



When you're 30 years old and bankrupt, a mom to two small children and living with your in-laws because the bank took your house, you need to take matters into your own hands - fast. For Ellen Lewis, beating the recession meant reaching for Tupperware.

Lewis admits she was hesitant at first to work with the 60-year old direct selling company. "I'm younger," she tells me. "I really didn't feel like I could make money in Tupperware. It's one of those things you hear people talking about, but I thought the market was surely saturated."

She and her husband, residents of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, had declared bankruptcy in late 2007 after their coffee shop went under. "Am I really going to be a Tupperware lady?" Lewis asked herself. If she couldn't sell lattes, would plastic pie containers be any easier? But time was of the essence. "We needed to make up a lot of money fast," she says. So rather than waiting to get hired elsewhere, she invested an initial \$100 or so in Tupperware products and signed on as a Tupperware 'consultant.'

After teaming up with a Tupperware mentor and rehearsing sales pitches in front of her dog, Lewis was on her way to selling up a storm. Six months into the direct-selling gig, she was earning \$3,000 a month in commission by hosting Tupperware parties for neighbors and friends. She's since moved up the ranks and become a director, meaning she oversees a team of other salespeople and earns commission for not only her sales, but her overall team's sales as well - something Lewis likes to call "double-dipping." She's also been awarded a company car.

Today Lewis and her husband, who's also landed back on his feet with a job in retail, are slowly but surely recovering from bankruptcy and foreclosure. They've moved out of their in-laws' house and into their own rental. With Lewis' flexible schedule their kids don't require daycare, either, and she can watch them on her own. "The flexibility is worth its weight in gold," she says. "It's winter and my daughter's been sick for a week and a half. I can be here [for her] where I want to be...I can pick and choose the moments that are important to me and my family."

You hear inspiring stories like Lewis' and you wonder if direct sales is all its hyped up to be. Can one actually make a living selling Tupperware, Herbalife or Avon products around the neighborhood and online? It's a booming industry that brought in about \$28 billion in 2009, according to the Direct Sales Association - although the same report shows sales figures have slipped over the last couple of years, even as more sellers entered the industry.

Still: With high unemployment, the industry can help motivated workers make immediate money. And some sellers, like Lewis, are lucky enough to fall into a gig that they actually enjoy.

You don't have to be great to get started, but you do have to get started to be great!

Wondering if it's for you? Here are some questions to consider before making the leap into direct sales either full or part time.

1. Would I Buy It?

To make this work, you need to believe in what you are selling - both the hype and history of the product. As Lewis learned quickly, "products don't sell themselves." A bowl is a bowl is a bowl, she says; be sure to pick a company whose products will inspire you to teach potential buyers why *this* particular bowl is different and worth their money.

2. Do I Enjoy Face-to-Face Work?

While many direct-selling jobs can partly be done over the phone and by computer, you need to be comfortable striking up conversations - often with strangers. In fact, 78% of sales in the industry is conducted face to face, according to the DSA. Lewis says she was a terrible public speaker at first. What helped was thinking about her "presentations" as conversations: "My sister gave me some advice, suggesting I sit down at my first dozen Tupperware parties, instead of standing in front of everyone." She was able to get more comfortable as time went on. This year she's been asked by the company to speak in front of 1,000 Tupperware reps.

3. What Are My Goals?

It's OK if you're not too ambitious. Lewis earns thousands a month, but others earn just a couple hundred dollars here and there. If your direct sales gig is just for supplemental income, that's fine - but make sure you're clear on what you want to get out of the gig, and what it will take to get there.

4. Did I Do My Due Diligence?

There are literally thousands of routes you can take in the direct sales world - and some, sadly, are scams. If you're asked to pay too much upfront to be a part of the company, let that be a red flag. Also make sure whatever company you choose to work with agrees to buy back all (or at least a majority) of your unsold products. According to Direct Selling 411, if you end up quitting the business, legitimate companies will usually buy back any unsold products. The DSA Code of Ethics also requires buy-backs for at least 90% of your original cost.

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