

Girl Scouts to sell cookies online

By Leanne Italie, AP

NEW YORK – Watch out world, the Girl Scouts are going digital to sell you cookies. For the first time in nearly 100 years, Girl Scouts of the USA will allow its young go-getters to push their wares using a mobile app or personalized websites. But only if their scout councils and guardians say OK.

“Girls have been telling us that they want to go into this space,” said Sarah Angel-Johnson, chief digital cookie executive for the organization covering about 2 million girls. “Online is where entrepreneurship is going.”

And the best news for these digital natives: They can have cookies shipped directly to your doorstep.

More than 1 million scouts, from kindergarten-age Daisies to teens, were expected to opt in as cookie-selling season cranks up this month and the scouting organization gets digital sales under way. But digital sales are intended to enhance, not replace, the paper spreadsheets used to generate an estimated \$800 million in cookie sales a year – at anywhere from \$3.50 to \$5 a box, depending on scout council.

There are important e-lessons here, scout officials said, such as better articulating and tracking goals, learning to handle customers and money in a new way, and more efficiently processing credit card information.

“A lot of people have asked, ‘What took you so long to get online?’ We spend a lot of time thinking how do we make this safe, scalable and smart,” Kelly M. Parisi, chief communications executive for Girl Scouts of the USA, said at a recent demonstration for select media.

Councils were offered one of the two platforms but not both. For web-based sales, scouts customize their pages, using their first names only, and email prospective customers with links to click on for orders. They can also put up videos explaining who they are and what they plan to do with their proceeds. The mobile platform offers tabs for tracking sales and allows for the sale of bundles of different kinds of cookies. It can be used on a phone or tablet.

“They can get them quicker than waiting for me to deliver them because sometimes it takes me a long time to deliver,” offered 11-year-old Priscilla at the preview. The adults at the event asked that only first names of scouts be used.

Added 7-year-old Anna: “My favorite part is that now I can sell more Girl Scout cookies.” She pulled down about 200 boxes last year and has upped her goal to 600.

Girl Scouts use their cookie money to pay for community service work or troop activities such as camping and other trips.

The websites will not be accessible without an email invitation, requiring the girls to build client lists. And personal information is as protected as any digits out there, for both the scouts and customers, using encryption in some cases. Much of the responsibility to limit identifying details about scouts online falls on parents.

Troop Leader Karen Porcher of the Bronx has an 11-year-old scout and is particularly psyched about the digital options. They live in a house rather than an apartment, and she and her husband work at home, eliminating at-office cookie and neighborly building sales.

“During cookie season my daughter is wearing her (scout) vest on the subway and people are so excited to see a Girl Scout,” Porcher explained. “Strangers actually will buy a case of cookies and wait for her to call. This is going to be amazing

because now she can just say 'Give me your business card,' or 'I'll take your email address,' send the email and they can be delivered. This is gonna be sweet."

Porcher also sees word-of-mouth value in getting cookies delivered quickly.

"People are going to be walking around with cookies and others are going to say, 'Whoa, how did you get those already?'"

Zack Bennett of Manhattan has a 9-year-old scout who sold more than 1,000 boxes last year. She hopes to increase her goal to 1,500 this season and went through training to learn how to set up her new cookie website. But dad won't be letting her loose alone.

"I'll be sitting in the backseat to help her, certainly when it comes to credit cards, things of that sort," he said. "But it makes perfect sense to have it be on the computer. It's definitely time the Girl Scouts came into the 21st century."