Driven by instinct—and sheer will—Lisa Madson has steered her way from farm girl to store clerk, to the top of a Mary Kay sales empire

By Ellen Williams-Masson
It was 1986 and hair was big, shoulder pads were broad and Technicolor makeup à la Cyndi Lauper was the height of fashion. The country was climbing out of a recession, but for Lisa Madson, caught balancing two young children with part-time jobs and her husband’s salary as a Christian schoolteacher, the American dream had turned into a nightmare.

“I was sick and tired of being sick and tired of being broke,” Madson says. “I remember not even knowing there was a recession, because when you have no money and nothing in the stock market, you don’t really pay attention to it.”

Madson had recently lost her job and employee discount when Gimbels Department Store in Madison closed. “My children were the best-dressed poor kids in the world!” she says. To make ends meet, she found herself working part-time behind the counter of a local discount store for $70 a week, sporting a smock embroidered with the name “Vicky.”

Time was ripe for a change.

Twenty-three years later, Madson is an independent national sales director for Mary Kay, Inc., and has cashed in more than $7 million in commissions on team member sales. A member of the Mary Kay Inner Circle, she is in the top one percentile of the company’s global sales force in terms of sales and recruitment, and is one of only 500 people in the world to reach national status in the company’s 46-year history.

Madson’s cadre of 500 independent beauty consultants and sales directors was the top-ranking personal unit in the organization for seven consecutive years prior to her becoming a national sales director in 2000. Her personal unit is now ineligible for ranking, but Madson’s national sales area of 6,000 team members ranked No. 5 this year.

“My personal sales unit just finished our 18th year in a row of $1 million in sales,” Madson says. “We achieved over $2 million in sales three times, and no other unit in the history of the company has done that.”

The two-time college dropout has been quoted in Fortune Magazine and cited in college marketing textbooks. And despite the current recession, Madson had her highest sales month ever this past June, raking in $83,000 in commissions for herself that month plus her annual bonus.

“When I began my business in 1986, my motivation was the money because we had none, but over the years my motivation has changed,” Madson says.

“I absolutely love what I do. I love watching women start their own businesses in Mary Kay and then see them grow and change, and become confident and stronger individuals. Mentoring and guiding other women to success is really what motivates me on a daily basis.”

The path from mislabeled smock to power suit and heels began with a smile and an offer she couldn’t refuse.

Growing up on a dairy farm in Ft. Atkinson, Madson enjoyed an “awesome” childhood that taught her the value of hard work and a close family. The youngest of four siblings, she credits her parents, Lloyd and Phyllis Mack, for modeling a staunch work ethic.

“Over the years, I know some have criticized me for working so hard at Mary Kay, and I just smile about it because I grew up thinking that work was a good thing by watching my parents,” Madson says. “You don’t get something for nothing—you have to work to achieve things. I will always be grateful to both my parents
because I attribute much of my success today to the example they gave me."

Vivacious and outgoing, Madson was never tagged “most likely to succeed” in school. Her business acumen developed over the years—but she always radiated the fun-loving personality that has helped her scale the heights of cosmetics sales.

Madson says she was hardly a glam girl in high school. “I was ‘least likely to sell Mary Kay,’” she says with a laugh. “I wore so little makeup that if you look at my wedding pictures, you couldn’t even tell I had it on.”

Madson met her future husband, Dan, in a carpool on their first day at Lakeside Lutheran High School, where he says that she was the life of the party.

“Lisa was always the center of attention no matter which group she was in, and she had fun people around her,” Dan says.

The two friends began dating during their senior year and, upon graduating, set off to Dr. Martin Luther College (now Martin Luther College) with a shared goal of becoming Christian school-teachers. There was only one glitch in their plan for living happily ever after: “I wanted to be a Christian schoolteacher all the way until I got to college and found out I didn’t like school, so I quit,” Madson says.

A subsequent year at Madison Area Technical College didn’t suit her any better, so, after she and Dan married in 1981, Madson fell back on “Plan C.” Dan had transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to finish his teaching degree and was, by that time, working at a private school in Madison.

“I told my parents when we had our first child in 1983 that I was going to stay home and raise her, and that Dan and I were going to live on love,” Madson says. “Have you tried it? One week after she was born, I knew that Dan’s once-a-month check was only going to go so far.”

Madson began typing up reports for a rural real estate appraiser—a “wonderful boss” who allowed her flexible hours and the freedom to bring her daughter to work. Reality was proving grittier than Madson had imagined, however, and the part-time secretarial salary wasn’t enough to bridge the financial gap between their incomes and the needs of their growing family.

“It was December of 1985, Christmas time, and we had two kids and couldn’t afford many things,” Madson says. “My father did very well farming, so financially we never had to worry about anything when I was a child. I did not enjoy being broke, because I’d never been in that situation.”

Madson took a second part-time job in retail sales, first for Gimbel’s and then for the store that dubbed her “Vicky.” She was at a local copy shop making copies for her secretarial job when a pink car pulled into the parking lot. Madson exchanged smiles with the driver, Kathleen Koclanes, who Madson recognized as her Mary Kay beauty consultant, but Koclanes didn’t recognize her.

“I bought so little makeup from her that she didn’t know who I was,” Madson says. “But because I smiled at her, she said to me, ‘You’d be so good at doing what I do.’”

Madson’s “Thanks, but no thanks” response to Koclanes’ sales pitch later became a tentative “maybe” after learning more about the company’s marketing plan.

Teetering on the cusp of commitment, Madson began polling friends and family for their opinions.

“I was 26 years old at the time, and I had never [even] gotten pregnant without calling my parents to see if they thought it was good timing,” Madson confesses. “They couldn’t believe I was even thinking about doing something like this—my dad wouldn’t even talk to me about it, he was so upset. My husband said I could do it.
but not to expect any help from him, and a good friend who had sold Mary Kay before told me not to do it, so I almost didn’t.”

Susan Pankow, now an executive senior sales director for Mary Kay, remembers the call she got from Madson and the advice she gave her childhood friend. The two had been school classmates and college roommates, and Pankow was teaching elementary school in the Philadelphia area at the time.

“I said, ‘What, are you nuts? You couldn’t even sell band candy in high school,’” Pankow admits. “I told her there was no money to be made in Mary Kay—I had tried it for a few months. I never went to training or a meeting, but I was the ‘expert.’”

After soliciting the accumulated wisdom of everyone she knew, Madson tuned out the (almost) universal disapproval and within 24 hours signed the contract that launched her Mary Kay odyssey.

Although she admits her initial decision to sell cosmetics was “impulsive,” Madson says it didn’t take long for Dan and the rest of her family to see the pink-tinged light.

“After one week of selling the product—I went out and sold, [what was] in 1986, $682 worth of product—my husband started to load my car the very next week, and he has been extremely supportive ever since,” she says.

Many working mothers would agree that having a supportive spouse can mean everything.

“Even though I was teaching during most of the time Lisa was building her business, I [did what I could] to give her the freedom to work as hard as she could,” Dan says. “I had the kids a lot and did a lot around the house to free up her time to build her business.”

Mary Kay is a direct-selling company and sales consultants pocket a 100 percent markup on product they sell. For those who “share the opportunity” and recruit consultants to join their team, they also receive a percentage of team sales as commission. Building and inspiring her powerhouse of a team has been key to Madson’s success. And her first team member was her old friend, Pankow.

“I couldn’t stand it—she was having fun and making money,” Pankow says. “I didn’t want to get left behind.” Within months after signing their contracts, both women resigned their regular jobs to focus on their Mary Kay businesses.

Twenty–two years later, Pankow earns nine times her former schoolteacher salary and is on target to become Madson’s first national sales director offspring in 2011. Pankow describes Madson as a visionary who is able to “paint that vision of success for other women.”

“She teases me all the time that we’d both still be broke if she had listened to me,” Pankow says with a laugh.

Madson’s rise was meteoric—“Lisa just strolled right to the top and held that position for a long time before moving up to national,” Pankow says—but Madson soon discovered that financial success comes with its own challenges.

“First I didn’t have any money, and then once I had it I enjoyed spending it a lot, so I had to learn how to be appropriate with that too,” Madson says. “That first week [of sales] financially changed our [lives]. We were in such a paycheck–to–paycheck situation. Then I stayed consistent, and as I built my team those commissions grew, and now I’m in a position I never dreamt I would be in.”

Dan, who retired from teaching at the age of 42 to work with Lisa, as well as train for the Ironman Wisconsin triathlon, has written a humor column and several books including “A Woman With a Man Beside Her,” a humorous look at life as a Mary Kay husband.

“It’s been really nothing short of amazing,” Dan says. “We’ve traveled the world together, and we have friends all over the world from our contacts at Mary Kay. We’ve been able to put all three of our kids through college and have a comfortable lifestyle. Every day is a motivating, exciting day.”

Madson calls 28 years of marriage one of her greatest personal
Above: Madson and husband Dan with founder Mary Kay Ash in Bermuda during a 1993 top sales director trip.

Right: Madson meeting with Ash after the founder was not able to attend events due to health issues.

Left: Madson and husband Dan with Pankow picking up Pankow’s first car 20 years ago.

Below: Lisa with her son and current Mary Kay vehicle.

Above: Madson in her home office, showing her awards and accomplishments.

Right: Madson on stage with her family being crowned “Queen of Unit Sales” in 2000.

Below: Lisa and husband Dan on a trip to Switzerland.
achievements. “In today’s world, that’s an accomplishment in itself,” she notes, adding that she has had good role models. “My parents are 81 years old and just celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary.”

Her other greatest achievement? Her children. The Madsons have three grown children. Rachel, 26, is working on a master’s degree in counseling at UW-Milwaukee; Jonathan, 24, is a volunteer firefighter who earned his degree in fire science at MATC, and Kyle, 21, is a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

“Not only do I love my children, I also like them,” Madson says. “That’s more important than anything, I think, just having that good relationship with my kids.”

Sean Key, vice president of Sales Force Intelligence at Mary Kay, has known Madson for 14 years and says she has “always had her priorities in order, with her faith and her family before her career.”

“Lisa never sacrificed time with her family to do her business, but she was also very disciplined in treating business time like business time,” Key says. “She had a schedule the family agreed upon; when it was time to work her business, she put 100 percent into that, and when her family needed her, of course she put 100 percent into that.”

How she managed it all? Sheer strength and determination, which she now passes on to those whom she guides along the Mary Kay path.

Laughter and a sense of sisterhood warm the Darlington, Wis., conference room where a crowd of the Mary Kay faithful, including Madson, have gathered for the debut of newly minted sales director Judy Berget.

“Lisa is so very caring, and she knows you by your first name right away,” Berget says. “She treats you like you are the only person in the room, and I really consider her a very dear friend.”

Madson’s appearance at their debut is added incentive for any consultant earning her sales director’s jacket during the nationwide challenge Madson issued to her 6,000-member sales team at the beginning of the year. Promotions offering trips and prizes are some of the ways Madson exhorts her sales team to greater success, but the most favored perk cited at the debut: The opportunity to spend time with Madson.

“She loves to spend time developing relationships with her consultants and directors—so we work to earn time with her,” future executive senior sales director Amy Hanifl says.

Both personally and professionally, Madson strives to be there for her team. Madson is the third person Hanifl called when her husband passed away last January, and she says that Madson “brings a sense of hope to any situation.”

“Lisa is just the perfect national sales director for me,” Hanifl says. “She understands you, she doesn’t push you, but she does help you dream bigger. Her enthusiasm and big thinking are contagious.”

That innate ability to touch and inspire others has been key in turning her family’s financial nightmares into the American dream, and Madson never loses sight of the people around her while focusing on her own goals.

“My dearest dream for my business is to become the No. 1 independent national sales director in Mary Kay,” Madson says. “By helping a lot of women achieve their dreams, that dream will be fulfilled. You can’t get to the top without helping others achieve their dreams, too.”