

WORKING MOTHER INTRODUCES A PRODUCT LINE FOR HER PEERS

Just when all the women's magazines were telling working mothers not to feel too bad if they really *couldn't* do it all, along comes Mary Anne Jackson, a woman who gives new meaning to the label "Supermom."

Not only did this energetic 35-year-old mother of two survive being fired from an executive post at Beatrice Cos. with her ego intact, she bounced back by founding her own food company.

Her Deerfield, Ill.-based company markets a line of shelf-stable entrees for children called My Own Meals. Jackson worked with a food development firm to perfect the concept after deciding it had potential, based on her own experiences and extensive market research.

My Own Meal entrees are packaged in plastic retort pouches for easy boiling or microwaving. The five selections Jackson included in the line—two chicken dishes, turkey meatballs, meatballs and shells, and a pasta dish—reflect the input of hundreds of children who sampled them in focus groups.

Much of Jackson's marketing strategy is designed to capitalize on her firsthand knowledge of the life of the working mother. Guilt is an emotion that working mothers know well, says Jackson, who has two preschoolers.

The advertising tag line



Mary Anne Jackson: The hard-working founder of My Own Meals.

for My Own Meals describes them as "Meals children love to eat and mothers feel good about serving," and Jackson doesn't hesitate to point out that the slogan is "playing on that guilt."

The back of each carton features a drawing of Jackson along with a personal message explaining how she developed My Own Meals. She's typically candid about the way she's using her real-life role as a mother as a marketing tool. "I don't have a big name like Quaker or Kraft. That's all that I have. I'm a mother."

Well, not quite. Jackson also has a few more traditional credentials—like a CPA, an MBA, and eight and a half years of experience at Beatrice. Before becoming a political casualty after the Beatrice takeover, Jackson was director of corporate planning for Beatrice and director of operations planning for its Swift-

Eckrich subsidiary. She was the kind of ambitious employee who spent her spare time on business trips developing a new-product concept for Beatrice and then fumed when she wasn't given the opportunity to make it a reality.

In conversation, Jackson is lively and direct. She comes across as more of a super-prepared go-getter than a tough-as-nails corporate climber, though. In fact, asked about the need for toughness in negotiating with retailers, she emphasizes that it's not being tough that's required. It's being prepared with the kind of market research and promotional programs retailers need.

Because all of her experience was in large corporations, it's not surprising that Jackson approached the process of founding her own company with something of a corporate mindset.

"If you can do it for a big corporation, you can do it for yourself, as long as you have contacts," she says. In engineering the start-up of My Own Meals, Jackson sought advice from many of her friends and former colleagues. Her husband, a CPA who had experience helping small companies obtain funding, was a particularly valuable resource.

Jackson's approach to attracting investors was straightforward. "I learned to ask anybody you've known in your whole life," she says. "I have something like 64 first cousins. I wrote to all of them."

So far, My Own Meals has 45 investors. More than two years from the time of the start-up, Jackson has yet to make any money on the venture, but she expects that to change sometime later this year.

Jackson has obtained distribution for My Own Meals in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin supermarkets. It may take five years to achieve national distribution, she says. She also predicts that it will be two to five years before she starts receiving acquisition offers from large food companies.

What her response will be if and when those offers start coming in remains to be seen. For now, she says, "I'm not running this business to be sold."

—Mary Ellen Lieb