

## R.I. sex-toy business connects women with their inner goddess

By Cynthia Needham

The Providence Journal, October 10, 2005

When the invitation came three years ago, Mary Beth Berrien was horrified.

Would she like to attend a sex-toy party?

“I was mortified,” she admits.

But a friend was hosting and, frankly, it had been a long year stuck inside with the kids. A little arm-twisting later, there she was, a mother of three, buying “sensual aids.”

Today, Berrien, 33, is among the top salespeople at Athena’s Home Novelties, the East Coast’s largest sex-toy company, headquartered in Woonsocket.

“If buying these toys was good,” she says, “selling them is even better.”

By now you may have heard something of this Tupperware-style “girls night in” – the ladies from the office crowd into someone’s living room, guzzling pinot grigio, while a saleswoman gives a PG-rated demonstration of X-rated items from \$6 “love lickers” to \$130 vibrators.

Guests snicker their way through the show and, a few blush-inducing purchases later, everyone heads home.

Erotic books, edible oils. You name it. Athena’s is selling it in a family room near you -- \$6 million dollars of it last year alone.

And if the women attending these parties surprise you, the women running them might, too. They aren’t vixens in leather, but middle-aged wives, hip-looking 20-somethings and church-goers like Berrien, ho say they love the idea of serving as sex advisers.

“At Athena’s, it’s not just about selling products and making a profit, it’s about empowering women and changing lives,” President and “Mother Goddess” Jennifer Jolicoeur said recently on a tour of Athena’s honey-scented warehouse in Woonsocket.

“There’s a spiritual spin to it. Yes, we’re selling adult products, but we’re doing it in a way that women want. Sexy doesn’t have to be Pamela Anderson sexy. It’s about slowing down and finding the goddess within.”

That starts with feeling good about yourself.

So while Athena’s 1,000 salespeople (known as goddesses) arrive at parties laden with nipple nibblers and adult videos, they also sell bath salts and aromatherapy – their top-selling product is a pheromone-based perfume. They encourage customers to embrace their inner spirit, not their inner dominatrix.

“When you feel better about yourself, you’re going to want to have sex. That’s a biologically proven fact,” Jolicoeur says. “And if you’re having great sex, you’ll feel fulfilled in a way that makes you walk out that bedroom door and be a better parent.”

Jen Jolicoeur doesn’t fit the stereotype of a sex merchant. Married to the man she calls her “elementary school sweetheart,” she sits behind a mahogany desk crammed with her kids’ artwork.

Jolicoeur launched Athena’s in 1997 out of the trunk of her beat-up pink Geo Tracker with a business partner she has since bought out. But her entrepreneurial fantasy started almost a decade earlier. Back then she was a social 16-year-old whose dad pushed her into the secretarial program at Woonsocket High School so she’d have some “practical skills.”

Jolicoeur spent her lunch hours doling out sex advice to her girlfriends in the cafeteria.

“I don’t know what it is, but I never felt uncomfortable talking about sex,” she says.

Her 1989 yearbook nickname? “Peniologist.”

After graduation, she landed an administrative job in the media department at nearby CVS headquarters.

But it was a chance encounter in the mailroom that she says changed her life. An old friend remembered her lunchroom “sexpertise” from high school and invited her to her first sex-toy party.

One night and she was hooked.

She signed up to work weekends for the company, but found that she had trouble with the crass, chain-smoking image its salespeople projected.

Sex, she thought, should be about passion, not Marlboros.

At age 25, using a \$3,000 loan from her “slightly horrified” grandfather, this self-described “girl from Woonsocket without a college education” quit the CVS job and started Athena’s.

“She’s carved out a real niche,” Salve Regina University lecturer and cultural anthropologist Debra Curtis says of Jolicoeur. “She’s taken a marginalized, tabooed subject and she’s helped to mainstream it. She’s bringing these products into women’s homes in a way that’s legitimate.”

Two years ago, Curtis published a study in the journal *Cultural Anthropology* that looked at the phenomenon of sex-toy parties. She based her study in part on Athena’s, after attending dozens of its parties.

“Jen’s success has a lot to do with her marketing. It’s done in such a way that it’s palatable to the sensibilities of middle-class women,” Curtis said.

Athena’s goddesses are instructed to dress conservatively and forgo naughty language. Some boast about how their own relationships were rekindled by a few inexpensive toys.

It’s a style that resonates with customers, who are then allowed to make purchases in private.

“In the 1970s, sexuality was something illicit. It was an XXX store with funny lighting and men in trench coats and no one to tell you what these products meant. Now it’s about sitting around, drinking Chardonnay with people just like you, people who share your perspective,” Curtis said.

Lemme guess, the last time you mentioned bondage tape, your man went to Home Depot, right?”

Inside the Woonsocket headquarters, a group of trainees laugh at goddess Amy Labrecque’s sales pitch. They’ve just learned rule number one at Athena’s – to sell big, you’ve got to remember your audience.

With so much talk about feminine spirituality, it’s easy to forget that Athena’s is a for-profit venture, and a successful one. Since January, it has recruited 350 new salespeople, and top-sellers clear \$70,000 or more a year.

Take Sheri Dever, 41, a no-nonsense businesswoman with a snappy personal style. She works part time running about three parties a week in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Her sales average about \$6,500 a month; her profits often top \$3,000.

“I’ve worked in sales for years and trust me, this place is unusual,” Dever said during a break in training. “When they say they care about their customers, they also care about their employees. In sales, that’s so rare. They offer incentives and all kinds of support – financial and emotional, you name it.”

“When a company grows as fast as [Athena’s] has, maintaining a message, much less remembering your employees’ names, can be difficult,” says Loren Levy, vice president of Classic Erotica, a California-based sex-toy manufacturer that works with home-party companies nationwide. “At Athena’s, the message comes first and the sales come second. That’s why they’re successful.”

Gauging success in the sex-toy industry is difficult. It’s still a relatively new field, meaning that there are no trade publications or market analysts to track growth. “Home-party” associations, which follow industry trends, have barred sex-toy companies like Athena’s from membership. And many companies operate only on the Internet, making them even harder to monitor, Levy says.

It should come as no surprise that New England isn’t exactly a hotbed of sex-toy parties, either. By most estimates, there are about 15 to 20 companies here; Athena’s being both the biggest and the oldest.

Nationwide, Levy and others interviewed figure that Athena’s ranks in the top 20. Companies like Ohio-based Pure Romance and San Francisco’s Passion Parties are far bigger, employing several thousand salespeople around the country. Pure Romance, whose sales topped \$30 million last year, has relied on celebrity clients like singer Jessica Simpson to help popularize its brand.

“Those companies are marketing machines. They’re literally throwing millions at marketing,” Levy says. “Now consider that Athena’s doesn’t do TV advertisements or many print ads and they’ve still recruited 350 new goddesses in the last few months. That kind of growth is amazing.”

At its bustling warehouse on Winter Street, a dozen employees stock shelves with Coochy Shave Cream and Tickler Whips, while others, soothed by the scent of lavender, work at hand-carved desks. The beat from a company kickboxing class in a back room filters through the airy space.

Last fall, Athena’s outgrew its first home, relocating its \$1 million in merchandise and 30 in-house employees to the spacious warehouse that’s nestled between blighted mills in a not-yet-redeveloped part of the city.

For Woonsocket, Athena’s is something of a mixed blessing. On one hand, it is the sort of successful business that Woonsocket actively recruits as it tries to break rank with old economic stereotypes. But behind the classy veneer, it’s still a sex-based business – a trade that officials have tried to eradicate as they work on revamping Woonsocket’s image.

In 2002, the relationship between the two soured briefly when the City Council set up a subcommittee to investigate whether Athena’s was selling pornography or worse from its storefront location.

City Solicitor Joseph P. Carroll said the council was unable to find any evidence of so-called “zoning” violations, and Woonsocket officials describe the current relationship with Athena’s as “very amicable.”

But Jolicoeur called the investigation a “painful” time that fractured the company’s relationship with the city.

Still, she'd rather focus on the future than dwell on the past. So far this year, Athena's has done \$6 million in sales. By year's end, they hope to break \$8 million.

In the coming months, Jolicoeur said Athena's also intends to boost its presence in western states by actively adding new goddesses.

What it won't do is expand its brand to men. While competitors tap the "guys' night in" concept, Athena's plans to stay away from all-male crowds.

"I don't think men have arrived yet to a point where they want to sit around in a circle, eat brownies and drink wine and learn about sex in a nurturing way. But when they are ready, we'll be here," Jolicoeur said after a company meeting.

Athena's does offer a growing number of couples and co-ed parties, which they say is consistent with their "relationship enhancement" image.

"For now, we don't need to expand into areas we're not comfortable in," Jolicoeur added. "What we've got, it's working."

As she spoke, she spotted a group of goddesses clustered nearby, sharing sales tips and a few laughs about their children.

Her smile brightened and she made her way toward them.

"It's really working," she said.