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A Madison Ave. Bond to Women

by: *Patricia Winters Lauro*

New York - MARY LOU QUINLAN worked her way up the corporate ladder for 20 years, becoming one of the few women to be named president and chief executive of a major Madison Avenue advertising agency. But for Ms. Quinlan, a usually upbeat 49-year-old, the achievement turned out to be a hollow victory.

After five often tumultuous years at the top, Ms. Quinlan resigned her post in 1999 and started a small research firm where she said she discovered her true passion, as a specialist in marketing to women. Now she has written "Just Ask a Woman: Cracking the Code of What Women Want and How They Buy" (John Wiley & Sons, \$27.95), which hit bookstores last week. It is based on more than 3,000 interviews she conducted with women in the last three years. To Ms. Quinlan, the book represents a new twist in a reinvented career as a self-styled translator of women's needs to corporate America.

Ms. Quinlan, who was raised in a Philadelphia row house, said she was thrilled in 1994 when she was chosen as president of N. W. Ayer, an ad agency in New York.

With the looks of a TV newscaster, a sunny disposition and a steely determination, Ms. Quinlan, the former head of new business at Omnicom's DDB Needham unit in New York, said she was ready to help turn Ayer around. But by the time Ms. Quinlan joined Ayer, which had once brought the world memorable slogans like "Be All That You Can Be" for the Army, the firm was suffering from a lackluster creative reputation and had lost several major accounts. The business side of advertising was also changing, as companies like Omnicom and the WPP Group became global agency giants serving ever-expanding worldwide clients that left little room for midsize, independent firms like Ayer.

At first, Ms. Quinlan relished being president and maintained her reputation for attracting new business by winning major accounts from Avon, Continental Airlines and other big clients.

But that all changed in 1995, when Ayer's chief executive, Steve Dworin, left on a Friday and Ms. Quinlan was catapulted into the post the next Monday. Over a weekend, her job changed from being the new-business boss and cheerleader for Ayer to the executive in charge of administrative and financial performance of the company and its staff of 500.

"It became a much greater burden," she recalled. "The stakes stepped up. Before, it was fun to win new business; now, it was make or break — you had to win. And the competition was everywhere."

Her husband, Joe, an independent television producer, and her parents worried that she was pushing herself beyond capacity. She was working 16-hour days, but the agency

still faced troubles.

Ayer lost some longtime accounts, including De Beers and AT&T. In a ranking by Advertising Age magazine, Ayer dropped to 64th in size in the United States in 1999 from 17th in the early 1990's.

"It was her misfortune that she was the caretaker of a dying brand," said Scott Donaton, the editor of Advertising Age.

Despite the treadmill, she rediscovered the joy of work while helping a client that was trying to reach women. Rather than use the traditional focus group led by a questioner in front of a one-way mirror, Ms. Quinlan developed a format like that of a TV talk show; she played the role of an Oprah Winfrey-style host.

"I personally was electrified," Ms. Quinlan said in a recent interview in her office on Madison Avenue near 28th Street. "I was touching people and laughing with them, and they were giving me these amazing insights. I felt alive again."

One day, after thinking she might prefer getting into an accident with a long convalescence to going into the office, she decided to re-evaluate her life. She asked for a sabbatical from Ayer's corporate parent at the time, the MacManus Group (later absorbed by the Publicis Groupe of France, which closed Ayer's offices in 2002). She decided that the TV "listening sessions" — she bans the phrase "focus group" in her office as "the F-word" — could be developed into a business.

It excited her as much as developing and presenting new business pitches, and it reminded her of how she had loved being a motivational speaker for the sales force at Avon, where she began her career and rose to director of advertising.

She returned to Ayer to resign; instead, MacManus offered to back her new venture, Just Ask a Woman Inc. The company offers a range of market research services, including the talk-show concept, now trademarked, to clients that have included Citigroup, General Motors and Saks Fifth Avenue.

"She is able to create both a personal bond and an environment in which women feel comfortable to speak their true feelings and opinions," said Carole Black, the president and chief executive of Lifetime Entertainment Services, who used Just Ask a Woman for a recent research project on women and technology.

At a recent research session outside Philadelphia, Ms. Quinlan invited women in the audience to fill in the blanks in this sentence: "My name is (blank), and I feel I deserve (blank)." Ms. Quinlan was the first to answer, saying that she feels she deserves to be proud for taking the risk of leaving her job and starting her own business.

She said she could not have risked starting a new venture without the support of her husband and her family.

"I was raised that I could do and be anything I wanted to be, but the corollary to that was that we will love you no matter what you do," she said of her parents. "I always had that emotional safety net and because of that I wasn't scared."

Ms. Quinlan's firm is one of many market research companies. Firms specializing in qualitative research and focus groups accounted for 4.2 percent of the \$4.4 billion market research business in 2000, according to the Advertising Research Foundation in

New York.

But for Ms. Quinlan, Just Ask a Woman has proved to be a happy niche. From a work force of 500 at Ayer, she now has a staff of 4 — all women. Ms. Quinlan is buying her company from Publicis.

In addition to writing magazine articles based on her research, she is looking to develop her listening sessions into some kind of TV or radio talk show about women and would like to teach someday at a university.

"They're not big bottom-line builders," she said of her outside interests. "But they sure are big happiness builders."