The Cookie Crumbles
By banning online sales, are the Girl Scouts failing our daughters?

By Kurt Soller  Newsweek Web Exclusive
Mar 11, 2009

When 8-year-old Wild Freeborn became a Girl Scout earlier this year, she had a simple goal: sell 12,000 boxes of the organization’s addictive cookies. She wanted to earn enough money to send her entire troop (all new scouts) to summer camp in Brevard, N.C. After going door to door in her neighborhood, visiting stores in downtown Asheville, N.C., and consulting her parents about her precocious business plan, she asked her tech-minded dad, Bryan Freeborn, “Can’t we use what you do at work?” referencing his job as the chief operating officer of TopFloorStudio, a Web design and development firm.

In late January, they posted a YouTube video, starring Freeborn in Girl Scout gear, touting her straightforward sales pitch. “Buy cookies! And they’re yummy!” Soon after, they set up an online order system that was limited to customers within their local area (so Freeborn could personally deliver them). While her online sales strategy took hold, she continued peddling cookies the traditional way—going door to door and working booths at the local grocery store. Within two weeks, more than 700 orders for Thin Mints, Caramel DeLites and Peanut Butter Patties reached the Freeborns solely through the online form.

Considering that the national Girl Scout Cookie Program bills itself as the largest program to teach
entrepreneurship to young girls, this e-commerce strategy seems especially savvy. But some families in the community felt threatened by the Freeborn’s unconventional efforts, likely because various prizes (including camp vouchers, stuffed animals and apparel) are given out by local councils to girls who sell a certain amount of boxes. “If you have an individual girl that creates a Web presence, she can suck the opportunity from other girls,” says Matthew Markie, a parent who remains involved in Girl Scouts even though his three daughters are well into their 20s. Markie, and other disapproving parents, brought the Freeborn’s site to the attention of local Girl Scout officials who told the Freeborns to take down their YouTube video and reminded the family of the organization’s longstanding prohibition of online sales.

According to the FAQ on the national organization’s Web site, “The safety of our girls is always our chief concern. Girl Scout Cookie activities are designed to be face-to-face learning experiences for the girls.” The relative safety of using the Internet versus knocking on strangers’ doors is debatable. “First of all, selling things online is no less safe,” says Peter Fader, a director of the Interactive Media Initiative at Wharton, the business school at the University of Pennsylvania. “And if we want to teach our kids to be able to operate in society as responsible adults, online savviness is going to be part of the overall portfolio.”

In addition to losing a teaching moment, Fader says the Girl Scouts are missing out on a sales opportunity. “It wouldn’t even be a transition—it’d be an expansion,” he says, noting that the program could allow cookie sales online through personal Web pages hosted by area councils. With some troops reporting sales down by as much as 19 percent this year, getting online would be a simple step that could invigorate the locally minded fundraising goals of the program. “Just because you go online, that doesn’t mean you’re going to stop engaging with the girls selling in town.” Look at online retailing, which never killed the mall; or Avon Cosmetics, which, though once peddled door-to-door, can now be bought online too.

That message isn’t lost on the national Girl Scouts association, but the group’s digital strategy seems confused and behind the times. Michelle Tompkins, a spokeswoman, says, “Girl Scouts of the USA is not shunning the Internet ... though we still have to figure out how to do this.” Tompkins notes that the marketing of cookies is allowed online, but sales are still verboten. She also highlighted a few other online advances, including the recent creation of a Thin Mints Facebook page and the registering of girlscoutcookies.org, a Web site with information on how to buy cookies from local troops.

On the girls’ level, few of the badges that scouts can earn involve technology, and of those that do, the requirements are paltry: the "Computer Smarts” requirement for young girls (or "Brownies") only requires that they visit three Web sites. For older girls, the CyberGirl Scout badge is earned in part by sending an e-mail. "These skills are at a level I’m sure many girls can already surpass,” says Andrea Matwyshyn, a colleague of Fader’s at Wharton.

Back in Asheville, Bryan Freeborn is committed to teaching his daughter what the Scouts won’t allow. “We had to talk with Wild about the ethics of cookie sales, what you can and cannot do,” he says. “We
decided that as long as we weren't taking money over the Internet, we weren't doing anything wrong." But that hasn't stopped parents like Markie from arguing that many in rural North Carolina don't have access to computers, and that Wild has an unfair advantage because she can easily comb several counties with her Web order form. Once the sales season is over next month, Markie says that he'll approach the national organization and demand a clarification of the policy. "The Web sales create the perception of unfairness," he says, citing the Girl Scouts Cookie Program guide.

But maybe a different Girl Scout maxim should come to mind: "The early bird always gets the worm."

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Posted By: tmnx @ 03/18/2009 11:00:05 AM
I am not in your area, however I will tell you that absolutely no Girl Scouts came to my door to sell cookies. If Wild was able to set up an account that only targeted the region in which she lives then I believe it is all fair in sales. What a smart young girl to try to sell cookies in a new way and think outside of the box!!! I have several friends that were unable to buy cookies at all this year because they were not selling door to door. When I did see the booths set up in front of Wal-Mart or other grocery stores, the parents were peddling the cookies not the girls. I would have purchased from the booth sales, but I am not going to buy from a parent. This is a learning opportunity for the GIRLS not the parents. I was a Girl Scout and so was my daughter (many years ago) and I think Wild should be commended, not just told to take the site down. With the way the world it today, it seems safer for the sales to come to her and then her parents can help deliver the cookies. I have seen too many young girls selling with out the support of the parents being there. I do mean "support" not just doing it for them. Way to go Wild!!!

Posted By: litara @ 03/17/2009 7:54:37 PM
Wild's online cookie sales, while practical and ambitious, are completely unfair to other troops in her area! The reason you can't sell cookies online is that it limits the cookie sale in an area to one girl and her troop. Wild's Junior troop may make an immense profit from this strategy, but the Brownie, Cadet and Senior troops in her area (the latter two being the names for teen girl scouts) are going to make a very meager profit from what has always been our most successful sale. They won't be able to compete with the online cookie sales and would not make the profit they normally would with the tried and true cookie selling methods.

I would also like to point out that yes, I'm sure it's easy for Brownie girls to visit three websites, and for Junior girls to send an email. I agree that it might be to easy for them to earn patches, but they are
what? 6-10 years old. It’s supposed to be relatively easy for girls their age to earn patches. If you looked at the Interest Projects (teen girl scout patches) set for Cadets and Seniors however, you would see that not only are there many more opportunities for us to earn technology related patches, but that the requirements for earning them are much harder and more numerous.

Wild's online cookie orders, while practical and ambitious, are completely unfair! She is dominating the cookie sales in her area with the online forms, effectively shutting out the opportunities for girls in other troops in her area to sell cookies. What happens when another girl from a different age level goes door to door or works at a cookie booth, and is told by her potential customers "I already bought a bunch from that girl online." It limits the sales of cookies in an area to one girl and her troop, and leaves everyone else behind. Wild's Junior troop may profit immensely from this sales technique. But what about the Brownies, and the Cadets and Seniors? (the latter two are the names for teen girl scouts) If Wild sells cookies online then everyone else is going to make very little profit from what has always been our most successful sale!

I would also like to point out that yes, it is easy for Brownie girls to visit three websites, and for Juniors to send an email. Maybe too easy to get the patch or badge. These girls are what? 6-10 years old! their in girl scouts to have fun. The patches are supposed to be relatively easy to get at that age. Did you think about the Cadet and Senior girls? Most of them are committed to living up to the girl scout ideals of being great leaders. Our patches (which are called interest projects) are much harder to earn. We also have a lot more opportunities to earn technology related Interest Projects than our younger sister girl scouts. My point is that you can’t assume that girl scouts have lower than par requirements for tech related patches, and few opportunities to earn them, based on the standards set for Brownies and Juniors.