

Mary Anne Jackson runs My Own Meals in Deerfield, making food kids, and parents, like.

The mother of MOM

Mary Anne Jackson's recipe for success is feeding kids while meeting parents' needs

By Sally Scobey
Photo by Hung Vu

National corporate headquarters usually are expected to be opulent, dressed in glass, brass or whatever the current decorating trend dictates. Distant receptionists whisper canned, grinless greetings from walnut and marble sentinel posts, letting visitors know in no uncertain terms that they are in the hallowed halls of commerce.

But that's not the case at My Own Meals Inc. in Deerfield. This company makes no stab at pretense; there are more important things to do.

A receptionist at a chipped Formica desk offers a welcome with her twinkling eyes and a smile as endearing as a birthday card. Mary Anne Jackson is the receptionist this day, and she also happens to be president of My Own Meals, a small corporation making microwaveable children's dinners that contain no preservatives or additives and can be stored without refrigeration. The idea is Jackson's brainchild.

"What we're doing is providing an alternative to home-cooked meals for working moms and busy moms who take their kids to swimming and ballet lessons. They just aren't home all day long to cook like the June Cleavers of the world. Our niche is related specifically to nutrition, portion size and taste for kids."

The concept seems to be working: My Own Meals are distributed in grocery stores in 12 states. The American Association of Pediatrics, after testing the meals, allows Jackson to advertise in its

Health Kids magazine, a step that she says amounts to an indirect endorsement. And My Own Meals is the first nonbaby food stocked by Toys 'R' Us.

With crisis comes opportunity, and Jackson's idea was born of adversity. She was a casualty of a leveraged buyout, losing her position at Beatrice Foods in 1986. She had spent eight years there in new products, accounting, strategic planning, mergers and acquisitions, public relations and other departments—enough experience to make her way on her own in the packaged-food industry.

"I loved working at Beatrice, because I used it as a learning ground," she says in brisk speech that suggests there is no time for wasted words. "I learned as much as I could, and I told them I was going to run a company one day, and it could be theirs, or somebody else's or maybe my own, but it would be a business that I was going to run."

"I went through a number of ideas, [for example] frozen sauces, since I had done some frozen-food research when I was at Beatrice. But my husband [Joe, a partner in the accounting firm of Peat Marwick Main & Co.] would give me these faces every time I would come home with these crazy ideas," she says. "I kept telling myself there was an idea out there that was just begging for me."

The idea finally came to her while riding the commuter train, mentally going through supermarket aisles and wondering how she could pair her expertise with a need. Then it struck her. "I had been complaining for so long that

See Meals, pg. 8

Meals

Continued from page 1

nobody's doing meals for children. My daughter [Katie, now 5] was old enough to be out of baby food. I worked, and I was often out of town. What is she going to eat if I'm not there? I used to prepare foods on the weekend and freeze them so she'd have meals during the week [for the baby-sitter to prepare]. I thought, 'This is it!' I went home and told my husband, and he said this was the first idea that had some possibilities."

Using a list she got from a diaper service she had used for Katie, she sent out a survey asking 2,000 Chicago-area parents about the kid's-meal concept. Then she took their feedback to a development firm for a product to be created by food-science specialists. When prototype products were developed, she took them to schools and neighborhood play groups and asked the kids to try them.

"We'd ask what kinds of vegetables they liked." She points to a box named "Chicken, Please."

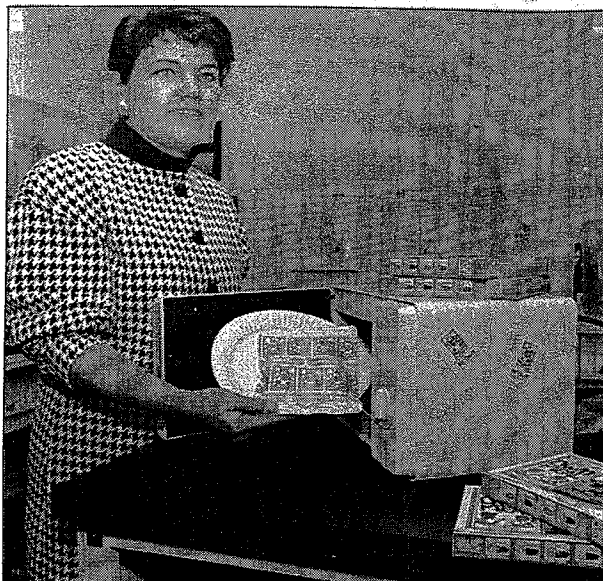
"This meal had green beans in it when we started and now has corn and carrots because only 53 percent of kids would eat green beans. We'd also ask moms to taste it and get their feedback. We reformulated and retested for over eight months. Our marketing is directed toward two groups. Moms are the initial buyers; kids are the repeat."

To say Mary Anne Jackson is tenacious may not adequately account for her resourcefulness. After the buyout, Jackson was sent by Beatrice to an out-placement firm that gave her new contacts with other unemployed executives. She wasted no time gleaming their expertise about her idea.

It soon became obvious to the out-placement firm's managers that Jackson wasn't looking for a job, because she was spending her time drawing up marketing and business plans and doing mailings. She was asked to leave and she took her idea and a few former food-industry colleagues home to Deerfield and her family room to start developing the meals in 1987.

At the time, Jackson was pregnant with Joey [now 3], and to further complicate matters, office conditions in Jackson's home were far from ideal.

"The computer and the Xerox machine were in the laundry room," says former Beatrice coworker Beth Martin, a vice president of My Own Meals. "And the



Beth Martin, a vice president of My Own Meals, tries out a product in the office microwave.

portable phone only worked 10 feet from the washer. In order to use the phone, you had to step into the laundry room, so we had a little chair there. Callers could hear the washer and dryer going in the background. It was quite cute," Martin says with a grin.

When Jackson and company passed the meal-development stage and started making sales contacts and conducting meetings, it was time to get an outside office. Quarters are still cramped. Just inside the front door are bulging file cabinets and stacks of boxes stuffed with pilot meat-and-sauce meals ready to be shipped off to young taste-testers.

The entrepreneur makes no apologies for her lack of corporate ambience in the rented office space at 400 Lake Cook Road, Suite 107, in Deerfield. In fact, she explains proudly how she got the metal desk used in the boardroom for \$25 from a Deerfield Village public auction.

Clients frequently are astonished by the meager surroundings, according to Martin. "I get calls all the time from people who want to come work for us. They think we're huge and growing, with maybe hundreds of employees," she says. The front-office reality is this: four full-time employees and three part-timers.

Martin travels monthly to South Carolina to oversee product preparation at one of the few plants in this country that can handle the

special shelf-stable (non-refrigerated) packaging.

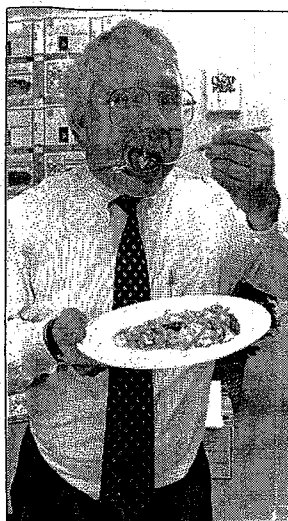
Jackson and Martin love sharing stories about confused callers expecting a much larger operation. The callers ask if the switchboard is closed after 5; they don't realize that there is no switchboard, and Jackson is as likely to answer the phone as anyone in the office.

Business people ask to talk to another department so as not to bother the corporate president with mundane transactions, but what they get is Jackson. There's lots of laughter and good-natured kidding in the office, a far cry, Martin says, from the corporate environment she left behind.

"There are only two other companies that produce children's meals, and they're frozen [Tyson's Looney Tunes Meals and ConAgra's Kid Cuisine]," Jackson says. "The ones in the freezer case say, 'No artificial colors or flavors.' Frozen items need preservatives to prevent freezer burns and discoloring. Our packaging says 'Nothing artificial, no preservatives, no MSG.'"

Hormel has a shelf-stable children's product in testing, but Jackson says she welcomes the competition and that other products just verify the importance of the market.

On the back of the package is Jackson's picture and her pledge to mothers that their children will be eating a quality meal. She is the mom who wasn't satisfied



Tribune photo by Hung Vu

Jack Gordon, another vice president, samples one of the company's meals in the small Deerfield office.

with what was available, so she created her own. Because of that image, which is reinforced in ads, she often receives mail from parents who have tried one of the five meals available. Those parents are often contacted to product-test the next chicken-and-vegetable or meatball-and-pasta combination.

Jackson seems to take delight in distributing her philosophy along with product-quality information. For instance, child safety is an issue that will prompt a stern lecture as she points out that she did not create the meals to be microwaved by children themselves.

"Look at some of the advertising [for other products] out there that says ... 'and I can prepare it myself,'" she says. "And you have this little kid putting it in the microwave. What if he looks to see if it's done, and the microwave is raised above him. He can tip it and burn his face and upper trunk."

If visitors aren't around, Jackson might pad around the office in stocking feet, the neatly tailored jacket of her navy suit left on her chair. But make no mistake, she is the corporate businesswoman when it comes time for interviews and seeking investors. Tacked up on metal files with refrigerator magnets in her office are pictures that her children painted. Over her second-hand desk is a quote: "Persistence and determination are omnipotent."

Her persistence shows in her insistence that she not be "one of the few" women at the top of the corporate ladder in her industry. "Now what is really funny," she says with a look that suggests she thinks the issue is tragic, not comic, "is that a lot of my friends are chairmen of the boards, big shots at major food companies throughout the country. I'll call them up periodically and ask, 'So, how many women [do you have working for you], what are their jobs, what are you doing?'"

"I had one bad day when a venture firm indicated that if I were a man, they'd put money into it; since I wasn't, they probably wouldn't. A chairman of the board friend called me that day, and I demanded to know how many women he had working for him in director positions. It totally threw him off guard. He said, 'Well, we have lots, I mean, several ... there's some.' But they were in human resources public relations, typical women's places—no position that has any accountability for the operations of the company. He said he tried to hire a CFO [chief financial officer], but he said he couldn't find a woman who was qualified. I told him to call me next time."

That persistence also shows in her approach to family life. Because her office is only a few miles away, she would go home to nurse Joey during lunch after she moved the office out of the family room. Ever the organizer, to the point of being a self-described "neurotic lady," she signs forms for the hospital and the doctor's office so they're authorized to take care of Katie and Joey if she is out of town and Joe is with a client and can't be reached. At home as at work, the bases are covered.

The extra hassles are worth it, the mom of MOM (the initials of her product weren't chosen by accident), and of Katie and Joey, insists. It's clear that she wouldn't give up either her career or her family without a fight. She says her husband and she have a pact. They don't do anything in their off hours unless the kids are included. The couple have turned down invitations to weddings and New Year's parties because they were adults-only celebrations. Family is paramount.

"Being a mother is the most wonderful experience you will ever have in your entire life. Think of the most pleasurable and the most wonderful feeling you've ever had and multiply it by 10. You can't even imagine."

"And what's so good about it is you live your life all over again. You get to experience what it was like when you were 2 years old

and Mommy gave you a big hug and a kiss and put a special Band-Aid on it."

Joe Rutzky, president of LaGrou, a Chicago food-distribution center, says Jackson has the respect of the old-timers in the industry. "She knows what she's talking about; she's very thorough in her market research. She's even showing some of the old boys new tricks. She doesn't have to take a back seat to anybody."

She enjoys the role of maverick, saying she "can't get any better jollies than shaking up the food industry."

"It's a mission, because the other major food companies who have all the money in the world and who could create these products easily, aren't. The people who run those companies have been parents so long ago they're probably grandparents. They're so far removed [from society changes and working moms] they don't see the problem. We understand that because we've been there. We need good meals for kids. This is the future generation, the future of our country. We should be feeding them properly."

Her energy seems boundless. She sews and works out at a fitness center. She will leave work an hour early to exercise, but she says she's always home at 7.

Her active lifestyle is not generated by her new position. When she was receiving her bachelor of science degree in business accounting from the University of Connecticut, she started a professional business sorority because the fraternity didn't let her in. The sorority was voted the most successful organization on campus. She has since received an MBA from De Paul and is a CPA, accredited in Ohio and Illinois.

Nor is she likely to stop here. "I'm not a maintenance-type person," she says. "I'm a develop-it, grow-it and move-on-type person." She is looking at products for seniors and other age groups and already has marketed MOM to the government for military commissaries.

She zealously guards her sales figures but hopes for figures this year to be "around \$5 million." This mother of invention has no plans to sell her creation once figures start riding high, but she says she would like to toy with a merger or acquisition of her own down the road. She knows firsthand how difficult that will be.

"It's hard to find companies to buy," she says. "This is the most fun in your whole life, and why would you want to go out and sell your company? It's your baby." She flashes a smile. "This is my third child."