

Girl Scouts Seek an Image Makeover

Green Skirts Are Out
As Organization Faces

A 'Nonjoiner' Society

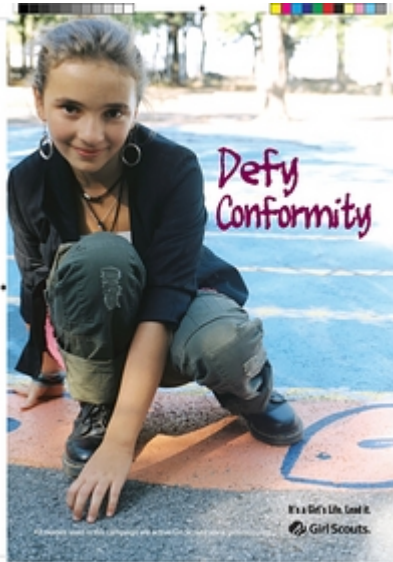
By ELLEN BYRON

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The cookies will stay, but the green skirts are history.

The Girl Scouts, seeking to reverse declining troop numbers, is shaking up its image. On Tuesday, the organization is expected to announce the appointment of its first chief marketing officer, a former senior partner and executive group director at WPP Group's Ogilvy & Mather.

Laurel Richie will be in charge of modernizing the image of the Girl Scouts, which is viewed by many as a rigid, old-fashioned organization focused on cookie fund-raisers and campouts. "Girls think of us as outdated," says Kathy Cloninger, chief executive of Girl Scouts of the USA. "They have stereotypes of who we are that are not right."



Girl Scouts of the USA
Ads that show the Girl Scouts'
recent efforts to transform
their image.

more on helping girls work together in groups and develop leadership skills. The Girl Scouts has long offered programs on everything from running a business to mountain climbing.

Appointing a marketing chief is part of a broader, multiyear effort to bring the 96-year-old organization into the 21st century. Over the past three years, the Girl Scouts has streamlined its organizational structure to 109 leadership councils from more than 300, added programs on topics such as managing busy schedules and online bullying to better reflect current issues, and narrowed the age ranges within each troop.

Trying to reinvigorate an old brand is a classic marketing challenge, and remains one of the trickiest feats in the business. On top of that, the Girl Scouts are trying to win over a demographic that is not only notoriously fickle but is also bombarded with marketing pitches: technologically advanced adolescent girls.

"They're very smart about media consumption, and deft at avoiding any communication that's not relevant to them," says Samantha Skey, executive vice president of strategic marketing at Alloy Media + Marketing.

The Girl Scouts was started in 1912 as a way to give girls more opportunities outside the home. It has since focused

But the big problem for the organization these days is that it is seen by many as sleepy. Though it has held up as an American icon, the group has little name recognition beyond its cookies, its executives say. The group, which has 2.8 million scouts from ages of five to 17, has been losing 1% to 2% of its membership a year for about 10 years.

After conducting a study of itself, the group discovered its main competition for members wasn't the sports teams or church groups it suspected, but rather what it calls "nonactivities," says Ms.

Cloninger. "Girls start hanging out at the mall, spending time online or just being with their friends, and basically become 'nonjoiners' -- that's [what] we were losing the most girls to."

Advertising efforts over the past two years also reflect the group's new direction, including public-service announcements in publications such as Entertainment Weekly and Girls Life that highlight girls' independence, and the tagline: "It's a Girl's Life. Lead it."

Repositioning the organization "isn't about us trying to be cool," says Ms. Richie. "We've seen jeans, sneakers and soft drinks try to do that and you just cringe."

Ms. Richie is hoping to increase the group's exposure among demographics that have been underrepresented in its troops, particularly Hispanics, Asians and other groups. She says she will also try to do more outreach to mothers, both to drive membership of their daughters and to recruit more volunteer leaders.

As for the cookie box, the former Ogilvy executive says she wants to turn it into more of a marketing tool -- some 200 million boxes of Girl Scout cookies are sold each year. "I'm dying to get my hands on it," says Ms. Richie. The nearly three million scouts who sell them door-to-door also need to become more opportunistic about promoting the organization. "I don't mean [for them] to be shills, but there's an opportunity for them to genuinely speak about their Girls Scouts experience," she says.

Ms. Richie is looking for an agency to add more panache to upcoming Girl Scouts marketing efforts; the group's current ads were created in-house. Coming marketing campaigns, she says, should balance the tension adolescents feel about being part of a group while maintaining individuality.

At its national convention in October, the Girl Scouts will officially endorse the new uniform for scouts in the fourth grade and older: a sash or vest that displays achievement badges, worn over the scout's own white shirt and khaki pants or skirt. "That gives them the opportunity for self-expression," says Ms. Cloninger. Scouts at the Daisy and Brownie levels, usually students from kindergarten through the third grade, will keep their trademark blue and brown uniforms.



Girl Scouts of the USA