



Small Business Builder: Mom Inc.

Looking at Mom as Entrepreneur

First in a Series

By Mary Campbell

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It's 2001; Do you know where your mom is?

Today it's a joke, but many conversations once began with this unfunny exchange:: "Do you work?" "No, I'm a housewife." Today, the adage "a woman's work is never done" has never been more true.

If you're a stay-at-home mom, or if you live with one, it's enlightening to view the job of "homemaker" as the equivalent of running a small business. And if you're thinking of starting your own business, try looking at Mom as an entrepreneur-in-training. You'll learn a lot.

Most women who are homemakers by choice see their job as a professional career, much as home-economics students did from the 1890s to the 1950s. Home economics (or "domestic science") schools served both full-time homemakers and aspiring professionals □ dietitians, preschool teachers, food testers and retail buyers, as well as home-ec teachers and agricultural extension agents.

Make no mistake: Not all stay-at-home moms take the job seriously, and being a homemaker is no picnic. Moreover &

Some two million stay-at-home dads care for about 1.5 percent of America's children under 5.

Families in which both parents work outside the home can function beautifully and foster healthy, happy kids.

Being a stay-at-home mom isn't for everyone; there is and has always been a dark side. (See "Mother's Little Helpers.")

In a Businesslike Way

The best of today's parenting and homemaking professionals manage their homes and families in a remarkably businesslike way. Insurance companies and divorce lawyers argue about the dollar value of "women's work." Estimates range from minimum wage for 40 hours a week to \$30,000, \$50,000, even \$200,000 annually, though many experts argue that the most important part of the job can't be measured.

Don't be fooled by the flippant "Mom's taxi" bumper stickers you see on minivans. Being a homemaker/parent is serious work that requires preparation and skills as diverse, yet specialized, as those of the most determined entrepreneur.

Networking, crisis management, strategic planning, flexibility, delegation, multitasking, management and supervision, education and training □ not to mention flexibility, self-confidence, leadership, and the

ability to remain calm amid chaos □ are just a few of the essential activities and attributes.

Continuing Education

As early as 1900, home-ec majors were studying food chemistry and nutrition, textile and clothing construction, household budgeting, child development, and machinery. Though you'll likely find 21st-century homemakers at the soccer game rather than the sewing machine, they are serious students of nutrition, parenting and financial matters.

They continually research the costs and benefits of, say, occasional high-carbohydrate fast-food meals vs. time constraints and nutrition; organically grown produce vs. that sprayed with chemical pesticides; homemade vs. school lunches; discount-store clothing value vs. name-brand durability. The economic and social importance of supporting local small businesses also weighs in.

Homemaker-moms choose sanity over perfectionism. They can't possibly do everything well, but they can extend their capabilities by networking and delegating. They continually explore available resources: free or low-cost weekly "Mom's morning out" services, often church-sponsored; carpools; grocery and babysitting co-ops; babysitters who, for additional pay, do housekeeping chores. Mothers enlist spouses and kids to share the housekeeping burden, settling for "adequate" rather than expecting "perfect."

Though many mothers "delegate" their children's formal education to the schools, they find it essential not only to reinforce and interpret their kids' learning but also to participate in school activities and get to know teachers, administrators, and other kids and their parents.

A wise parent and a good supervisor have much in common. Though children aren't precisely equivalent to employees, sensible parents set clear expectations for their kids, nurture their educational and personal growth, give them tasks that are both achievable and challenging, require accountability, deliver predictable and appropriate consequences, and foster independence.

Should we be surprised that the mothers who so adroitly manage a relentless schedule of family and children's activities plus planning and preparing meals, housekeeping, shopping, volunteering, healing, and more □ while maintaining balance in their lives and taking care of themselves □ segue so naturally into the entrepreneurial world?

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing and marketing services. Small Business Builder is published on Wednesdays.

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