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Cover Story

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“Mom-trepreneurs” juggle business, family life in awe-inspiring circus act

Jody Purdom | Sonoma Valley Sun

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By loose definition, mom-trepreneurs are budding businesswomen who have embarked on their own careers outside the corporate mainstream. They are contributing to their family's bottom line while still making time for their families and children, PTO meetings and field trips, after school homework help, athletic events and anything else life throws their way.

Even before the country's economic woes, many young mothers seeking a way to help increase their family's monthly income have found that a home-based business is just the ticket. Some of these women have bitten off a piece of a previous corporate career and regurgitated it as a lucrative home-based business. Others have never worked outside the home but have built an interest or hobby into a moneymaking venture.

If necessary, many mom-trepreneurs can take their work with them, managing business from far flung locations or even ... a day at the beach.

Chicago native Wendi Ezgur recently traveled through Sonoma in her family's RV on an once-in-a-lifetime trip that combined business with pleasure and education for her three children, herself and her husband, Mike. Being able to take her work with her was the key to making the trip possible.

Working from the open road

Ezgur was a mom-trepreneur before the phrase was even coined and uses her business savvy in every aspect of her life. Originally an inventor – her first invention was the “twig pencil” hence the name of her company, Leadhead – she morphed her business over time to include product development and a little known concept called ideation. As an ideator, she hones in on consumers' likes and dislikes to improve products for clients like Campbell's Soup, Pizza Hut and Sharpie. In her line of work, Ezgur is often called upon to do the proverbial “make lemonade from lemons.”

“The best part of my business is its flexibility. When we felt the first rumblings of the economic downturn, all I could think of were the opportunities it afforded us,” said Ezgur, as she began to fantasize about different scenarios like moving the family overseas or traveling extensively until things turned around.

Ezgur's husband Mike was much less sure. A commercial real estate developer whose once vibrant business was showing signs of the bad economy, he was prepared to hunker down and ride out the recession. Wendi couldn't let it go and soon the family had bought an RV, were home-schooling the kids and seeing the country as they managed business from the road.

The family began their trip from Chicago in early April and is currently tracking the journey on their website. The children, Rosie, 6, Charlie, 8, and Aidan, 11, have researched each state visited and helped guide site-seeing based on what they've learned.

For Wendi, the trip has been purely inspirational. “Especially today, companies are looking for creative ways to market products. This trip has shown me so much about our country and the vast number of options that are available to people,” said Ezgur, who signed up corporate sponsorship of the trip from the likes of insurance company Geico, IceBreaker Clothing and restaurant chain Sweet Tomatoes. Upon returning to Chicago, Ezgur plans to brand FamilyOffTrack and see where the idea leads her family.

“This trip wouldn't have been possible is it weren't for the flexibility of my business and, if business as a whole had gone as planned. As it were, we got the best of both worlds – travel, education, lots of family time and work to sustain us. We'd do it again in a heartbeat,” said Ezgur.

With the trip, one of the Ezgur's goals is to inspire other families to creatively use their circumstances to take a chance and/or make a life change for the better. Striking out as a mom-trepreneur is a perfect example.

Throughout Sonoma Valley, there are numerous women who have taken the mom-trepreneur route like Wendi Ezgur. Profiled here are just a few.

Charlotte Hart, Independent fashion consultant

Charlotte Hart holds a Masters degree in finance from a prestigious London university. But upon arriving in the U.S. some eight-and-a-half years ago she realized that her field of work doesn't exist here. With a young son at home and no desire to commute to San Francisco to find employment in the finance sector, she felt her working days were over.

But then, she went to a home-based fashion trunk show at the home of a neighbor and had an epiphany.

"I have always had trouble finding clothes and hate shopping and realized that this was the perfect way for me, personally to purchase apparel," said Hart, who decided to host a show first, before committing to being a consultant but was quickly won over and began her new career in 2006. Today, she is an independent fashion consultant for a Los Angeles-based designer of high-end clothing.

For Hart, one of the best aspects of the job is the flexibility to be with her children. She handles two collections a year: spring/summer and fall/winter. Working from a studio above her garage, she can see clients during the day so the job doesn't disrupt her family life. Typically, she'll gather a group of five to 10 women and do a presentation of the entire line in one sitting.

Depending on how interactive her audience is, shows can take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour.

According to Hart, the range of styles and classic lines of the clothing are fabulous for enhancing all sorts of figures.

"By nature, I'm not a salesperson so I love the fact that the clothes sell themselves," said Hart. "People often ask my opinion and I've become a personal shopper more than anything else. I just happen to represent this line of clothing and have a unique little boutique in my home."

Emily's Cottage

While her son Nicholas was just a baby, Emily Fitzpatrick capitalized on her sewing skills and previous work for Country Curtains and created Emily's Cottage, a custom home fashions business specializing in custom slipcovers, cushions and pillows. The company today has a long and impressive list of clients throughout the Valley as well as nationwide by way of her Web site.

Three years ago, Fitzpatrick expanded her offerings to include an enormously popular oilcloth product line that includes tote bags perfect for farmer's market shopping or everyday shopping, reversible placemats that wipe clean in a jiffy and tablecloths in every color of the rainbow.

"Oilcloth is perfect for families because it is easy care and reusable," said Fitzpatrick. "People loved the bags when I first started selling them so I began to offer more choices in terms of size and color and the business just took off.

Today, Fitzpatrick's online business is brisk with orders streaming in from across the country and she also sells her products at the Tuesday and Friday Farmers Market in town.

"My business suits my lifestyle," said Fitzpatrick, who is home when her son returns from school each day.

"Because this is my business, my time is my own. I can help with homework, drive on field trips, and really be there for my son. I manage my life around my work instead of my work managing me."

Clean Come True

Yazbeth Navarrete's business is busy but she says there's always room for more work. Navarrete owns and runs Clean Come True, a home and office cleaning company she founded a little over a year ago.

"My husband's not working right now so building my business is more important than ever," said Navarrete.

"I have a lot of good clients and four women that work for me, and between the five of us, we can do a lot of cleaning."

Navarrete works all over the Valley including the Armstrong Estates neighborhood as well as part of the time at Sonoma Mission Inn and at Three Dog Bakery on Broadway. She cleans offices, homes and even a few rental houses that require fast turnaround, which often makes outsourcing necessary.

"For the rental homes I am often called at the last minute so I rely on my staff to help me out," said

Navarrete.

Navarrete's two children Laney, 9, and Ryland, 4, are currently being looked after by her husband, Sabian. When Sabian's working, she has to juggle home and family-life around her growing business, as do all of the women who work for her.

"My children amuse me. They make me laugh. Going home to them after a long day's work is the best part of my day," said Navarrete.

To contact Clean Come True call 933-1539 or 483-4491

Julie Schindler Design

Julie started her women's apparel company, Julie Schindler Design, while still a student at Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in San Francisco. Operating on the proverbial "shoestring", she created patterns, cut fabric and established a network of goods and services.

Today, Schindler has a portfolio filled with scores of well-known clients but, by her own design, she has chosen to focus solely on her private clientele these past five years. She is a respected and innovative women's clothing designer specializing in unique and elegant coats and sportswear made of high quality, imported European and Asian fabrics. Her successful design business is based out of her home in Sonoma.

For Schindler, work is a panacea. Throw in her family, sons Felix, 12, and David, 4, and husband, Brian, and you have a true balancing act, but one that she relishes.

"My business allows me to be a good role model for my children. They see me work hard and realize that perseverance pays off," said Schindler. "I also think they have more respect for me having another aspect to my life. It encourages them to be more interested and explore the world around them."

Of course, there are times when the best of plans can go awry and Schindler, like many other mom-trepreneurs, finds herself administering to her business and children at the same time. Although, it is the flexibility afforded by working for herself is what keeps Schindler going.

"I've been a designer for 20 years and it's always going to be my passion," said Schindler. "But my children are also my passion and I'm lucky to get to have both in my life."



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