



Can a Young MBA With Family Beauty Secrets Make It Big in the Cosmetics Game? *By Leslie Milk*



She Wants Your Face

Ada Polla wants to be the next Estée Lauder.

Lauder started with little more than moxie. Her first creams were cooked up on a stovetop in her uncle's kitchen in Queens, New York. When she died this year, at a well-preserved 97, Lauder's company was worth about \$10 billion.

Like Lauder, Polla is selling her family's secrets—creams and lotions that promise youthful, beautiful skin. Polla's are created in Switzerland by her parents, a dermatologist and a biomedical researcher, who run two medical spas in Geneva.

Petite and polished, Polla has an entrepreneurial zeal that belies her genteel appearance. She knows that it will take moxie to succeed. "Hope in a jar" requires more science than it did in Estée's day. The crowded cosmetics field is an ethereal arena of skin remedies with polysyllabic ingredients and quasi-medical claims.

Polla can talk about cellular aging and the botanicals and antioxidants in the family's Alchimie Forever products. Just ask her and you'll get a rapid-fire recitation of

the natural ingredients—blueberry, basil, tomato, and green tea—and benefits of a holistic approach to beauty.

At first, Polla's parents didn't encourage her to expand the family business. She had graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1999 with a double major in art history and political science. She went on to get an MBA this year from Georgetown. Shouldn't she use her stellar credentials to find a corner office in a business someone else had already built?

"Sometimes they think I'm crazy," Polla says with just a trace of an accent.

But she had no doubts. She worked on her business plan during her first year at Georgetown and incorporated during second semester. By the time she graduated, she had set up her one-woman operation in her apartment and was ready to hit the ground selling.

Polla concluded that she didn't need to be queen of the mountain. She just wanted a foothold. She decided to bypass the consumer market and targeted medical offices and spas that stock "professional" products.

At Georgetown she also met her fiancé, Lars Tray; they'll be married in Geneva next month. Tray does marketing for the Corporate Executive Board.

Most weeks, Polla is on the road in her

aged purple Saturn, meeting with dermatologists and spa owners. In Boston, she stays with college friends. Heading south, she stays with her fiancé's parents in New Jersey. Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia can be covered in day trips. She's also prospected farther afield in places like Indianapolis and Florida. Next stop: California.

"She's the most persistent person I've ever met," says Pirooz Sarshar, cofounder of the Grooming Lounge in downtown DC.

Polla doesn't disagree. "If you take 'no' for an answer, you're never going to get anywhere," she says. If people don't return her calls, she calls again. And again. The Grooming Lounge now carries her men's-product line.

Business success often hinges on forces beyond your control, Polla has learned. She was on her way to call on a spa owner in Virginia when she looked in the mirror and discovered a pimple on her chin.

When great skin is your stock in trade, a pimple is more than a pimple—it's a disaster. Should she cover it with makeup? Postpone her sales visit?

Polla decided to tough it out. It's not acne, she told her potential customer, it's hormones. By the time it faded, she had made another sale.

Photograph by The Washingtonian by Sam Miller

Lifestyle editor Leslie Milk (lmilk@washingtonian.com) writes often about cosmetic surgery and looking good.