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**Sherry
Fields**
manager
**WARM
SPIRIT**
personal
products
MIAMI, FLORIDA

Sherry Fields looks out at the ocean from her Miami Beach home and remembers the time after September 11, 2001, when a wave of layoffs left her jobless. "I was broke," says Fields. Without the six-figure paycheck she'd earned as vice-president and general manager for a Swiss watch company in New York, she was desperate to find a way to pay her bills. She found it while giving herself a pedicure with beauty products purchased from a Warm Spirit consultant. "I was doing my feet and had an 'Aha!' moment," she remembers. "I realized I knew a whole lot of people who would appreciate this." She decided to take advantage of her large network and give direct sales a try.

A start-up product kit cost less than \$500, and because the company would ship orders directly, there was no need to build inventory. She signed on with the multilevel marketer (a business model that pays income from the sales of consultants recruited into the program) in October 2001, hosting spa parties at friends' homes. She made nearly \$1,000 her first month. Next she hit her Rolodex, calling colleagues she hoped to turn into customers—they would need holiday gifts for hundreds of clients. Suddenly "it became apparent that this was more than a way to make ends meet," says Fields. Though she had relocated to Miami for a new job in spring 2002, she "retired from corporate life" just six months later. Meanwhile she recruited new consultants, which let her earn residual income off their sales. Within two years she was earning almost \$11,000 per month. The company's cofounder, Nadine Thompson,

tapped Fields to develop the northeast market as regional field manager. Now at the head of a network of 5,000 business partners, Fields has a monthly income averaging \$17,000. But she says the rewards are more than financial: "I'm happier and more balanced."

SUCCESS STRATEGY: Carefully research any "business opportunities" that involve direct selling—especially those that encourage you to purchase large inventories up front—to avoid falling prey to a pyramid scheme or an unprofitable enterprise. Visit the Direct Selling Association's Web site, dsa.org.

L. Trena Woodson says she was born to sell. As a kid in the fifties, she hawked lemonade and candy. In the seventies her travels as a flight attendant turned into buying trips. Friends back home snapped up her Italian bags and Greek jewelry, then turned into her sales force as their friends became customers. In the eighties she bought and sold real estate. Then she opened an ice-cream parlor, Scoops Delight, in 1990. She liquidated that business but kept the name and launched a promotional and marketing company that provides T-shirts, mugs and other premiums as well as special-event planning to businesses, civic groups and social organizations. Now she's scooping up revenues of up to \$500,000 annually.

Woodson was introduced to the promotions biz by a family friend. She started attending association meetings to solicit contracts in 1993 and "hit pay dirt." A hookup with Philadelphia's recreation department led to a \$5,000 order of T-shirts for summer campers. Another early customer was the Midwest-based Mercy Health Plans, which ordered \$258,000 worth of pens, water bottles and other promotional items. Woodson grossed \$458,000 in 1994, her first full year in business. Her initial investment? Nada. Customers pay up front, and her suppliers extend her a line of credit. Eleven years out, she has installed a high-tech home office and a conference room in her six-bedroom Tudor home, but she loves being able to handle business in the bathtub or on the beach.

SUCCESS STRATEGY: Excellent customer service is the key to repeat business, which is why "Trena's gonna take care of you," she says. "It's easy to get a contract. But you don't have a customer until that person calls you with another order and says, 'I need it yesterday.' I follow through on contracts from A to Z." ▸

4.4%
of Blacks earn
\$75,000 or
more a year

Are you a closet entrepreneur? If you're thinking about making the move toward self-employment, the first step is to determine your readiness for the entrepreneurial work style, advises Erika Welz Praeder with Carole Sovocool in *Keep Your Paycheck, Live Your Passion* (Adams Media). The book is a hands-on guide that helps you shift your artistic vision into the business venture of your dreams.