

M.O.M.'s the word

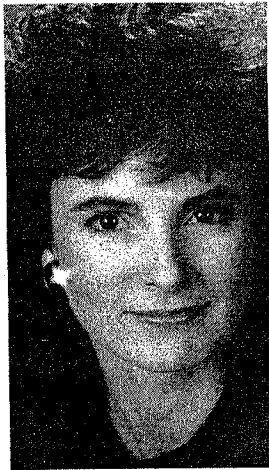
by Janice Rosenberg

Self-esteem, self-confidence, and a great idea are basic ingredients if you want to start your own business. Anyone who meets Mary Ann Jackson, president of My Own Meal's, Inc., in Deerfield, can tell she has plenty of the first two. The great idea turned up right in her own backyard.

"Being a working mother, I'd been complaining for years that no one was making good-tasting, healthy, nutritious meals for kids," she says. "After baby food, what was there? Canned pasta, fast food, macaroni and cheese that's full of garbage. So I figured if I'd been complaining about it for so many years, why not take action and do something?"

What she did was create and market a shelf-stable main course for kids called "My Own Meal." In numerous varieties — ranging from "My Kind of Chicken" to "My Favorite Pasta" — Jackson's product is available in over a thousand markets in the mid-west, New York, California, and Virginia. "We're getting authorized to be in military commissaries right now," she adds.

Jackson, 37, has an M.B.A.



Mary Ann Jackson, president, My Own Meals.

and is a C.P.A. She spent eight and a half years at Beatrice Foods, Inc. "I worked in accounting for four years," she says. "Then I became their food strategic planner. I traveled all over and dealt with international companies, mostly food related."

She gained experience with new products by working on an idea she had for a new category

of frozen foods. "I worked on the business plan for it at night when I was out of town, which was all the time," she says. Although Beatrice liked her idea, they never actually used it. Jackson benefited by becoming an expert on frozen foods.

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After an assignment to "turn around" a Beatrice subsidiary and a short sojourn developing a nacho cheese sauce, Jackson asked for a transfer to operations and was appointed director of business and operations planning for Beatrice subsidiary Swift-Eckrich. A year and a half later, her career at Beatrice came to a sudden halt when the company fell victim to a leveraged buy out.

"I loved working at Beatrice," Jackson says. "It was a very good learning experience. We had so much fun. And then I got canned."

My own business

Unemployment brought headhunters with offers ranging from vice president of advertising to director of mergers and acquisitions. What Jackson really wanted to do was run her own company. She considered and discarded the idea of buying a business — "Those

available were mostly restaurants, or in really bad shape" — and decided instead to start her own.

"It wasn't like I had a million ideas," she admits. Still, in September, 1986, just four months after her last day at Beatrice — an eternity to the fast-paced Jackson — she had dreamed up her newfangled kids meals. Choosing a name took some thinking. "Having worked in the food industry I knew that every name gets shortened to acronyms," she says. "I wanted one that would mean something. I went through hundreds. When I got to My Own I knew I was on the right track."

My Own Meals, MOM for short, suited Jackson because she wanted her product to appeal to parents as well as kids. She read hundreds of cookbooks and came up with twenty-four meal concepts. Then she hired a foods development firm to work on her product.

"The firm was in New Orleans, so I was traveling again," she says. "We whittled the possibilities down to ones we thought would actually work. The firm made sample batches for us. Then we arranged focus groups, children in one room, parents in the other and tested our food on real people."

Eighteen months later My Own Meals in their brightly colored boxes were sharing grocery shelf space with canned chili and dried macaroni dinners. Jackson's choice of a shelf-stable product was an important one. "We didn't do the freezer because anyone can get into the freezer with something they make in their own kitchen," she says. "On the other hand, store freezer space is limited and very competitive."

Instead, Jackson decided to package My Own Meals in

hermetically sealed pouches. Jackson calls them "flexible plastic cans." The pouches are specially manufactured and environmentally friendly, the food moist. "The process is just like canning tomatoes," she says. "My Own Meals can remain on the shelf for about a year. After that they won't hurt you, but the flavor or appearance might not be right."

At-home preparation involves boiling the pouches or microwaving them for ninety seconds. Complete instructions including a warning — "These meals are to be prepared by an adult. Not by children." — are printed on both the box and the bag.

"We had a campaign on microwave safety," Jackson says. "Children can get burned by the steam when they open the pouch or by the food itself when they eat it. We are very concerned about that."

"We're the only ones with no preservatives and no MSG."

Jackson is extremely proud to be offering a product that's good for consumers. "We're the only one that's all natural," she says. "We're the only one portion-size and developed specifically for children's nutritional and taste needs. We're the only one with no preservatives and no MSG." Her own children, ages six and two, think My Own Meals are delicious.

Next on Jackson's agenda are line extensions and expansion into other areas having to do with kids and food. "Finding that first idea isn't easy," she says, "But once you have it, you can think of a billion ideas that feed out of it." The only problem she has now is finding time to do them all.

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