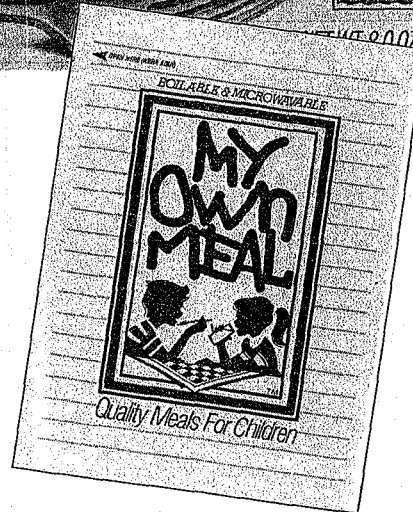


MARKETER OF THE MONTH

A M.O.M. FOR ALL SEASONS

Mary Anne Jackson calls upon her own experiences as a working mother to create a line of microwavable meals for kids.



Laid off from Beatrice, Jackson took to the supermarket aisles to find a niche the big companies had ignored.

By HARRY L. FOSTER

Here's the scenario. You're a working mother, well-educated, young, moving steadily up the corporate ladder at a major food company. In your position as director of operations planning, you deftly balance a half-dozen major projects, marriage, a family—in short, you're a woman on the fast track. You want it all and you won't be satisfied until you get it.

Then suddenly, your company is gobbled up in a takeover and your position is terminated. You wake up the next morning and all you have to show for ten years in the business is a Rolodex full of names and a nagging thought that maybe at the ripe old age of 33 you're already washed up. You report to corporate outplacement, where you encounter a number of your fellow (now ex-) employees looking shell-shocked and stressed out. The atmosphere is all doom and gloom, and for a moment you seriously consider chucking it all and going home to your daughter, figuring that maybe you can assuage those feelings of guilt you used to get every morning when you left her standing in the doorway as you rushed off to slay the corporate dragon. After all, who would blame you? You put in your time, gave it your best shot, and you had your success. And even though you've got a few solid offers coming in, the prospect of starting over isn't really all that tempting to you.

Unless, of course, you're Mary Anne Jackson. Jackson isn't the kind of person who lets a little thing like losing her job get her down. As a matter of fact, Mary Anne Jackson isn't the kind of person who lets *anything* get her down. Jackson's outlook on life is so overwhelmingly positive that to spend more than two minutes with her puts you in serious danger of becoming another in a long line of converts to the Jacksonian philosophy, which she neatly sums up as: "People are wonderful, and if you ask them for help, they *will* help you."

A bit naive, you say? A little too wholesome and bubbly for the down-and-dirty world of corporate politics? Well maybe you should know something else about Jackson before you pass judgement. You see, Mary Anne Jackson is the founder and president of My Own Meals (M.O.M. for short), a Deerfield, IL, maker of a line of microwavable meals for children that has been turning Midwestern mothers (and their kids) into walking advertisements for Jackson's company.

The five My Own Meal varieties—Chicken, Please; My Kind of Chicken; My Meatballs & Shells; My Turkey Meatballs; and My Favorite Pasta—contain no preservatives, no MSG, and absolutely nothing artificial, claims Jackson. But what makes M.O.M. unique is that the line is shelf-stable, not frozen, and the single-serving meals (which retail from \$2.39 to \$2.99, depending on the variety) can either be microwaved or boiled in their own vacuum-sealed retort pouches.

The recipes themselves are similar to the kinds of things Jackson used to pre-

pare for her own daughter, back when she was still working at Beatrice Foods in Chicago. Jackson's rise through the corporate ranks from senior accountant (she's worked for both Price Waterhouse and Peat Marwick) to director of operations planning for Beatrice's Swift/Eckrich division had put her in a position that most first-time mothers can readily identify with: having to work, but also trying to provide a stable environment for her child. The result of this kind of balancing act, says Jackson, is that you spend most of your time feeling guilty, and one of the ways she dealt with that guilt was by seeing to it that her daughter ate healthy and well-prepared meals.

Of course, not every working mother spends as much time as Jackson did studying nutrition and planning extensive menus, but even Jackson will admit that she's "somewhat obsessive."

"I would write out these detailed menus for the babysitter, lists of phone numbers for every kind of doctor you could imagine, emergency numbers where I could be reached at any given moment," says Jackson. "Of course, now I have it all pre-printed, which I guess you might say is even more obsessive. But that's just the way I am."

At that time, Jackson's obsessiveness hadn't yet led her to any thoughts of becoming an entrepreneur, although, reflecting on it now, she does admit that it was always in the back of her mind.

"While I was with Beatrice," she says, "I was so involved in my work that I never had enough time to *think* about starting my own company. But when the takeover happened and I was terminated, I had this feeling that the time was right—although some of the offers I was getting did make me think twice about going off on my own."

The first thing she had to do was decide what kind of business to get into. She had only two requirements: first, that the company sell some sort of food product, and second, that it would offer her the opportunity to use all the knowledge and contacts she had built up over the years at Beatrice.

"I looked into a lot of different things," she says, "and to tell you the truth, I was having some real trouble finding just the right item. I went up and down the aisles of the grocery store, basically looking for an area that I felt needed some work. I looked at baby food, frozen food, and a lot of different things. But I realized that if I got into areas like that, I would end up being just another small-time competitor. To me that didn't make sense. I mean, why be like everybody else?"

As it turned out, the thing that finally pointed Jackson in the right direction was something she was well acquainted with: the needs (and guilt) of working mothers. "Once I started talking to other mothers and found out they all had this same problem—worrying about what to feed their kids—I said 'That's it!' It was just so obvious, and on top of that, it was an area that was basically wide open."

Using her own menu-planning and cooking experience as a jumping-off point, Jackson enlisted the help of her friends and business associates. She

called on Elizabeth Martin, another former Beatrice employee who has since become vice president at My Own Meals. With Martin's help, Jackson began drawing up an extensive marketing plan, creating a series of charts covering everything from manufacturing to packaging to advertising.

With the planning process underway, Jackson had to come up with just the right combination of ingredients, nutrition, and convenience, and for this she contacted Food Innovisions, a Louisiana food technology company that she knew through her experiences at Beatrice. Working closely with dietitians and nutritionists, and using the company's test kitchens and pilot manufacturing facility, they developed a tentative menu, adapting the individual meals for large-scale production. At the same time, Jackson sent questionnaires to a cross-section of working mothers, asking for feedback and suggestions, which were followed by extensive taste tests with children and mothers.

Jackson also called upon the expertise of some of her former colleagues from Beatrice, using the company-sponsored outplacement sessions as a kind of think tank to gather information on the marketing aspect. "I got an awful lot of help from those sessions," says Jackson, although she does admit that it was a rather strained environment, particularly given her own enthusiasm about her new company.

"As you can imagine," she says, "the general atmosphere is pretty downbeat in that kind of situation. But there I was, running around with all this energy, asking questions, and probably making a real nuisance of myself. It's just that at that point I was so into starting this business! I was saying 'Come and work for me for free. At least you'll have some fun.' And I'll tell you, I got so much help from those people that I could never repay them."

Even though My Own Meals is still largely a Midwestern phenomenon, its marketing and manufacturing aspects extend far beyond the company's metro Chicago-northern Indiana-southern Wisconsin market area. In addition to its original connection with Louisiana's Food Innovisions, the M.O.M. line is prepared and packaged by So-Pak-Co, a South Carolina processor, one of only a handful of companies that could accommodate M.O.M.'s unique plastic retort pouch.

Once the meals are ready to be shipped, they go directly to M.O.M.'s warehouse operation, Chicago's La Grou Co., with brokers in the tri-state area supplied from this single location. At last count, the M.O.M. line could be found in every major Chicagoland chain—Jewel, Dominic's, Central, and Treasure Island to name a few.

Donn Robbins, president of Milwaukee food broker Seavey & Jay, which is now moving M.O.M. into Wisconsin, says that he's encouraged by the rapid success of the product after only a month in the market. "They've definitely found a niche," he says. "I think we're looking at a product with fantastic potential. A lot of the major companies are starting to develop similar lines and I'd say it's only a matter of time before the whole market explodes."

Robbins is another Beatrice alumnus, although he didn't meet Mary Anne Jackson until after he was with Seavey & Jay. It wasn't long before he became well-acquainted with the Jacksonian methods. "I'll tell you," he says, "this is one dynamic and outgoing lady. There's no shortage of energy there. In fact, there are times when I wish I had some of it."

The kid-food dynamo is so charged up that she shows little concern for major manufacturers that could easily bury her with me-too products. "At this point," she says, "there are a couple of similar products, like Hormel's Kids' Kitchen line, but they're not really the

same. The way I look at it, this just validates the market for us, and in my mind, that's great!"

But isn't she worried about the broader distribution, bigger budgets, and just plain old clout that the major companies would have if they decided to go head-to-head with a regional upstart like M.O.M.? "Look," says Jackson, "I'm well aware that we're too small to do everything at once, but I believe you either do one thing right, or you do a bunch of things wrong. We have a long way to go, and compared to what we've been through up to now, I'd have to say that the tough part is just beginning."

When asked about future expansion, Jackson responds with uncharacteristic reserve, although she does allow that offers and inquiries have been coming in from all over the map.

"At this point, we're just concentrating on building up our present markets," she says, "but we've had some interesting overtures. All I'll tell you is that we're currently looking into a few overseas markets, and I've been known to say on occasion that we'll probably be in Japan before we're into the rest of Indiana."

Well, that's a relief. For a moment there, it almost sounded like Jackson was getting cautious. □