

Woman builds company with her own meal plan

By LARRY ENGEL
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Four years ago, Mary Anne Jackson had a good management job at Beatrice Cos. Inc. in Chicago.

She was director of operations planning for a division of Beatrice when she and others lost their jobs in 1986 following a leveraged buyout of the company.

Today, the 36-year-old wife and mother of two is an entrepreneur, the founder and president of My Own Meals Inc., Deerfield, Ill., a producer of nutritious, microwaveable and boilable meals for children ages 2 through 8.

Jackson, who spoke to Wisconsin Women Entrepreneurs — Milwaukee at a dinner meeting Tuesday night, talked about her experiences in starting and operating the business during an interview before the meeting.

She spent about 18 months studying her market and developing her products before introducing them. She worked with nutritionists and food technologists to develop the meals.

My Own Meals has five different dishes — Chicken, Please; My Kind of Chicken; My Turkey Meatballs; My Meatballs & Shells; and My Favorite Pasta — priced from \$1.99 to \$2.69.

Each meal is vacuum-packed in a plastic pouch and can be microwaved or boiled.

The meals do not have to be refrigerated or frozen. They usually are stocked on store shelves near the canned spaghetti and other canned meals.

They are available at Pick 'n Save Warehouse Foods, Shop Rite Food Stores, Super Maxx, Sav-U Warehouse Foods, Piggly Wiggly and other stores in Wisconsin.

My Own Meals will be 3 years old next week. It was incorporated Oct. 31, 1986.

"I have learned some lessons," Jackson said. "A lot of people think if you have a contract you are protected. But you should do business with people you feel good about and trust. You don't want to run a business in court. If you don't trust someone, don't do business with them."



Mary Anne Jackson

You also can't start and run a business yourself, said Jackson, who is a certified public accountant and has a master's degree in business administration.

"Whatever you can't do, admit it and get someone to help you. You need a lot of different disciplines. We are very lucky to have a lot of people investing in our company who have different disciplines."

Jackson looked for individuals to invest in her business. She has sold two private stock offerings in the business.

"When you are a very green, start-up company, you have to put your life and sweat on the line and get your friends to do the same."

Planning and research are very important, Jackson said. "Set up a good strong business plan," she said. "Research your product to the hilt. Then you have a story to tell. The more facts you have, the better."

"If you have a decent idea, work hard to develop it, do research, have a good business plan and are persistent, you can get financing," she said.

"Financing doesn't come easy. You will be rejected, but you have to go on. You are not going to find some big investor. That only happens in the movies. You have to work to get what you get."

Jackson recalled being rejected by

banks when she went looking for a line of credit to cover receivables and inventory.

"We went to five different banks. Every bank told me you don't have a proven track record."

"Finally, we found a banker at Harris Bank in Chicago who liked us, our product and our business. He was able to be our champion at the bank. We got less credit than we wanted, but we have been able to get it increased."

"Don't take 'no' for an answer. If you are going to survive, you have to be savvy, street smart and go for it. If you believe you will succeed, you will. I guarantee you will succeed, assuming you have everything else in place."

My Own Meals, which has four full-time employees, contracts with a company in South Carolina to produce and package its meals.

"We don't publicize sales," Jackson said, and added that the company will not be profitable this year. "We have spent a lot of money in advertising. That has to go to tell people about the product and where to find it."

Jackson has not taken a salary in three years. "If you take money out of the company, you have got to put it back," she said. "It's going to be at least another year before I take a salary."

She sounds like she believes her company will succeed.

"There's a definite need for the product in the market," she said.

"We get lots of letters from consumers. We got 75 letters just this morning from consumers in different parts of the country. People are interested in the meals and want to know where they can buy them. They are buying them by mail order. People send us suggestions and favorite recipes for meals they would like to see us offer."

People ask what she'll do if the big food companies become her competitors, Jackson said. "Well, that would say this is a good idea. It would validate the market and we would be able to capitalize on it as well. I don't believe competition is bad. It makes us all work — harder, better and smarter."