

Business



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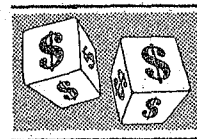
Mary Ann Jackson holds up one of her My Own Meals, a meal-for-kids product she began planning in 1986 and put on the market last year.

She sells MOM's home cooking

"The risk-takers" is a continuing series of stories focusing on the biggest gamblers in American business today: entrepreneurs. Many, like Mary Ann Jackson, whose story is told below, left the security of a big firm to pursue even bigger dreams. They represent the latest wave in business and the biggest risk. Of the 32,000 small businesses that opened in Illinois last year, all but about 4,000 had closed their doors by year's end.

By P.J. Bednarski

A couple of weeks ago as Mary Ann Jackson shopped at a Dominick's food store in Park Ridge, she came upon a mother looking over a package of My Own Meals, the microwaveable meal-for-kids product that Jackson began planning in 1986. Jackson rushed over to the



The risk takers

woman, offered to buy the package for her and struck a deal in the process: In return, the mother would only have to tell her friends about the product.

That's not an everyday occurrence for Jackson, but no doubt it's the kind of hands-on entrepreneurial skill Jackson has been allowed—or forced—to

Turn to Page 58

She sells MOM's home cooking

Continued from Page 55
follow as she tries to succeed on the supermarket shelf.

My Own Meals are child-sized entrees that are nutritionally balanced for children aged 2 to 8. They contain no chemical additives or monosodium glutamate. After test-marketing at just a few groceries in Chicago, My Own Meals are now available at virtually all Jewel and Dominick's stores, and are creeping into Wisconsin markets, too. At year-end, Jackson's company will ring up sales of around \$250,000. She projects \$60 million in revenue five years from now.

"We wanted to focus on a food category no one is in yet," said Jackson, 35. "And I know how the big companies work. If they started today, it would take them two years to come to market with a competing product."

If there were a made-for-television version of Jackson's My Own Meals (the acronym is MOM), it would go something like this: A working mom who's a high-powered executive with two kids develops the habit of preparing nutritious meals for her own children and freezing them for re-use later. Suddenly in 1986, her employer, Beatrice Cos., is taken over in a \$6.2 billion leveraged buyout, and Jackson is dismissed.

Only then does she realize that the care with which she makes her own children's meals is a market in itself. My Own Meals is born, priced between \$2.39 and \$2.99 per meal, with each one carrying a drawing of Jackson and her daughter, Kathleen. (She also has a son, Joseph.) The product debuts in March, 1988, and by November, *Venture* magazine features her My Own Meals as one of the 100 best ideas of the year. Roll the credits and pick up the Emmy.

All of that is true, but the game plan that gave birth to My Own Meals likely would have happened eventually, regardless of the leveraged buyout.

Jackson was the director of operations and planning for the Swift-Eckrich branch of Beatrice when she was let go.

But all along, she says, "it was my plan to run a company or start my own. And when I was about to start my own, hundreds of people tried to convince me to do something else. But my

background obviously helped me. I have hundreds of contacts and friends at Beatrice, Quaker, Kraft." (Indeed, the rest of MOM consists of Beth Martin, who was also canned from Beatrice, and Marian Flynn, who left Frito-Lay.)

My Own Meals, based in Deerfield, started with \$2,000 in seed capital and a \$30,000 loan "advanced" by Jackson and her husband, who, like herself, is a certified public accountant and holds an MBA. Since then, she's raised more than \$900,000 in two private stock offerings, and, after five banks showed her the door, she got a \$200,000 line of credit from Harris Bank (which had turned her down once).

She searched the country looking for a food developer, found in Louisiana, who shared her concern for nutrition. That firm developed five good recipes. The food itself is made by a South Carolina manufacturer under contract.

But it's savvy, moxie, street smarts—call it what you will—that got Jackson where she is now. For example, when she was exploring the idea of creating a nutritious, quick-to-prepare meal for children and wanted to know if there was a market for it, she hit upon the idea of distributing a questionnaire. That's routine. What isn't so ordinary is that Jackson enlisted the aid of her own diaper service, which was glad to distribute the survey to new mothers on their routes.

"My major customer is just the mother," says Jackson, "but let's face it, if the kids don't eat it, I'm sunk. Mothers feel terrible if they leave children alone to go to work, or go on a date with their husband, or have night classes. My Own Meals helps parents feel good about themselves."

That's not just talk. Even before My Own Meals was a go, Jackson knew that potentially she had a \$500 million market, excluding the 45 percent of U.S. families that earn less than \$20,000, and the 5 percent her survey said just wouldn't care for the product.

Her time at Beatrice taught her something else. "You look at the freezer case at a grocery and it's overloaded," she says. "Everyone in the world is there." And while that may be a reason to join the crowd, Jackson decided against it.

Her former job gave her experience in innovative packaging, so when she planned My Own Meals, she determined the product would be what is known as "shelf stable," meaning it never needs to be refrigerated and can stay fresh for at least a year. American consumers have resisted shelf-stable attempts before—Kraft's A La Carte fizzled for five years before it was pulled in 1985—but Jackson points out, "A La Carte had no reason for being other than its packaging."

My Own Meals did. By pushing the fact that the meal needed no refrigeration, Jackson was able to sell the fact that mothers could give My Own Meals to their children to take to school, or carry a few packages with them to the babysitters without worrying about arriving with a soggy mess. What's more, half of the nation's homes have microwaves, but half don't. By making My Own Meals suitable for a microwave or stovetop boiling, both markets were served.

All around the product, there are touches that only a working mother could have thought of providing. For starters, the boilable pouch repeats the cooking instructions that are on the outer cardboard box, because Jackson knows kids sometimes play with the packaging.

And those instructions are printed in English and in Spanish—and illustrated.

As far as marketing My Own Meals, Jackson thinks she has played all the angles. She made sure the first few Jewel stores and independent grocers that carried the product weren't equipped with price code scanners. Why? Competing food companies can and do use data from those scanners to collect information about how well products are moving.

"If you're in business, you check out what other companies are doing before you spit. I know that. I did that. So I don't tell people squat," Jackson says.

For right now, Jackson doesn't take a salary, and for right now, My Own Meals doesn't make money. But next year, Jackson fully expects to turn a profit on \$2 million in sales. In the meantime, radio commercials are on the air now, and a television campaign starts this year.

"Hey, I have the same *modus operandi* I ever did," she says. "I just moved over to a smaller company."