



Fantasia Home Parties sales representative Sandi Buccì shows off some lingerie during a party in her North Brunswick home.

Christian Jennines, left, and Mary Lou Carty share a laugh about the secret compartment pillow being passed around at the party where lotions, feathers and massage gadgets are among the many marital aids sold.

## At-home erotica sales parties enter the mainstream

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STAFF WRITER

Sandi Buccì stands before a living roomful of women and wraps a white apron around herself as she instructs her guests to grab catalogs and order forms from the coffee table.

On this bitter January night, the inviting scene in her North Brunswick home screams typical home-sales-party atmosphere: A scooped-out pumpernickel loaf filled with spinach dip sits at the center of the snack table, and wooden knickknacks that read "Home Sweet Home" hang above the front door.

But instead of marketing Tupperware, Pampered Chef products or gourmet pantry items, Buccì is selling a commodity more coveted than anything you could use in your kitchen — sex appeal.

She is one of more than 200 representatives for Fantasia Home Parties, a pioneer in the erotica in-home sales business. The company's premise — to provide women with a Tupperware-style presentation of lingerie, lotions, marital aids and other bedroom toys in a private, home setting — was considered somewhat salacious when Rina Valan-Hudson founded Fantasia in Roselle 20 years ago.

"When we first started, people thought we were crazy. The bankers were not conducive to us at all," says Valan-Hudson, who has since moved her company's home base to Kresgeville, Pa.

But after a stint as a vice president for a similar start-up, Valan-Hudson saw a niche that needed to be filled. So she maxed out her credit cards, borrowed \$10,000 from her mother and invested in her own stock of crotchless lingerie, fruit-flavored lubricants, vibrators and other sensual items to sell.

It looks like her gut didn't steer her wrong. In 2002, Fantasia raked in almost \$2 million, and last year sales spiked to \$3 million — proof that these parties attract the mainstream rather than porn stars, as evidenced by the multigenerational collection of women in Buccì's living room.

"It's a perfect marriage, because women do like to

shop like this," Valan-Hudson says. "We really are collective shoppers. We go to the mall together. We discuss things. We'll share tips and stories, it's kind of a social experience.

"(The types of products) we sell are not conducive for us to do that, to go out and socially shop for."

Most of the stigma associated with these products has dissipated since Valan-Hudson started in this business, she says, but pockets of negative sentiment still exist. Just last month, Joanne Webb, a representative for Passion Parties, was arrested on obscenity charges by two undercover police officers in Texas. She faces up to one year in prison.

"I actually spoke to the president of Passion Parties," Valan-Hudson says. "What I believe happened is that in Texas, if you carry I think it's more than six or 12 of a particular item that's considered a marital aid, then you're considered a distributor, and that's against the law in Texas."

Adult book stores and shops are able to circumvent that law by presenting similar items as novelty items.

"You can probably buy guns in Texas, but if you sell vibrators you're in big trouble. Go figure."

The isolated incident hasn't hampered Fantasia, which has representatives in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut and Maryland (with expansion efforts starting in the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida). There are 25 to 50 home parties hosted in New Jersey every week.

At that rate, you'd think Fantasia, like other companies of its ilk, would run out of "virgins," (so to speak) to sell to. But many women who've experienced these home parties return over and over to check out new products or enjoy a girl's night in — as is the case at Buccì's shindig.

### Better than Amway

Anything but the shy type, Buccì is able to initiate discussions about intimate subjects — which helps when you're waving around a 7-inch, battery-operated purple phallus or explaining creams intended to speed things up or slow things down in bed.

"One thing I would like all men to know," Buccì says. "They think I go into a stranger's home, and we take our clothes off and we try (the toys). NO!"

The spunky mother of five grown children became a part-time Fantasia rep two years ago after attending a show. "I saw how much (the representative) made, and I said, 'Shoot, I can do this,'" Buccì says with a laugh.

The full-time receptionist pulls in about an extra \$4,000 a year through Fantasia — working anywhere from one party a month to one a week.

"I sold Amway. I worked in real estate. I worked in a liquor store..." Buccì says, ticking each past part-time occupation off on her fingers.

"And nothing gives her as much pleasure," her friend and the party's host Mary Lou Carty cuts in.

"And money," Buccì adds, "as this."

But it's not just about the money, she says, it's about giving women the opportunity to empower themselves, express their sexuality and "enhance, not improve" their relationships.

"It gives you that little twinkle in your eye," she says.

### 'Oohs' and 'ahs'

Buccì holds up a black lacy number to a reactions of "oohs" and "ahs."

"That's what you're going to look like," she says, referring everyone to the curvy catalog model.

"Does the body come with it?" quips guest Barbara Arhakos, riling up the women.

Some of the items are tame. Others are crotchless. The "Naughty Net," a fishnet body stocking with two cut-outs north of the equator, "could make for an interesting dinner date," Buccì says with a wink.

Silky, slinky selections are well-received by the women, who comment out loud as they finger the goods being passed around the room:

"This is so elegant."

"That's hot."

"I'm going to spend all my money!"

As enticing as that sounds, Buccì will be the first to tell you all the toys in the world won't save a relationship and warns that women shouldn't "make them be your only sexual contact."

After delivering her humorous sales pitch in plenty of living rooms, Buccì says she often finds herself assuming the role of sex therapist when women meet with her privately to place their orders.

"Women actually think you're a Dr. Ruth," she says. "There are a lot of questions."

Most are about the products or suggestions on how to introduce them to a mate, but there are others that raise red flags.

"There are people who don't have sexual contact with their own husbands for several years, and they do not talk about it, which is very strange," she says.

Instead of peddling false promises, Buccì offers free but sometimes-life-altering advice: Go home and talk to your partner.

### Play time

The products and Buccì's playful pitch keep the women in stitches.

"I wish my Thursday nights were all like this," says young mother Christian Jennines between gasps of laughter.

These evenings usually include healthy doses of wisecracking and giggling — OK, cackling — but it isn't all games.

"We see women blossom," Valan-Hudson says. "First of all, if they're given a little bit of knowledge and are being validated, that is so important — hearing other women talk maybe about their experiences and understanding, 'Hey, you know what, I'm not the only one feeling like this.'"

"If you try this or do it this way or use this type of a product, one little thing could create a big change for a woman's life."

After years of marriage, Buccì and the other baby boomers at her party say these products can help rev up old routines.

"The older you get the more you need to play," explains Judy Garrity.

And it's easier to play once the kids are away.

"There's no one throwing up on you and crying 'Mommy,'" Garrity jokes.

"You don't have to worry about it if the headboard hits the wall," Arhakos adds.

Buccì puts it this way: "You don't eat pasta every day. Every now and then you need a lobster."

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