met are passionate when they speak of motivating others. To that end, it seems passion is an important part of the Mary Kay culture. What are you, personally, passionate about?

Since the company's beginning, Mary Kay has advocated the idea that 'one woman can.' One woman can transform her life and the life of others both in using our company's products and in bringing these products to market. It's this link between people

and the possibilities offered here at Mary Kay that creates the culture in which I am so at home. I love connecting people and ideas; ultimately, this is how I create opportunities to tap the potential of ideas by putting them together. The other thing I've always loved is developing people. While I'm proud of my business achievements, I'm even more proud when I am able to help people uncover potential they didn't even know they had. Leadership responsibility and a passion for people are important to me.

It sounds like Mary Kay Inc. is the perfect home for your desire to develop people.

Absolutely. I could not have designed a better, more perfect job for me.

Did you know that when you accepted the position at Mary Kay Inc.?

I sensed it, yes. I had worked in Dallas before and knew the reputation of the company. I quoted Mary Kay Ash for years because I identified with her values: what she was doing, and why. The mission and history of Mary Kay really resonated with me. But I didn't fully realize how powerful the culture is until I actually joined the company and got to live that dream, interacting with the sales force, getting to know them and hearing their stories. When I judged the Mary Kay Dream Beautiful contest in Hong Kong, I was interviewed about my dream job. I said that I am living my dream job now. If I won the lottery—though I'd probably take off for a couple of months to travel and shop—I'd come back to work at Mary Kay. I can't imagine not being a part of this organization and contributing to the success in helping other people achieve their dreams.

The great thing about Mary Kay is that we have the opportunity to make a dream come true. This dream might take the form of funding college, funding a vacation, or being able to stay home with children or take care of aging parents. The dream is not just for a day or a weekend; it represents a change for the better in an independent sales associate's life. Every day, I get to work with my team to support the independent sales force, making sure this opportunity is viable and rewarding. That's our goal.

I don't want to make it sound like we wave a magic wand and everything is perfect; it's not like that. But when you meet people and hear their

stories, you find that many who didn't have confidence in themselves gained that confidence by getting involved with Mary Kay. It's something that stays with them forever, and then they are able to use that new-found confidence in other aspects of their lives. That's very powerful. It doesn't matter if an independent sales consultant has had a Mary Kay business for 1 year, 3 years, or 30 years: they are changed for the better because of the personal growth that occurs when they get involved with Mary Kay Inc.

Since I can't be on the frontlines every day, I use social media to share ideas and connect people. I also use social media to inspire. Almost every other item I post is something that inspires me, that I want to share with others. I'll often get a little note back, saying: "I needed this so much today. Thank you." And when people pass the message on, it makes me feel good. If I help one person who then helps five others that day, I'm happy, because—again—for me, it is all about connecting people and ideas.

I think that social media can have a tremendous impact in helping women with self-efficacy. We all feel better, and thus work better, when we interact with people who have the same interests as us and who can relate to the challenges we face on a daily basis. Importantly, I think we need to celebrate ourselves more often; we, as women, do not celebrate ourselves nearly enough. A couple of years ago, I wrote a blog post on 'Losing the Wait.' Here's what I wrote:

I frequently have a great idea but then find myself 'waiting' until the right time, when most great things are achieved under adverse conditions. So my New Year's resolution became "Lose the wait!" It dawned on me that I don't need to hear my favorite song on the radio or find a four-leaf clover in order for it to be a good day to pursue a goal that's important to me. What I do need is to just get started. Instead of thinking "I'll wait and see," my motto is now, "Just start and see how far I go!" So, I'm losing WAIT, and replacing it with S.T.A.R.T.:

- S = Start smaller to achieve bigger. In other words, I break my goal down into manageable and achievable segments, instead of a big chunk that will overwhelm me.
- T = Target a specific time each day to work on my goal, even if it's only 30 minutes. I literally schedule it. I make an appointment with me and I keep it!
- A = Ask for help and accept help. So often, we're so busy doing for others that we feel that

we can't or shouldn't ask for help. Yet we all have at least one friend or family member who is willing and able to support our goal. We just need to ask!

- R = Reward my progress. It's important to celebrate each success along the way, no matter how small. Plus, who doesn't love a reason to get a new pair of shoes?
- T = Treat time as my most precious resource and make every minute count.

You often refer to experience and empowerment when discussing Mary Kay. Are the two related? How does Mary Kay empower women? What kinds of positive impacts can a woman's experiences at Mary Kay Inc. have on her life?

Empowerment starts with confidence. More tangibly, we provide women with the freedom and flexibility to have a business and to set their own goals. Being a Mary Kay independent beauty consultant gives women added control over their lives. It also helps women develop better ways to find their beauty. There is a wealth of talent, experience, and creativity at Mary Kay Inc.: here in Dallas, across our team internationally, and among our independent beauty consultants. By leveraging these different people for the diverse ideas they can contribute, we create an environment of innovation. As I've said in other contexts, innovation starts with bringing people together with external resources and new ideas to create an atmosphere for innovation. We create an atmosphere where instead of asking why, we ask why not. The confidence we instill in our people, supported day-in and day-out by our quality products, enables a spirit of innovation that encourages women to think about what one woman can do in her life. We empower women by helping them attain the confidence that will stay with them for a lifetime.

How is selling cosmetics creating confidence?

We here at Mary Kay are confronted daily with what we can do to help women attain the confidence needed to make their lives better. A story that really touched me—and one that portrays the connections among experience, empowerment, and confidence—is something Ryan Rogers shared about speaking with a group in Russia. After Ryan's presentation, a woman

came up and thanked him. She said that the Mary Kay opportunity really saved her life. Her husband had left her, which is challenging in Russia even today. She had a young son, no means of supporting him, and was considering suicide. In that period, she got invited to a Mary Kay event and she connected with the women she met there. She went on to be very successful. She said that Mary Kay literally saved her life. Something as simple as makeup and selling can have such impact.

Mary Kay is going to help women with their confidence and their self-esteem. Mary Kay Ash always said: "Now picture everyone with an invisible sign around their neck that says, 'Make me feel important; Make me feel special.'" On the company website, all executives were asked to put up their favorite quote. That is mine. Oftentimes we buy things not for the product, but for the interaction with people.

Empowering women by enabling the development of personal confidence while being a member of the C-suite at Mary Kay Inc. responsible for the company's brand sounds like a 24/7 career choice. What wakes you up at night?

Usually it's excitement about ideas and wondering how I'm going to do more, faster. I am an optimist; I'm also a pragmatic or realistic optimist. I recognize challenges and constraints, but I have faith in the Mary Kay philosophy that if you believe it, you can achieve it. The philosophy doesn't necessarily say that you can do it right now or on the scale that you'd like to, but I really do believe that all things are possible. Sometimes I use the phrase: "I'd love for XYZ to happen or to be able to do such and such. I don't know when or how we'd afford it, but I'm putting it out in the universe because that might trigger someone else's inspiration or idea." For example, I might say I want to be interviewed by Oprah. I don't know how or why that would happen, but at least I put it out there. I want Oprah to talk about Mary Kay. We know we can't just write her publicist and say: "We'd like you to interview someone at Mary Kay." But then someone might say: "Well, Oprah has these schools in Africa. Maybe Mary Kay can help." It gets people thinking about how something can happen and not get caught up in why it can't happen. That's what I love to fuel: the thinking of possibilities and innovations and the framing of important questions.

Speaking with some colleagues in Asia, I asked them to imagine if money was no object. What would they do? Launch a product in a castle or

on a private island? We're probably not going to actually buy a castle or a private island, but what would it be like to remove the barriers of our thinking? Then, all of a sudden, people can think about something as an experience.

You are featured in Valorie Burton's book Successful Women Think Differently. How do we think differently?

What Valorie noted about me, and why she wanted to include me, was my optimistic outlook. I have an optimism that all things are possible! This belief enables me to work through problems, obstacles, and challenges more effectively than most people. I won't let my team wallow in misery; that is such an energy drain and a distraction. Individuals who worry about what went wrong or what's going to happen expend considerable energy and these worries go nowhere. I want people to focus on the positive and the future. Just yesterday, I was looking at a project timetable that is running later than originally hoped for. Long story short, I said: "Instead of treating this apologetically, let's flip things and make this a teaser campaign. Let's start layering on images here, quotes here, and ask people: 'Are you curious about what's coming? Stay tuned.' Let's take the fact that we're not where we wanted to be and make lemonade out of the lemons, and use it to build a better launch." We turned a challenge into an opportunity to be better than we had even planned.

I'm successful because I can help other people see the possibilities and potential in almost any situation. I view what might be perceived as obstacles or challenges as opportunities to excel. Most businesses don't have serious, major issues. It's not the end of the world. "What are we going to do here?" is not a gender-specific question. It is an important trait of successful people. Leaders need to have a vision and perspective that allows them to see over that rock, the obstacle, to the other side while keeping their eyes on the prize rather than the challenges.

But do you believe there is anything unique to women and how we think?

I believe women have a higher level of EQ and use their emotional intelligence sensibility well. Women use their sensibilities to improve how they communicate, listen, tune in, connect, understand,

and motivate a wide variety of people and personality types. I feel that men tend to be less multidimensional. From a leadership standpoint, I believe confident women have a broader range of skills and styles to draw from. It is a part of our nature; it is something we can inherently tap into. It used to be that everyone thought female leaders had to emulate Jack Welch—hallelujah, we are past that! Now a confident woman can choose from a broader set of leadership skills.

I think being emotional has been associated with: "Oh, she's going to cry." But being emotional is really about how people see and process what is around them. I am grateful for the international experiences I've had in my career; they've helped me tremendously. I have the trust of my colleagues around the world because I am able to look at the business through their eyes, not just from the vantage point of what we're doing here in the U.S. Whether it's assessing people's body language, how my colleagues may be interacting with each other, or even how people are sitting in a room, I am able to read some of those unspoken signs and respond effectively.

Has anyone ever referred to you as intimidating?

No, not as a person. Someone might think I've done a lot and consider me unapproachable because of that, but it's not usually because of anything I've said or done personally. Maybe my credentials are intimidating. However, when people get to know me, they don't find that. I want to be accessible and approachable. I talk to everybody on the elevator. I schedule as many meetings as possible off the 13th [executive] floor because it gives me the chance to walk around, poke my head into people's offices, and connect more regularly with everyone.

What do you hope your legacy will be at Mary Kay?

I want to leave having made a meaningful and sustainable contribution to Mary Kay's legacy. I regularly refer back to the wisdom of Mary Kay Ash, whose principles and philosophies about establishing and building lasting relationships are timeless. Mary Kay Ash always talked about how her legacy would be built through the independent sales force and national directors; she actually referred to them as her daughters. It is these women who will carry on with this opportunity and this business. When I think about my role, I think about how I can support these women in fulfilling their ability

and their success to do that. I might be able to come up with campaigns, taglines, a cure for cellulite, or whatever. While all of that would be impressive, it would not sustain the Mary Kay opportunity of creating confidence in our employees and the leadership of the independent beauty consultants around the world. I believe strongly that 'one woman can.' One woman can transform her own life while becoming a beautiful success and having a huge impact

on the lives of other women. That's why I hope my legacy will be meaningfully and sustainably contributing to the success of our independent sales force and national directors.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with the readers of Business Horizons.