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On the Job

By Mary Beth Sammons

From Unemployed To Entrepreneur

How One Mother Made Picky Eaters Her Business

Like many first-time mothers, Mary Anne Jackson, 36, returned to her full-time job following the birth of her child in the spring of 1985 with a "terrible case of working-mother guilt." In an attempt to assuage those feelings, she spent Sunday nights slaving over her kitchen stove, determined to cook up a week's supply of nutritionally balanced meals to be doled out to her daughter, Katie, by the baby sitter.

"I was quite obsessive about pureeing fresh-cooked vegetables for Katie and, when she started eating solid foods, grinding my own lean meats for meatballs—one of the few foods she really liked—and then freezing enough food to get her through the week," recalls Jackson, who was then a director of operations planning for a division of Beatrice Companies, Inc., a food manufacturer based in Chicago.

"One night I was at a party sponsored by my husband's office, and I was talking with some of the women about what we fed our kids," continues Jackson. "I mentioned how I was freezing all this food on Sundays.

Mary Beth Sammons is a business writer and columnist for "The Daily Herald" in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

Bill Arsenault



Soon after, I started getting calls from these women, and then hearing from their friends and friends of those friends. They all kept asking me, 'Tell me your secret. What are you cooking, and how can I do it?'"

That's when she had a brainstorm: "Why doesn't someone figure out a way to produce and mass-market nutritious, easy-to-make meals for kids?" she remembers thinking. "Hmmm, why not *me*?"

Today Jackson's My Own Meals (MOM, for short)—a collection of five microwaveable and boilable entrees for 2- to 8-year-olds—can be found on grocery-store shelves in 10 Midwestern states and in 86 Toys "R" Us stores in seven states. The dinners can also be purchased through mail order. She projects sales reaching \$1.5 million by the end of 1989.

DOING HER HOMEWORK

Jackson's success didn't happen overnight. In fact, it wasn't until 1986, a year after her flash of inspiration struck, that she was forced to give her idea some serious thought: Her job at Beatrice was eliminated after a corporate reshuffling.

Using her own Sunday-night culinary creations as a starting point, Jackson began by zeroing in on her concept. She wanted to devise a food product that would appeal to kids and be good for them, but be easy for moms to make. Through her work at Beatrice, she already knew

that vacuum-sealed plastic pouches were the way to go. Foods packaged in this manner, unlike frozen or canned foods, do not require additives or preservatives, and they can be kept without refrigeration for up to a year. They can then be

reheated right in their plastic pouches.

Next, Jackson set up shop at the outplacement center her former employer was sponsoring. There she tapped seasoned food-industry experts (who had also been fired) for free advice on every phase of starting a business—from advertising and marketing to new-product development.

"These people were just sitting around, depressed about losing their jobs," says Jackson. "I wasn't afraid to ask for their advice. If they said no, I'd ask if they knew anyone else who might help me. 'No' to me means try again, ask a different way."

Corporate experience had also taught her that a thorough understanding of the market and the competition was the key to success. So Jackson spent two months "reading everything I could get my hands on about kids and nutrition and researching any company that could be a potential competitor," she explains. (Continued)

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WHAT MOMS—AND KIDS—WANTED

To test her idea, Jackson enlisted her diaper service to distribute questionnaires (at no cost to her) to the 2,000 mothers on its route. "The response was overwhelmingly positive," she says. "Mothers were attaching two- and three-page letters to the questionnaires, writing, 'Thank you. It's about time for something like this,' and listing their suggestions for the meals."

Armed with these mom-mandated food requirements—MSG and hot dogs were absolute no-no's—and her own daughter's preferences, Jackson came up with 24 menu ideas by late 1986. She then tracked down and hired a food-development company whose team of dietitians and nutritionists helped her develop 10 of these ideas into possible meals.

For the next five months Jackson staged about 40 taste-testings at Chicago-area nursery schools, day-care centers and friends' homes. She would ask the mothers for suggestions and listen to the kids as they ate the meals, paying close attention to their "yucks" and "mmms."

"Everything the moms and kids told me was taken into consideration for the final product," says Jackson. The most popular selections became the My Own Meals line, which includes a chicken and vegetable stew with potatoes, corn and carrots; a pasta meal of ground pork, macaroni, barley and lentils in a tomato sauce; a chicken dish with brown rice, peas and carrots; meatballs with raisin bits and macaroni shells in a tomato sauce; and ground turkey meatballs with noodles and vegetables.

In August 1987, soon after the taste-testings were completed, Jackson moved her computer and copy machine out of the laundry room of her home and into a small



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office in a nearby office complex. One month later her second child—a son, Joey—was born.

But she took only a short break before tackling her business's last major stumbling block—finding financial backers. She and her husband, Joseph, a C.P.A., contributed \$60,000 from their savings. Jackson then embarked on a door-to-door campaign for investors. By calling on food-industry colleagues, friends and "people I'd been told

liked to invest in new ventures," she raised over \$1.3 million through three private stock offerings.

Five major Chicago banks turned down her request for a loan, but Jackson still refused to take no for an answer. "I just kept pushing until I found a loan officer who fell in



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love with my product and believed in me," she says. Finally his bank, which had already turned her down once, issued her a line of credit for \$200,000.

ON THE ASSEMBLY LINES

It was now February 1988 and time for MOM to become a reality. Jackson found a manufacturer in South Carolina to cook and mass-produce the meals. The day the first 600-pound batch rolled off the production line Jackson was "so excited I had tears in my eyes."

But after two years of hard work, her excitement immediately fizzled into despair. When she bit into her first MOM dinner, she says, "It tasted terrible, and it looked all mushy. I was so *frustrated*, but I refused to give up."

Instead, she worked alongside the factory crew for three weeks until they were all satisfied with the results. When she was confident she had a supermarket seller on her hands, Jackson flew back to Chicago with a suitcase filled with My Own Meals. Within days she had persuaded several neighborhood grocery stores to test them on their shelves. An additional 7,500 meals were shipped from the factory to moms who had participated in Jackson's original diaper-service survey or the taste-testing groups, and to grocery-store owners and media representatives.

Rather than cross her fingers and wait for cash-register receipts to dictate MOM's fate, Jackson promoted her product from every angle she could think of—from placing TV and radio ads with her slogan, "Mary Anne Jackson, a mother as concerned about her own children as about yours," to staking herself out in grocery-store aisles and personally introducing the product to shoppers.

The product's packaging, a slim box with childlike, hand-written lettering and a drawing of a small boy and girl daintily eating the meals, was designed to appeal to both moms and kids. "At first I thought about putting cutesy little animals on the package, because kids would like that," explains Jackson. "But I wanted moms to see the picture of the children and say, 'That's how I want my kids to eat—just like little ladies and gentlemen.'"

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In August 1988 one of Chicago's major food chains agreed to stock the dinners. By the end of 1988 MOM had rung up sales of close to \$200,000. In five years Jackson projects sales of \$60 million.

"Word of mouth has been my best advertisement," she says. "Whenever I meet a mom with young kids, I tell her about my meals and ask her to please tell a friend."

Do her own children eat My Own Meals? "You bet," says Jackson. "Katie loves the pasta dinner, and Joey's a chicken lover. They eat them at least six times a week. I even eat them myself. Whenever someone wants to do business over lunch, I tell them to come on over to my office—and it's My Own Meals on the house."

For more information or mail-order forms, write to: My Own Meals, P.O. Box 334, 400 Lake Cook Rd., Suite 107, Deerfield, IL 60015. ■

