Chapter 9
Moving Forward, Looking Back

In December 2006, the Chivas of Guadalajara won their first national title in the Mexican professional soccer league in a decade. To celebrate the victory, Jorge Vergara purchased half an hour of prime time television on a domestic broadcast channel the day before Christmas Eve. The program opened with scenes of crowds cheering at an Omnilife rally and then cut to interviews with individual distributors. The smiling subjects carried bottles of colored water and spoke directly into the camera. A woman exclaimed, “I began to realize my value. I have all the capacity. I am a great woman.” A man said, “I can discover the abundance in my life.” Another woman, near tears, added, “No one will give you this capacity to dream again.” Lights went up on a studio. Jorge Vergara appeared in a dark suit holding a bottle of orange-hued beverage and leaning against a stool to reveal sockless ankles. The camera panned to a display of company products arrayed on a table behind him and a large soccer trophy on the floor next to it.

Vergara had no new product to launch or initiative to introduce. He merely wanted to recognize the soccer team’s triumph and link their glory to the continued growth of the nutritional supplement firm. When it was founded in 1991, Omnilife’s survival was precarious. Direct selling in Mexico was limited mostly to housewives looking to make extra cash by circulating Avon and Tupperware catalogs. Both Herbalife and Amway encountered difficulties introducing the business-oriented multilevel marketing model to the Mexican market. Along came a failed taco vendor with a passel of sugary powders. Starting with six recruits, Omnilife grew to encompass 3.8 million distributors across 18 countries. The company diversified beyond vitamins and earned headlines for forays into professional sports,
filmmaking, and architecture. Despite setbacks, Omnilife reached its fifteenth anniversary as one of the most visible symbols of the ascendancy of direct selling in the developing world.

To account for the exploding popularity of direct sales in countries like Mexico, anthropologists have turned to economic explanations. Direct selling’s rise to prominence since the 1990s has coincided with the solidification of neoliberalism as the dominant global economic model (Harvey 2005, Klein 2007). As implemented in Mexico, neoliberalism assumes that, free from government interference, producers and consumers will make rational choices that lead to the most efficient distribution of resources (Gledhill 1995; McDonald 1999). The reforms aim to reduce dependence on the state and spark entrepreneurial innovation, goals that fit well with direct selling companies’ operating philosophy. Luisa’s search for financial independence certainly conforms to the theory that neoliberal policies have fueled Omnilife’s recruitment efforts. In this neat cause-and-effect scenario, the adoption of new macroeconomic policies creates the conditions for the swelling ranks of direct selling distributors.

While a necessary component, the neoliberal turn alone is not sufficient to capture the full appeal of direct selling companies in the developing world. As Diego discovered, direct selling rarely lives up to the entrepreneurial ideal of a self-sustaining business. Industry insiders and critics alike acknowledge that precious few direct sellers earn back their initial investments, so the attraction does not lie merely in the amassing of commission checks. Instead, Luisa and the distributors in Morelia who stay loyal to Omnilife are responding to a different kind of commission. They view their involvement in direct selling as fulfilling a charge to transform their lives. By joining Omnilife, dedicated distributors locate a map for returning to their original, perfect state. Their journey takes them back through the layers of accumulated doubt, negativity, and self-denial to an earlier time when they enjoyed a closer connection to the divine creator.

Omnilife sparks a religious conversion in Luisa. Within the orthodox forms of Catholicism, she finds a space to establish a new, more intimate relationship with God that I have dubbed direct faith. Believers in direct faith are heirs to a 150-year-old legacy of mind cure ideas that have diffused from New England Transcendentalists to positive-thinking advocates worldwide (Carpenter 1999; Fassihi 2008). While official, established centers of direct faith have nearly disappeared, since its inception the direct sales industry has nurtured and popularized the tenets of direct faith. Viewing Omnilife from the perspective of advancing a tradition of direct faith suggests a