

Scouting for Profits

SWEET GIRLS PLUS SWEET COOKIES EQUALS SERIOUS BUSINESS

My daughter sat on our front steps in the chilly winter weather, resting for a minute. She and I had been hard at work for two hours that morning. Our mission? Sell as many Girl Scout cookies as possible. Of course, we were already familiar with our product, having been strong supporters for years. We knew the cookies weren't hard to sell. Not many people can say no to sugar—nor the girls selling them, who are just as sweet with their smiles and brown or green uniforms.

What we didn't know until a few weeks before is that selling the cookies is serious business. To be approved, our troop's "cookie mom" and I had to attend a mandatory training session. We had to learn about the different cookies, perfect the process of filling out the forms and master the computerized system used for our final orders. We were also encouraged to have our troops earn cookie "patches." To do so, they had to complete a handful of activities demonstrating their knowledge about the cookies and sales organization. In addition, we were all invited to a Cookie Kick-off the evening before the sale began. There we perfected our cookie mastery and sales techniques and voted for our favorite cookie (if memory serves, Thin Mints won, but I voted for the Tagalongs.)

Every step of our training, we were reminded of the start date. And by that, I mean the exact time. It was 9 a.m., the second Saturday of January. Not Friday night, when the Cookie Kick-off was held and we'd be given our order forms. Not the follow morning when we woke up with the sun. And not even 8:59 a.m. Saturday. We were warned—if we attempted to take any orders before the official start we would be ratted out, the coordinators would take action and we would be banned from selling. So many



girls were vying for their own profits (the troops received 20 percent of total sales to spend as they liked); everything had to be fair.

Wanting to be good Scouts—and well, being kinda scared of the cookie coordinators—we followed all the rules. We stepped out of our house at 9 a.m. and knocked on our next door neighbor's house. She kindly bought some cookies, despite the fact she had just started a New Year's diet. (Why, oh why, do the Girl Scouts choose January to start the sale and then continue into February, in competition with all the Valentine goodies? Yes, they do sell a lot of cookies, but would they be even more successful in March? May? September?) I noticed, however, that my daughter kept looking at the door. Our neighbor was slowly filling out the order form and slowing writing her check. I started tapping my foot. The Kirk girls were thinking the same thing. Time was ticking away. Precious minutes were being lost. Any advantage we had by starting right at 9 a.m. was slipping away. We needed to knock on more doors ... and fast.

Somehow, we got out the door before too much time passed, and we sped up the process at each stop. No need for a full name on the order form, only write down the house number, and we could share the total due when we came to collect the money. Swiftness was the name of the game, because around every corner was another Brownie or Girl Scout. In our block of about 40 houses, we had counted seven other girls in a troop. All but one had sold cookies before; they knew the ropes, the short cuts and most important, which neighbors had a weakness for shortbread, chocolate, mint, peanut butter and caramel. We needed to make speed, our only possible advantage, work for us.

Our only mistake? Getting hungry. That's when we stopped on our steps and shared a quick bite of an apple. We were satisfied with

our efforts and nearly rejuvenated when my daughter spotted her—a fellow Girl Scout who was a year younger but with longer legs and a year of experience as a cookie seller. She was walking toward the neighbor's house straight across the street from us. Right in front of us, as we sat there.

My eyes grew big, and my jaw dropped. We hadn't experienced this type of face-to-face competition yet. While we had seen two other Scouts earlier, they respectfully kept their distance.

"Oh no you don't!" my then 7-year-old screamed.

She dropped the apple, grabbed her order form and pen and sprinted across the street, making it to the door 10 steps ahead of the other girl.

Never have I been more proud of my daughter.

And more ashamed of myself.

Fortunately, the other grownup in this scenario, my neighbor, actually acted like an adult and graciously bought cookies—from both girls. **HRM**