

# Inc.

## My Own Mission

When we last saw Mary Anne Jackson, she was gracing INC.'s cover, the subject of our story on former large-company executives who now run their own businesses ("The New American Start-Up," September 1988). Jackson's endeavor, My Own Meals Inc., makes microwavable meals for kids; her immediate plans for the two-year-old company were to saturate the Chicago market with the five products, sell about \$10 million of the \$2.39 to \$2.99 meals in 1989, and hold off going national for a few years.

Plans, of course, are just that: plans. And they change.

Sales in 1989, for example, "aren't even close" to \$10 million. That's because, says Jackson, it took longer to get certain stores signed on—six months for one big chain, close to a year for another. "But they're in now," she adds, "and that's an important accomplishment. That it didn't happen by January 1, 1989, I don't find disheartening."

There's good news, too. My Own Meals are now being carried in some 1,000 stores in midwestern states, New York, and New Jersey—up from about 100 stores a year ago. Among them are 86 Toys 'R' Us Inc. outlets; My Own Meals is the first non-baby food stocked by the \$4-billion toy-store chain.

Jackson's full-time staff of four at the Deerfield, Ill., office is supplemented by free-lance development people, brokers, and production workers. She put together an in-house advertising agency, using free-lancers to design the company's print, radio, and television commercials (one of which is in Spanish); the agency also makes its own media buys. Jackson estimates she spent "well over \$500,000" on advertising in 1989. "I can't succeed unless my retailers sell my product. And they can't succeed unless I do my advertising."

Challenges have included getting good



product positioning and keeping the family of items together. "How retailers are pricing things, how they're merchandising them—I sit down with them and have those kind of conversations frequently," says Jackson. "If it's not selling well, we look at examples where it *is* selling, and see what we both can do differently."

Strong retailer partnerships will be critical for the company in the face of heavy competition. With children's packaged and frozen foods estimated to be a \$500-million business, food giants Geo. A. Hormel & Co. and ConAgra Frozen Foods introduced their own children's meals in the past year. Hormel's Kid's Kitchen is pitched as something children can fix themselves and cost \$1.09 to \$1.29, quite a bit lower than Jackson's prices, revised last spring to \$1.99 to \$2.69. My Own Meals, on the other hand, is pushing its nutritional/no preservatives angle. "We feel competition is good for business overall," says Jackson. "For a new category, more players bring more attention and validate the market."

Jackson has revised 1990 sales projections down to "under \$10 million" and says she expects My Own Meals to be profitable by 1991. Although the company is fully financed for now with \$1.4 million, Jackson may seek additional capital. "If we just stayed where we are, this would be fine. But it depends on your objective: is it to be a big company or a little company? And my objective certainly isn't to be little."

—Leslie Brokaw