

Cooking Up Profits With Children's MEALS

By Julie Applebaum

Today's labor force contains more women than ever before. Over 50 percent of these working women are mothers, according to *The 1989 World Almanac and Book of Facts*. The combination of a full-time career with motherhood has created much stress in family routines. Gone are the days when Mom had time to pack Junior's lunch and be home, waiting with warm cookies and milk, when he bounded in from school. Those days have been replaced with Mom shelling out a few dollars for cafeteria food, and Junior having free reign of the house until 5:00 p.m. Motherly duties have taken on a whole new dimension, as the Moms of today juggle children, husbands, pets, and a career.

Mary Ann Jackson was an expert juggler. She did it all, and like thousands of other working mothers, felt the pressure. "I know first hand about the guilt mothers suffer when they are not there," she said. Out of necessity, many mothers resort to fast food, and grudgingly accept the sodium, preservatives, sugar, additives, and fat included in it. The demands of schedules unfortunately dictate that children's meals be as quick and as easy as possible. Nutrition, it seems, gets lost in the process.

Wanting her daughter to have healthy meals, Jackson used to spend her weekends preparing menus for the following week. As her daughter grew and her nutritional requirements changed, Jackson researched the world of food. She read books on cooking and nutrition. She became proficient at packaging small portions of healthy meals for babysitters to heat up. The meals could also be precooked and put into a thermos for restaurants, long car rides, or airplane trips. But preparing meals for longer time periods, such as vacations, was still a problem.

In 1986, Jackson's employer, Beatrice Foods, was the victim of a takeover, and consequently, she became unemployed. What could have been a major disaster, however, turned into a lucrative opportunity. Like most clever entrepreneurs, Jackson reviewed her experiences,

Delectable developments

Counting on approval of thousands of working mothers who, like her, were often too busy to prepare meals, Jackson strove for the best in taste and nutritional value. Each delectable delight in the frozen food line contains *nothing* artificial, no MSG (monosodium glutamate), and no preservatives. The five-item line includes: *Chicken, Please, My Kind Of Chicken, My Meatballs & Shells, My Turkey Meatballs, and My Favorite Pasta*.

In addition to being chock full of nutrition, My Own Meals dinners are packaged conveniently and economically. All products are microwavable, so the entire oven needn't be heated for one small meal. In case a microwave oven is not present, the meals come in sealed plastic pouches and cook in minutes when placed in boiling water.

The next step? Jackson was confident her products were healthy and practical but the final seal of approval must, of course, come from kids themselves. After all, kids are notorious for turning noses up at foods deemed good for them.



PRACTICAL PACKAGING—All products are microwavable so the entire oven needn't be heated for one small meal.

assessed her strengths and potentials, and took what began as a good idea, and formed a thriving business. Her products provide a much needed commodity to America's younger generation; nutritionally-sound, frozen meals, intended especially for children.

M.O.M.

Jackson named her fledgling company My Own Meals, thinking the acronym M.O.M., would invoke an image people could remember and trust. To instill top quality into the meals, she consulted with food technology specialists and developed the initial meals in test kitchens. Registered dietitians and nutritional firms joined the team to evaluate meals for adequacy of meeting children's dietary requirements.

From the Mouths of Babies

"We served meals to over 100 children, ages two to 11, and watched their faces, asked them questions, and listened to their comments," Jackson said. The My Own Meals team, consisting of Jackson, the sales staff, and dietitians, brought groups of children together, without their mothers, to try a My Own Meals product for lunch. They asked the children to describe which foods they liked or disliked.

Each child was given a range of happy-faced to sad-faced pictures. These were used to communicate how the child felt about various factors; appearance, smell, color, and taste, and ultimately, whether they wanted their mothers to buy the meal for them. The appropriate face was to be

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M. O. M.

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colored in with a crayon. The children used *technical* words such as yucky, mushy, yummy, etc. The results of these taste-tests were used to improve the product, making it more appealing to children, the true target market.

**Subsidizing The Suppers—
 The Biggest Hurdle**

"Just the same as in any business, our major obstacle was the start-up—getting financing in place," Jackson said. "If you have the best product in the world, that's great, but to make money from it, you still have to sell it, and that takes more than an idea and a prayer."



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Jackson researched trade journals and other pertinent publications, interviewed people in the food business, sent questionnaires to potential consumers, reviewed census bureau data, evaluated market and demographic trends, and used her own observations and experiences. "You have to take your idea, your business plan, and prospectus and convince people that you and your product are winners," she said.

Then she began marketing her ideas, concepts and experience to potential investors. While it took months of difficult presentations and follow-up efforts, Jackson remained confident. "We never

lost sight of our objectives. We (the team) all work under the premise of a positive mental attitude," she said. "I never doubted that it wouldn't work."

"I have a philosophy. I think that in all business deals, everyone should win to a certain degree; everyone should be somewhat happy. That means we're all doing our job."

"We originally started to test market the product with the consumers in mail order," Jackson said. "Because the retail market is such a gamble, you've got one shot of doing it right. If you blow it, that's it. So we tested our product through direct mail efforts, and through the feedback we received, we were able to make minor improvements before entering the retail market."

Distribution

"Because the food business is so costly to get into, (advertising, promotions, distribution, inventory, overhead, etc.) we looked for other methods of distribution," Jackson said. "That's how Toys R Us got involved." Toys R Us, one of the nation's largest toy stores, will begin to carry My Own Meals products starting this September, firmly cementing Jackson's place in the market.

"We started in retail in April, 1988," Jackson said. "Now, in less than one year, we have grown from one store to over 1,000 stores."

Winning Philosophy

The mark of a truly successful entrepreneur is not always measured by assets or bank balances but is often shown through attitude. "I have a philosophy. I think that in all business deals, everyone (the customers, the retailers, the suppliers, management, etc.) should win to a certain degree; everyone should be somewhat happy. That means we're all doing our job," she said. "On the other hand, no one should be too happy, because then the deal is not fair. If someone is too happy, then someone else is losing out."

Advice to beginners? "While it's important to never lose sight of your goals, it's also important that goals be realistic," she said. "People call me up and say I have a great product, and I want to be retail in one year. I try to get them to come back to Earth. You have to move methodically and in an organized fashion." ³

National