

the might of a mini group // for busy modern women, it's party time

Every night across Australia, women are getting together for a modern day take on the traditional party plan gathering. With champagne in hand, friends, colleagues, sisters, mothers and daughters chat and giggle their way through product presentations that provide the opportunity for time-poor women to combine two of their favourite past times – shopping and getting together with the girls.

And what a potent combination it is proving to be. Party plan sales are now a big business generating more than \$600 million in revenue each year, providing a living for up to 250,000 consultants who work after-hours to supplement their income from a full-time job, or to add to the family income if they are stay-at-home mothers.

A far cry from the traditional Tupperware party, the modern day party plan industry is being driven by the emergence of a wide range of new direct selling organisations whose products include lingerie, jewellery, fragrances, cosmetics, books, skincare, toys for kids (and adults), cleaning products and kitchen utensils, to name just a few.

Les Dell, the CEO of The Direct Selling Association of Australia (DSAA), says party plans have come a long way since the days of domination by US giants Tupperware, Amway, Avon, Mary Kay and NutriMetics which run network marketing schemes. "These days party plans are more popular than ever. Over the past decade they have been the engine room of the direct sales industry. Consumers are recognising the convenience of home shopping and the ever-expanding range of products."



Laced with Success

Sue Whyte is one of the new breed of party plan entrepreneurs who have transformed the dynamics of the direct selling industry. Her lingerie business, Intimo, is sold through party plan, and is widely recognised as one of the fastest growing brands in the industry.

During her 20-year stint in fashion wholesaling and retailing, Whyte had observed that women who were shaped more like Marilyn Monroe than Kate Moss were missing out on style and colour. Bras for the better endowed tended to be beige and frumpy.

Sue put her talents to work to come up with a special range of designs catering for all sizes and launched Intimo Lingerie in September 1995, after sourcing fabrics from across the globe and special manufacturers in China. Wanting to avoid the 'pretence' involved in some aspects of retailing and the impersonal nature of cash 'n' carry – 'no interaction or advice and no relationship-building' – she decided buyer-friendly party plans were the marketing solution.

That was a smart decision. Eleven years down the track and annual turnover is around \$22 million, with 1100 consultants, 53 staff, and operations in Australia and New Zealand reaching more than 5000 women each week.

All Intimo Lingerie consultants are female, many of whom are young mums who appreciate the flexibility a party plan career offers.

Convenience and Convergence

The resurgence in the direct selling industry speaks to two desires of today's busy, time-poor woman juggling the conflicting demands of a career, marriage, friends, motherhood and other pressures. Convenience and convergence.

Above all else, women are factoring convenience into their purchase shopping list. Gone are the days when women have hours to spend browsing through a shopping centre (when we do, it is now generally classified as an indulgence or special occasion rather than the norm). As a result, online retailers are experiencing unprecedented growth.

Australasia's leading direct selling fashion company, EziBuy, has seen its online business triple in the last year.

Combining shopping with a networking experience is also proving popular, as women value the opportunity to shop while connecting with other women more and more.

As a result, the mini-group dynamic is extending into other areas such as insurance and financial services. Masu Group, a Sydney-based financial planning group has launched a series of events targeting busy professional women. *A Man is not a Financial Plan* is a two hour event where women are invited to attend, enjoy cocktails, networking and hear a low-key, female-friendly presentation on financial planning. The presenter is female and attendees are showered with goodie bags that include cosmetics samples and other take-home gifts.

Even smaller retailers are supplementing their shopfront sales channel with direct selling activities. Barbara Millar, proprietor of Designers Direct fashion store on the Sunshine Coast has added party plan to her retail and online channels, a move that is paying dividends.

"The incremental cost of running a few parties a month, on top of the cost of the shop and website is minimal," she says. She adds that the party plan format often generates additional shop and online sales. "They now seem to feed off each other and our customers appreciate the convenience of choice."

It seems that with the ever increasing demands on our time, products and services that offer convenience and convergence as part of their brand experience will be rewarded.

For more information, see
Intimo Lingerie – intimo.com.au

EziBuy – ezibuy.com.au

Masu Group – masu.com.au

Designers Direct – designersdirect.com.au

Direct Selling Association – dsaa.asn.au