

THE WAY I WORK | Essie Weingarten

“God gave me an innate ability to pick colors.”

In 1981, Essie Weingarten boarded a plane bound for Las Vegas with a suitcase full of nail polish and a plan. She wanted to sell her chip-resistant line of varnish—in 12 unconventional colors, with names such as Baby’s Breath and Bordeaux—to every hotel and beauty salon in Sin City. Back then, there were fewer than 200 nail salons nationwide, and the few cool colors available were for sale only at high-end department stores. Today, Weingarten’s company, Essie Cosmetics, sells to more than 250,000 salons and spas worldwide, from Denver to Dubai, and shoppers spend \$150 million a year on Essie products. As a small army of sales reps and distributors touts the line salon to salon, Weingarten, 59, jets around the globe, attending fashion shows in Milan, a sales meeting in Santo Domingo, a speaking engagement at Harrods. All the while, she has her eye out for next season’s trendy colors.

AS TOLD TO LIZ WELCH | PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL EDWARDS

I usually get up around 5:30 a.m., put on the news and get a little depressed, and then go back to sleep for another hour or two. I’m up by 7:30, and then it’s nonstop all day. I met Max [Sortino], my better half and business partner, 21 years ago at a trade show. He owned a company with his ex-wife that sold jewelry for the nails. Remember that? It was very hot in the ’80s.

Max and I have breakfast together. He gets up at, like, 4 o’clock in the morning and is an e-mail freak. I am a phone freak. I like to talk; he likes to write. But I must have freshly



brewed coffee first. I have a little coffeemaker that only makes four cups, and a mug is two. That's the way we do it. I'm a maniac. If I smell coffee that's not fresh, I won't drink it. I love cappuccino, but I took my machine out to our beach house in the Hamptons, because we were getting addicted! Now, it's a weekend treat.

I'm one of these germ freaks. I shower in the morning and at night. I wash my hair every night and blow-dry it and then blow-dry it again in the morning, because it's curly. Then I have breakfast. If I'm being good, I eat fresh fruit with rolled oats. Sometimes, I'll put a piece of Melba toast with American cheese in the toaster oven or a piece of sourdough with Muenster cheese—it's almost like a pizza.

work from the house in the morning, taking care of the important phone calls, because it's quiet. We live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and my office is in Astoria, Queens, close to where I grew up. My father died in 1965, one week before I turned 16. My mother had five kids and never worked a day in her life, and yet she took over his party rental business. Back then, there were no women in business, so she was a great role model for me. She's also the reason I went into the nail polish business. If I was a good girl, she would take me to the beauty salon with her every Saturday. That started when I was 6—there were only a few boring colors, and I remember wondering, as a kid, Why can't I paint my nails blue?

I arrive at the office around 11 a.m. Sometimes, I will drive in with Max, though he often comes in later. He prefers to work alone from home, but I like being in the thick of things. My office has glass walls, so people can always see me. I have an open-door policy—if people have questions or concerns, they know they can walk right in. I always say, "If in doubt, just ask." It's safer that way.

I don't have a personal assistant. People think it's funny that I answer my own phone—I often pick up on the first ring. But that personal touch is important to me; I like to know what people are saying. When your company grows, it can become impersonal.

I rarely have a set office schedule, unless I am traveling. People pop their heads into my office every day, whether it's Elizabeth, my VP of marketing, saying we need to meet to talk about the spring launch, or Tiffani, my head of PR, wanting to discuss interview requests or public appearances.

God gave me an innate ability to pick colors, which is a good thing, because we produce six colors a season, four times a year. I never know when I'm going to see something that might translate into a nail polish. It could be a fabric or a pincushion that just may have the right intensity of pink. Sometimes, I buy a pair of shoes, even if they only have a size 11, because the color is so perfect. Then I give the item to the chemist, who is out in New Jersey, and he matches the color. Sometimes, I imagine a color but cannot find it, so I keep a Pantone color wheel at my

desk. I meet with Michelle, my color engineer, and we often actually mix the colors. It's like a kid's art class. We tweak until we arrive at the right color.

I try to go to as many fashion shows as possible—New York, London, Milan, Paris, Berlin. I see everything, from Oscar de la Renta to Zac Posen and everyone in between. Spring was totally black, white, yellow, and maize—boring. I came back to my office and told my team, "We have to have colors that are going to put a smile on everyone's face. This country is in a funk." So, I went brighter and fun. I decided to use uplifting names and colors—there's a bright red called One of a Kind, a pale coral pink called Eternal Optimist, and a bold blue called Mesmerize. I wanted to call that one Obama Mama—he's our savior—but we already have Bahama Mama. We thought it would be confusing—which Mama do you want?

Every day, someone asks, "How do you come up with all the great names?" I keep a list going at all times—I jot them down in my Mont Blanc notebook, which is my lifeline. I'm devastated, because they don't make this size anymore, and mine is pretty beat up. I love it, because it fits in my clutches and my small bags, so I can always bring it with me. It is jammed with my scribbled notes. When we are ready to name the new line, I sit down with a few people on staff and pass around a list of roughly 16 ideas. People put little check marks next to their favorites, and nine times out of 10, my favorites win. But some don't. No one liked No Pre-Nup.

In the early days, I would drive around Manhattan with a box of nail polish in my trunk, searching for new salons to drop off samples. But in 1983 and 1984, as nail salons started proliferating, I hired sales reps: one for Manhattan, one for Queens, one for Las Vegas. Since then, the whole business model has changed. Now, we work with distributors. They sell our products for us, which means we have to sell our products to them. Either I go, or I send someone, to these sales meetings, where we get 15 minutes to sell them on our product. Then, their salespeople go out and sell to the salons.

That's why we need to get to the consumer directly. We have been doing trade advertising for 15 years and just started consumer advertising five years ago. We get e-mails and phone calls from people in places we used to call flyover states who say, "I saw your nail polish advertised in *Cosmo*. Where can I find it?" Some people e-mail and say, "Why isn't Essie in our town?" And that gets brought up in our sales meetings, which I have weekly.

I get detailed reports once a week from all the outside salespeople and the 12 in-house staff members who support the field team. I'm in constant touch with my reps in the field. So if my Southeast guy is in Georgia meeting with distributors, he'll stop by salons or spas to take photos of how our product is being displayed so I know what we look like. If a retail outlet is not using shelf talkers—those little strips that say, "As seen in *InStyle*" or "Winner of *Allure's* Best of Beauty Award"—we can send them a package.

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I used to do all the trade shows. But then my knees started to give in. It's such a great way to meet the people who sell our product and form relationships with them. I still go to as many as possible.

I am, like, a numbers freak. I used to look at them every day. It became an obsession. Then Max said, “Why don't you just look at them every month?” That was hard for me. But then I realized, if you have people you trust, you can let go. Now, I ask my VP of sales once a week how we're doing. Or, if we are having a particularly good week, he'll hover around my office, waiting to be asked. He keeps me posted.

I go out for lunch a few times a month, usually meeting with a magazine or if a customer is in from out of town. But if I'm in the office, I don't have lunch until 4 o'clock. I get so wrapped up, and then suddenly I'm starving. I love to cook; it relaxes me. So I'll run across the street to this great market and buy things to make lunch. When we bought the building, 10 years ago, we did a renovation, and I had a kitchen built adjacent to my office.

I have appointments in the city, either with designers, beauty editors, or sales reps, I always make a point of popping into random salons to say, “Hi; I'm Essie.” And they say, “Manicure? Pedicure?” And I say, “No. I'm Essie.” I take out my business card, and then they get all excited, and they start speaking in their native tongue. Who knows what they're saying about me? I ask what colors are really doing well, what's hot. We recently added new products to our line, so I ask if they're selling the cuticle pen or our hand and body lotions.

I've been going to the same manicurist for 20 years and get my nails done every Friday at 5 p.m., unless I'm traveling. She's in a salon on 65th between Madison and Park and has an

incredible clientele: high-powered working women. I often find myself networking when I'm there. I was looking to do a charm, a little ballet slipper to put on our color called Ballet Slippers, and, sure enough, I met this woman there who recommended a jeweler, and I had the cutest ballet slippers made.

Media requests come in daily. Usually, it's a quick phone call, though occasionally my PR rep will set up an editor meeting or lunch. Getting product placement or editorial write-ups is even more powerful than advertising, so these meetings are incredibly important. We'll meet in the city at a restaurant or do a desk-side meeting with an editor, depending on what we're launching. Our launches are very controlled. We know what the launch date is, 90 days before on long

leads, so we do a marketing calendar and a publicity plan.

I also spend a lot of time thinking about marketing. Part of our strategy is to put the voice behind the brand. A lot of people didn't even know there was an Essie! Or they think I am Asian! So we teamed up with an advertising agency to help us with branding and started coming up with a new tag line for each season. The first one was, “Hi. I'm Essie, and I'm a color-holic.” The agency came up with that one. But I love coming up with them, too. My favorite was, “From the bedroom, to the boardroom, to the ballroom.” And then for a color in this past winter's collection, I came up with the name Rock Star Skinny, and the agency came up with the line, “All of the color, none of the calories.”

I often work until 8 or 9 o'clock at night. When everyone leaves, I get a lot done. That's when I do what didn't get done—e-mails, calls to the West Coast. I need quiet to really concentrate, because I'm a little bit scatterbrained; I'm doing a lot of things at once. I get home late, so Max and I might go out for dinner. Or, if we have had a big lunch, then I will throw together a salad and call it a night. I do my cooking at the beach house on the weekends. I like to read before bed—Danielle Steel and Sidney Sheldon are my favorites, but often I am so tired, I conk out. If we're up, Max and I both love *David Letterman*, but I am addicted to *Dancing With the Stars*. I'm a frustrated dancer. I thought I was going to be a prima ballerina.

The end of last year was the first time our monthly sales were down. It was devastating. We're used to a double-digit increase. We were going to close almost 20 percent ahead for the year. Max tracks that with our accountant—I used to. Now, I don't even look until the end of the month. And while I'm not happy with the way the economy is falling out, I always say, “We still make women feel good for very little money.” We're the affordable luxury. Even if you're out of a job, you still have to look perfect. So, we're in a really good spot in a bad economy. **1**