

Mom gives birth to My Own Meals

By KAREN BIESBOER

Today, MOM stands for a lot of things. MOM from a child's point of view stands for security and discipline.

However, as members and guests of Women In Management's South Suburban Chapter recently learned, MOM also stands for a new concept in packaged meals for children. It stands for My Own Meal.

Mary Anne Jackson, president of My Own Meals, Inc. based in Deerfield, told the group how she started in business after spending years in managerial positions with such firms as Beatrice Foods and Swift-Eckrich.

Jackson recounted, "Many people start their businesses by choice. They elect when to leave the work force and go into business. I, on the other hand, was pushed. Due to a leveraged buyout of Beatrice Foods in 1986, I found myself unemployed.

"The experience wasn't as devastating for me as for others as I had my career plan to fall back on. I found that my goal was to run something. I didn't have to own it, but I did want to have management control.

"I'd always worked as a planner, but now it was my turn to be a doer. I looked at my options which were to get a job, buy a company or start a company."

Continuing, Jackson said, "I looked around at many things. Coming from the food industry, I felt my experience could be put to use in that market easier than in any other. As I thought about the new venture, I hit on the idea of creating a convenience meal that was nutritionally sound that would be marketed to the two-to-eight-year-old market.

"As a working mother, I knew firsthand how hard it was to insure that my daughter would receive the nutritional value she should have when I wasn't there to oversee meals. I'd spend weekends preparing meals for the babysitter to serve that I felt were nutritionally balanced. So, I felt there must be other mothers in the same predicament who would welcome this new product," she said.

Drawing on her experience with the large food firms, Jackson realized the planning that would be needed before she could embark on her business endeavor. She knew she'd have to test the waters, so she arranged to have her diaper service distribute a survey to clients for her.

More than 15 percent of those surveyed responded favorably. And the results showed that parents favored turkey and chicken over beef, and opposed MSG and hot dogs.

Most respondents indicated that they would not purchase meals

through mail order. They also volunteered information such as "it has to be easy to prepare"—it has to be complete and balanced without additives or preservatives" and "it has to sell for less than \$3."

Armed with this information, Jackson and a group of volunteers continued to work on product development and research.

She did her homework well and pinpointed her market.

Jackson told the group, "our next big step was actually developing the product. We worked with Food Innovations in Louisiana to develop products that could be used in tasting sessions. We provided them with 25 ideas and then narrowed it to five."

After many reformulations, the product was ready for testing. "We set-up two focus groups. One group consisted of children and the other of parents. I had hired an associate to work with the kids and I worked with the parents. We learned what each group liked or didn't like about the product and we zeroed in on the needs of the parents," she said.

After those groups, she tested the waters by sending product samples to 7,500 households. The food items were packaged in "flexible plastic cans," plastic pouches suitable for

microwave cooking or boiling that allow the food to store for about a year on the shelf. There's no need to keep it frozen.

"Our focus groups recommended that we print the cooking instructions on the pouches themselves. That way, if one of the kids walked off with the box, the instructions were in tact," she said.

Passing every test on the way, My Own Meals was finally ready for mass production. Today, the packaged meals are available in 13 states in the East and Midwest, she said.

Jackson had her fair share of financing problems in the beginning. She started the company with her own funds and a lot of volunteer help.

She is adamant about networking and keeping channels of communication open with people you meet. She repaid some of her volunteers by helping them find jobs when they needed them and she also offered them stock options when she put out her first stock offering.

Jackson ran into difficulties with the banks in the beginning, but now has an established line of credit. In addition, she has formed her own in-house advertising agency. She's advertising in newspapers and on TV and radio.

And in her continued efforts to cut costs, Jackson, her daughter and children of friends can be seen in the television advertising.

To date, Jackson hasn't taken a salary from the company. She prefers to pour as many available dollars as she can into product development.

She knows that some of the larger food vendors are going to develop similar meals and try to cut into her market share. Since no one else has developed meals aimed at the 2- to 8-year-old age group, she has most of the market now, but tomorrow is another story, she said.

She is targeting other markets, and is involved in a pilot program with some day care centers that allows working parents to select and pay for the meals on site. She's also looking at the feasibility of ethnic meals for children.

Jackson commented, "we've come a long way since 1986, but we realize we must go slowly. We want to expand into all 50 states and get our product on the shelves of most grocery stores and on the tongues of most children and parents."

My Own Meals can be found in all Chicagoland Jewel Food Stores, Dominicks and locally at Garafalos. Toys-R-Us is also selling the product.



Star photo by Dave Dorsett

Kathy Johnson, (from left) assistant manager of Tivoli II, and Mary Fischer, of Fischer Dental Studio, share

a few stories with Mary Ann Jackson, president of My Own Meals, which makes packaged meals for children.