

# MOM, INCORPORATED

Mother of two and corporate casualty Mary Anne Jackson has found her niche in a food for kids that moms like, too

BY HEIDI PARSONS

Three years ago, Mary Anne Jackson was doing some consulting work for small food companies in the Chicago area and searching for an answer to the question, "Now what?" which she was forced to ask herself after being fired from Beatrice Cos. that April.

"Even though it resulted from an LBO and I knew it was coming down, it was still unnerving to be let go after 8½ years," says

Jackson. It wasn't that she doubted her marketability—not with an MBA in one hand, a CPA license in the other, and solid experience at Beatrice and two "Big Eight" accounting firms behind her. Jackson's anxiety arose from the realization that opportunity was knocking and the uncertainty of what she'd find when she opened the door.

She found an idea for a line of shelf-stable, nutritionally balanced, preservative-free meals especially for children and in October, 1986, she founded My Own Meals (MOM) Inc. The five-item line consists of two chicken entrees, and one entree based on each of the following: turkey, beef, and pork. She hasn't stopped opening doors since then.

"Every November I sit down and evaluate where I am and write out my goals for the next year," Jackson explains. "For the last few years before I left Beatrice, my objective was to run a company." As she saw it, she had three options: Go back into a corporation as a division head; buy a company; or start up a company. Jackson says the first option seemed safe but unappealing, and the second "I dawdled with. Now that I have my own company, I know why it's so hard to find one to buy. Unless you have a good reason, who



**My Own Meals:** *My Kind of Chicken, Chicken Please (front), My Meatballs & Shells, My Turkey Meatballs, and My Favorite Pasta.*

wants to sell their company? It's like letting someone take your baby."

To prepare for either of the latter options, Jackson worked *pro bono* for smaller firms to get a feel for the challenges and day-to-day workings of that environment, to broaden her view beyond that of an operations manager for Swift-Eckrich. The experience

then, the seeds of My Own Meals had begun to germinate in Jackson's mind.

"I knew there was an idea sitting in front of me and I just couldn't see what it was. I didn't have this idea when I was at Beatrice," she says. But after 8½ years in the food business, she was certain food would be the focus. So she took a mental walk down the supermarket aisles, looking for a need in the marketplace that no one had begun to fill.

Frozen was out, she says, because of the intense competition for shelf space. Canned food could use a little stirring up, but with what type of product? Being the mother of a 1-year-old girl, Jackson was compelled to consider baby food, but that market was sewn up by two major companies. "Finally, I thought, 'Why don't I do what I've been complaining about no one doing? Why don't I make up nutritious meals for kids?'" she remarks.

"I'd been having to spend my Sundays writing menus and preparing and freezing meals for the babysitter to serve my daughter during the week so that I didn't have to worry about what she was eating when I wasn't there," Jackson points out. "So I realized I could really help other moms with these meals."

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MY KIND OF CHICKEN™				
CHILD'S SERVING SIZE SERVINGS PER POUCH	AGES 1-3		AGES 4-10	
	4.0 oz (114g)	2	8.0 oz (227g)	1
	4 oz	8 oz	4 oz	8 oz
	SERVING	SERVING	SERVING	SERVING
CALORIES	110	220	110	220
PROTEIN	11g	21g	11g	21g
CARBOHYDRATES	9g	17g	9g	17g
FAT	4g	7g	4g	7g
CHOLESTEROL	28mg	57mg	28mg	57mg
SODIUM	290mg	590mg	290mg	590mg
FIBER	1.4g	2.8g	1.4g	2.8g
R. D. A.'s for each age grouping				
	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	
SERVINGS PER POUCH	2	1	1	
PROTEIN	46%	71%	62%	
VITAMIN A	*	*	*	
VITAMIN C	*	*	*	
THIAMINE (B1)	1	3	2	
RIBOFLAVIN (B2)	14	23	16	
NIACIN	30	49	33	
CALCIUM	1	3	3	
IRON	3	10	10	

**The nutritional profile** of an average meal, available by mail on request.



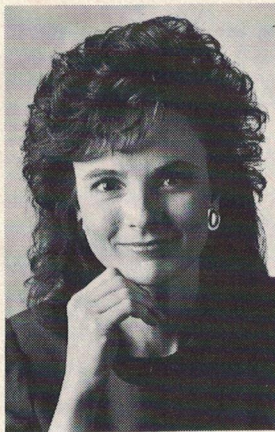
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Jackson knew that besides nutrition, packaging would be a concern. The meal had to be convenient and quick, so it had to be microwavable. And it had to be portable, so that it could go to day care centers, grandma's house, or on vacation. Process of elimination brought her to a retort pouch.

"I asked all my friends with kids what they thought and they liked the idea, so I knew I had a handful of customers, but I wondered about the general public," she says. Working with colleagues from the outplacement firm where she and many other Beatrice amputees spent some time after the ax fell, she developed a consumer survey. She printed 2,000 questionnaires and distributed them through diaper services. "That way, at least I knew the people I was surveying had kids," she says. "And it didn't cost me anything but the postage for the return envelopes."

Whereas the typical response rate on such surveys is 1 to 2%, Jackson notes,



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*President, My Own Meals*

she got better than 15%, and more than 90% of respondents favored the concept. The last page of the questionnaire was left blank for comments; some people filled that and attached additional pages "to tell me how important this type of product was," Jackson says.

Comments included, "I work full time outside of the home. I am gone from 7 AM to 6 PM Monday through Friday. Needless to say, there's not much time for cooking. This type of program, if indeed it pans out to be nu-

tritional, would be ideal. I personally feel this program is long overdue." Another respondent said, "I am glad you are also concerned about the special nutrition needs of young children and will demonstrate that by not using sugars, MSG, starches, etc. Children definitely do not need the items that most adults have acquired a taste for. You have a great opportunity to help change the eating patterns of a new generation."

Once she received that level of encouragement, Jackson set about organi-

zing a company and devising formulations. She combed through cookbooks for recipes that would work for kids and be commercially manufacturable. But her primary guideline was "what moms wanted." Turkey and chicken were favored by 94% of parents answering the survey, versus 74% positive response for beef. Many indicated that vegetables should be included.

### MAKING IT REAL

Jackson boiled down her ideas and parents' suggestions to 24 product concepts and contracted with Food Innovations Inc., Harahan, LA, to work up formulations. Then she set up focus groups to judge the results.

Some difficulties arose with creating turkey entrees, Jackson notes. "We tried turkey breast slices and natural proportion chunks of turkey (IQF) in various meals, but it tended to come out tough and dry. Kids don't have the patience to keep chewing a tough piece of meat," she says. The solution: Turkey meatballs, which are easy to chew, made from thigh and drum meat which is naturally moister than turkey breast.

"We put moms in one room and their kids in another," says Jackson. "Mothers were asked to look at the products and taste them. Then we had the kids try them and evaluate them on taste, appearance, aroma, and color, and say whether they would want their moms to buy it." This was done without showing either group the package, so as not to let that influence them.

"From the focus groups, one thing that came out very clearly was that chicken and rice was going to be a big winner," she notes. "I didn't even have that combination in my original set of concepts, but when they kept telling me 'chicken and rice,' I added it, believe me." Other meals that garnered positive—but not emphatic—response were reformulated and served to the next group for their input.

After a few rounds of this Jackson narrowed it down to five items, and even then a lot of recipe tweaking was necessary to get the scores she demanded in order to take the meals to market. "We use a five-point rating scale, and we had to have 10 out of 10 people in a focus group rate the meal a 5

before it could join the line."

She argues, "You have to rely on focus groups, because you can't predict public reaction yourself. We had some items that I thought were going to be great, but they didn't make it in the focus groups. There was one in particular that 50% of the kids loved and 50% hated—nothing in between. That was dropped immediately."

### GETTING IT RIGHT

Then came the manufacturing, contracted with So-Pak-Co Inc. of Mullins, SC. As the recipes were scaled up to 600-lb. production batches, they lost something in the translation, so Jackson spent 3 weeks with the packer to fine-tune the flavors.

Obtaining the right ingredients was no easy task either. "It took me a long time to find a supplier for the turkey meatballs, because everybody wanted to fill them with soy and there's no reason to do that," says Jackson. "It took me 5 months to find someone to make my beef meatballs, because no one wanted to make them at the lean-to-fat

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ratio I asked for—75/25 was the best most of them would do. That's ridiculous. We finally got someone to make them between 85 and 90% lean. And they've got raisin bits in them for natural sweetness."

While children's tastes were largely responsible for determining the varieties in the line, Jackson says that "kids are not the primary market, mothers are." As a working mother herself, Jackson has often felt the same pangs of guilt over what her children (Kathleen, now 4 years old, and Joey, 2 years) may eat when she's not around. But these days the cloud has a silver lining; she relies on that guilt to sell her product.

"Our radio commercial uses the tagline, 'So serve your kids My Own Meals®, because nothing's as important to your child's tomorrow as the meals you serve today.' And that's true, but there are so many nutrition messages out there, what's the alternative to sifting through a textbook to figure out

what to serve your kids? Serve My Own Meals," Jackson argues.

The meals' microwavability is a help to mothers not just because it frees up their time for activities other than cooking; their 90-second cooking time addresses the problem of fickle appetites. "A kid can decide what he wants for dinner 90 seconds before he eats it," observes Jackson. "It doesn't give him time to change his mind. My daughter does that to her babysitter all the time for breakfast. She'll say she wants an egg, then she'll say she wants French toast after the poor lady has already started to make the first item."

But that doesn't mean Jackson will also try to jump into the breakfast market. Breakfast items are more difficult to package and reheat well, she says, and it would open the question, "With whom is My Own Meals competing?"

### NO CAN DO

"Right now, I'm competing with Chef Boy-ar-dee," Jackson points out. "They have a huge market; we all know that and I'm not taking that away from them. I'm just offering an alternative to

that type of product, as well as hot dogs, pizza, and fastfood. If I tried to do breakfasts, I'd be competing with all the cereals, the frozen breakfasts, and a lot of other unrelated products.

"Breakfast is also relatively easy to accomplish," she continues. "But lunch and dinner—Who's going to make chicken and rice and carrots and peas, or turkey meatballs? I'm going after the meals that require the most time and energy. There's lots of room in this category, and this is just the beginning. You're going to see a lot of new products for children, because we as a society have been neglecting them."

For example, Jackson cites a media report of a study commissioned by McDonalds that found 90% of children under age 7 eat at McDonalds at least four times a month. That tells you how strongly people are searching for convenience kids will eat, she maintains.

McDonalds is widely recognized for attracting kids with an atmosphere of fun that includes play equipment outside many of its units, its own cast of cartoon characters, and meal packages containing activities and toys. None of

this is lost on Jackson, who named her product for kid appeal.

"The name 'My Own Meal' has a lot of impact; the kids know it's only for them," she says. Packages are designed so that inside the box, behind the logo, there's a card kids can clip and use as a trading/calling card. Whereas Jackson might have worn her mother's shoes or used her lipstick, her daughter wants to have business cards just like mom, she says. "It's a big fad now," Jackson remarks. "In fact, there's a whole company devoted to kids' business cards."

Often there is a third party to consider—the babysitter. Day care 'centers' frequently consist of one woman taking care of three or four children. In Chicago and other large cities, many of these operations are run by Hispanics, Jackson notes, so My Own Meals heating directions are in Spanish and English. Speakers of other languages can follow the illustrative instructions.

Many day care facilities require that mothers bring the food their children will eat that day. With My Own Meals, handling is not a problem because they are portable and don't require refrigera-

tion. "You can pop them in your purse and take them anywhere," Jackson notes. "And at \$1.99 to \$2.69, you can afford to take them everywhere."

While she's busy solving other mothers' problems, Jackson ends up spending a lot of time traveling and logging long hours at the office. Because it's her own business, however, she can bring

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her daughter to the office for a pre-pre-school breakfast with Mom. "It's my life now, and I love it, so I don't count the hours I put in," Jackson says. "Now I have three babies—a little girl, a little boy, and a little company."

That little company is growing quickly. The product is in 1,000 stores in 10 states, with primary distribution in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio.

Customers include Dominick's, Kroger, Jewel, SuperValu, Big Bear, and Roundy's, to name a few.

"One thing a lot of people asked me," Jackson remarks, "was, 'Aren't you afraid the big companies will come into the market and wipe you away?' But this country was built on the creativity of smaller companies that were able to get into innovative areas."

She points out that some of her stockholders are individuals who work (or have worked) at major food companies such as Kraft, Quaker Oats, Beatrice, and Uncle Ben's. "They're marketing people who know that this thing's got potential and would love to do it themselves but they can't because of their own situations at their companies," she says. "They want to see it work and they want to be part of it. And every one of them has assessed this product up and down the wazoo."

As for the onslaught she's likely to face from big guns like Hormel and ConAgra, Jackson shrugs and says, "I don't view competition as bad as long as it's fair. In fact, the competition validates our market." □