

## Getting the word out, one meeting at a time



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Andy and Joan Horner of Premier Designs address the crowd during the company's annual convention at the Fort Worth Convention Center. "In 22 years in direct sales, I've never talked about selling - I talk about service," said Horner, 83.

### Premier Designs' rally brings huge direct-sales force together

By **HEATHER LANDY**  
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FORT WORTH — Premier Designs is a quiet company, the kind you might never hear about unless you happen to know someone involved in the business. It doesn't advertise, and its founder doesn't like to draw too much attention to the charitable works he says the company has helped to fund around the world.

But with a sales force of more than 26,000, more than a quarter of whom descended upon downtown Fort Worth this week for a three-day "rally" at the Fort Worth Convention Center, it's getting harder for Premier Designs to fly under the radar.

Founder Andy Horner said the Irving-based company will sell more than \$350 million of jewelry this year. Half the revenue will return to Premier Designs, and the other half will be pocketed by the independent contractors who sell the company's jewelry line at small parties hosted in kitchens and living rooms across the

country.

Nearly all of the contractors are women, many of whom have small children and are looking for a way to make money while staying at home most days with their families. Giving women an option to make stay-at-home motherhood possible, and helping overextended or under-challenged women build their self-esteem, are two of the reasons why Horner said he launched Premier Designs 22 years ago.

Horner said he also wants to promote the idea of service, be it through the small businesses his contractors have built for themselves or through the donations that the company's profits allow him to make to philanthropies and Christian ministries.

"In 22 years in direct sales, I've never talked about selling — I talk about service," said Horner, 83, who has white hair and a light brogue that gives away his Irish upbringing. "Many of our contractors have financial needs.

They make money. They have a need for acceptance. We give them a lot of recognition. But most of all, they get an opportunity to really feel like a somebody."

This week's rally, a national gathering that is run like a cross between a sales convention and a religious revival, featured motivational speakers, fashion merchandising experts, stories from successful saleswomen, and a gargantuan set design dominated by images of the U.S. Capitol, an inviting home and a picturesque church.

The rally, which has drawn 7,400 people to Fort Worth, began Thursday and ends today. It isn't the largest crowd that will convene at the Fort Worth Convention Center this year, but with so many of the attendees coming from out of town, it's one of the most important, with an estimated \$5 million in direct and indirect economic impact stemming from hotel bookings, restaurant tabs and shopping, said David DuBois, head of the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Premier Designs moved its annual convention to Fort Worth from Dallas three years ago and has committed to holding the gathering here through 2015, DuBois said. This year, attendees booked about 2,500 rooms at 38 hotels stretching from the Alliance corridor in the north to Arlington in the east.

More than 14 million Americans are involved in the direct-sales industry, hawking everything from cosmetics and cleaning supplies to vitamins and kitchen gadgets. Revenue from direct-sales merchants topped \$30 billion in 2005, according to estimates from the Direct Selling Association, a Washington trade group.

Becki Glenn of Fort Worth, whose husband works at Premier Designs' corporate office, said it took her about a year's worth of convincing to start selling the company's jewelry at home shows in the area.

"I was just going to do it part time, three shows a month, just to make a car payment. I could make \$500 a month," said Glenn, who was teaching third grade when she started with Premier Designs three years ago. "But my business was doing so well I decided to do Premier full time." She now tries to arrange eight or nine shows a month.

In addition to their 50 percent gross profit commissions, Premier Designs contractors who sponsor and train someone else to sell the company's product can collect a 10 percent commission on that person's wholesale business. The "down-line" commission model





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Attendees at the Premier Designs rally get into the spirit of the event before the festivities begin Thursday.

can be repeated up to two more times.

Glenn attended this week's rally with Ashley Studinski, a family friend who also has been involved with Premier Designs for about three years. Studinski's sister and mother also have signed on as Premier Designs saleswomen. Between the jewelry shows and her part-time position at her mother's beauty shop, Studinski, 28, said she can make enough money while still having plenty of time to care for her 2-year-old daughter.

Horner "wants mothers to be able to stay at home with their children if they want to," Studinski said.

Horner's own hardscrabble childhood, meanwhile, sounds like something out of a Frank McCourt memoir. The youngest of 13 children from a Protestant family in Belfast, Horner said he was 6 or 7 years old when his mother left his alcoholic father and moved the family from Ireland to Canada. They joined a Baptist church in Ontario. Horner said he was 11 when he became a Christian.

As a teenager, he lost interest in church. But when he and his wife, Joan, moved to Texas in 1950, friends invited them to become involved with First Baptist Church of Dallas, where Horner is still a deacon.

For years, he kept his faith separate from



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Members of Premier Designs' sales force leave the stage Thursday.

his work, which included jobs at SC Johnson Wax, Xerox and Home Interiors and Gifts. It was at Home Interiors, which was started in Dallas in 1957 by Mary Crowley, the mother of former Dallas Mavericks owner Don Carter, that Horner learned the ropes of the business.

He retired at 60, but a visit to South America, where one of his daughters was doing mission work at the time, inspired Horner and his wife to start a business that could support charities and ministries.

Horner, whose Dallas home is valued at more than \$1.35 million by the Dallas Central Appraisal District, started a nonprofit that donated more than \$650,000 to religious, missionary and service organizations in 2005, the most recent year for which tax records are available. Among the grants made by the Horner-Premier Foundation: \$25,000 for Mission East Dallas, a faith-based group that provides medical and dental services to the working poor.

"They were very generous and have since helped with a mission trip down to Argentina," said Jenny Williams, executive director of Mission East Dallas. "We'll be going back to them and making another ask" for contributions.

Horner said that Premier Designs does not have any religious requirements for its contractors. But the company's emphasis on service and helping people was a big draw for Anna Wanamaker of Conway, Ark., who has been selling Premier Designs jewelry for two years. She then recommended the company to a friend, Kim Burbank, who was working part time at her church and looking for a way to pay down debt without sacrificing much time away from her two young sons.

"My husband was surprised that I actually could do it because I was so shy," Burbank said. "I was nervous the first few times, but once I got [the routine] memorized, I knew what to expect."

Both women said they aim to run at least three shows a month. They have yet to run out of venues, driving as far as an hour from home to parties hosted by women who enjoy shopping for jewelry, entertaining friends and taking advantage of the hostess benefits Premier offers, which include discounts and free jewelry based on the amount of merchandise sold at each show.

"You start off with your friends and family, and you book more shows off of those shows," Burbank said. "The majority of my shows now are hosted by people I didn't even know before."

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