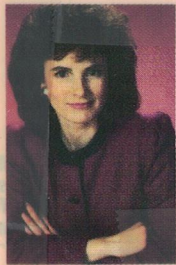


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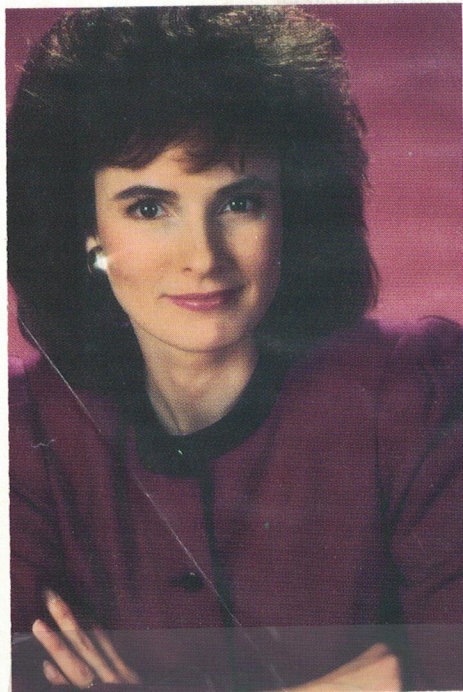
**Marketers face a "downsizing" crunch (p. 18). Mary Ann Jackson of My Own Meals (p. 20).**

### COVER STORY

## Going It Alone

They are, in the main, strangers to debt and "big-brand" ad budgets. But single-product franchises like WD-40 and Murphy's Oil Soap thrive against better-financed competitors, the ultimate "back-to-basics" marketers.

**Mary Ann Jackson (below) saw a niche for microwaveable kids' food and created a category. That was the easy part.**



## My Own Meals Makes Microwaveable History

A scrappy start-up for kids is holding its own against Hormel and Gerber

In the four years since launching My Own Meals Inc., Mary Ann Jackson says she has weathered two types of competition. One is the healthy variety, in which she pits her marketing skills against food-packaging giants. Then there's the harassment, when her products are damaged, their shelf tags torn off and rumors are planted about non-existent production or financial problems.

Still, the president of the Deerfield, Ill. company is not slowing down. She works trade shows for new retail accounts. She visits store managers, and can be found on many a Saturday stocking shelves with her product.

As a marketer at the Swift-Eckrich division of Beatrice

Foods, Jackson saw a niche for shelf-stable, microwaveable children's meals. When the downsizing axe fell at Beatrice, she decided to see if her idea would work. A survey of 2,000 mothers revealed a demand for the product she envisioned. Years before giants like Hormel, Gerber and American Home Products entered the niche, she created it.

It's not clear how successful MOM is. Jackson won't discuss total sales, new markets or line extensions she may be planning. Industry projections put MOM in 6% of the nation, but that includes high-profile markets in northern California, New York, New England, the Great Lakes region and all U.S. military commissaries. And Jackson scored a coup by closing a distribution deal with Toys 'R' Us.

Being small affords MOM a greater nimbleness than its larger competitors. For example, within a week of pitching promotions to such retailers as Cub Foods and Village Markets, Jackson can execute in-store sweepstakes.

She also encourages retailers to develop their own promotions for MOM, for which her company handles all costs and paperwork. "I have found that store managers like to be asked for their ideas," she says.

Competition is heavier than when she started. Hormel launched Kid's Kitchen, which borrowed heavily from MOM's package and label design. Now it is reformulated, repackaged, and reportedly back in test. Chef Boyardee has a full line of shelf-stable lunches aimed mostly at children. And many frozen meals now target kids.

Still, Jackson says winning respect for her company has not been as difficult as it first looked. One final rule: "Don't promise anything you can't deliver."

