Home Work

The joys and challenges of a home-based business

By Linda Childers

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Shortly after Nancy Whitcraft’s son was born a year ago, the San Mateo woman decided she wanted a job where she could dictate her own schedule and spend more time with her family, yet still pursue a career she loved. The former jewelry sales professional, who also has an education background in fine arts, launched the jewelry design business Blacksheepstyle from her home.

The business is doing well, but what is more important to Whitcraft is the flexibility she has in raising her son.

According to the Center for Women’s Business Research, the number of women-owned businesses has grown in excess of 40 percent over the last 10 years. Couple that with the fact that the number of women choosing to stay home to raise their children has increased by 15 percent, and you realize two things: women are taking charge of their careers and managing them from a place that will give them a sense of power and fulfillment – home.

For most working moms, the idea of doing it from home is a dream come true. While there are certain drawbacks – not least of all never being able to completely escape from the office – they are often outweighed by the benefits. Parents who work from home can often have the flexibility to spend more time with their children and attend their activities, volunteer in classrooms and carpool to their hearts’ content.

As we start off a new year – and a new decade – Bay Area Parent introduces our readers to some moms who are making it work for them. From work-at-home jobs like medical transcription and tutoring to businesses that rely on a unique skill set, there are myriad opportunities available to parents who want to earn an income from the comfort of their own backyard, dining room table or den.

Bringing Home the Family Bling

Who: Nancy Whitcraft, mother of a 10-month old son; owner of Blacksheepstyle, San Mateo

What she does: Blacksheepstyle is a line of affordable sterling silver charms, necklaces and earrings featuring animals and expressions of love. She sells her products via her Web site, blacksheepstyle.com.

How it works: "I focus on a target market that fills a gap in the jewelry industry by creating reasonably priced, high-quality jewelry that can be enjoyed and shared by
daughters, mothers and grandmothers,” she says. “I design images that are converted into casts and molds for charms. My background as an artist allowed me to create unique, fun charm designs that other companies don’t carry.”

**Her best business advice:** “When I launched my business, I looked into areas that fit my target market and considered their shopping and spending habits,” Whitcraft says. “Based on that data, I picked the top five locations I thought fit my product best and advertised in those local newspapers.”

Whitcraft also relies on a nanny who watches her son 12 hours a week during the day while she works upstairs. “I also do a lot of work after my baby goes to bed for the night,” she says. “I have a fantastic husband whose support has helped make this venture possible.”

**A Dog’s Best Friend**

**Who:** Mo Lynch Vashel, mother of two children, ages 4 and 5; owner of Diablo Doggies, Danville

**What she does:** “I wanted to be able to coach my children’s soccer games and attend their spring recitals,” says Vashel who started Diablo Doggies, a business that offers obedience courses, dog walking, pet sitting and grooming services, in 2008. “I knew it would be hard to have that kind of balance if I was working 40-60 hours a week outside of the home.”

A former full-time instructor with Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, Vashel left her job after giving birth to her children. Although she initially planned to launch her own business when her children began elementary school, the economic downturn forced her to rethink her plans, and she opened the business.

**How it works:** Vashel believes her business is unique because she offers all-inclusive services to pet owners and will travel to their homes. “Many of my clients are moms who suddenly find themselves in charge of juggling both their children and the family pet,” she says. “I can help them walk and exercise their dogs, care for the family pet while they are on vacation, and train their dog not to pull on walks or jump on houseguests.”

**Her best business advice:** Vashel found her local mother’s group, the Iron Horse Mothers’ Club, to be a wonderful source of support. “One mom designed my Web site, another embroidered my company logo on shirts, and another helped me form a publicity plan,” Vashel says. In turn, she recently mentored a mom who hopes to start her own dog-walking business in the East Bay. Vashel also swears by the Web site legalzoom.com, which helped her to become a limited liability corporation at a reduced rate.

“Instead of mastering everything there is to know about business, I hired a bookkeeper to handle my financial records, and I’m bartering with another mom who is providing daycare to my children in return for obedience training for her dog,” says Vashel, who does the majority of her work when her children are in school. “People say it’s a cutthroat world, but I’ve only encountered other parents who are supportive and want to help me succeed.”
A Coach for Life

Who: Amber Rosenberg, mother of a 20-month-old daughter and expecting her second child; owner of Pacific Life Coach, San Francisco

What she does: Rosenberg spent 12 years working as a marketing and public relations director for Fortune 500 companies but yearned for a job where she could make a real impact in the lives of others. Several friends suggested her passion for helping others would make her an excellent life coach. Rosenberg returned to school at the Coaches Training Institute in San Rafael and opened her own life coaching business in 2005.

“I am professional life coach who helps working mothers manage guilt and stress and redefine success on their own terms,” Rosenberg says. “Through personal and corporate coaching programs, I empower women to achieve success that’s balanced and help employers to create a more supportive work environment for their employees.” Some of her clients include Adobe, Morgan Stanley and Google.

What she likes best about her job: “Coaching allows me to connect with a dynamic and diverse group of interesting people all over the globe, every working day,” Rosenberg says. “It also provides the freedom to work flexible hours and to spend quality time with my family. I make a solid income and I work about 20 hours a week.”

Her advice for other home-based parents: “Owning a home-based business is the best of all worlds for a working parent,” Rosenberg says. “The flip side is you need to be able to separate your work life from your home life. When I first started my business, I was so excited that I ended up working crazy hours at the expense of family life. (This was before I had kids.) As a coach who now helps many working parents with work-life balance, I’ve learned how to walk the talk.”

Rosenberg also stresses the importance of finding trusted childcare. “We have a nanny-share situation in which our nanny watches our daughter and a neighbor’s daughter, who is the same age, for 20 hours each week,” she says.

Amber Rosenberg with her daughter at 10 months old
The Professional Greeter

Who: Tina Tobin, owner of LuvemOrLeavem.com, mother of two children, ages 11 and 12, Livermore

What she does: Last year, Tobin launched LuvemOrLeavem.com, an interactive relationship advice site that is aimed at women who are at a crossroads in their relationships. “It’s like an interactive ‘Dear Abby’ where everyone gets a chance to be Abby, but even women who don’t want to post advice have the chance to participate by casting a vote of ‘Luvem’ or ‘Leavem,’” Tobin says. “I make money off advertising revenues from the site.”

Why she made the leap: After working in corporate marketing for years, Tobin became frustrated seeing how few part-time jobs existed for working moms. “My husband’s job has required us to relocate to five different states during the 15 years we’ve been married, so a Web site was the only solution I could find that was fully portable,” she says. “I make the same income as I would if I worked outside the home part-time.”

Tobin thinks the Internet holds potential for other working parents. “You don’t have to have a certain employment background to have a successful Web site, but it is important to have a topic that you love,” Tobin says. “Starting a Web site requires a lot of hours and it’s almost impossible to stay motivated if you don’t love what you’re doing.”

How it works: While Tobin writes all of the content on the site, she does outsource the programming. “I spend an enormous amount of time contacting potential advertisers on sites that have the same female demographics as my site,” she says. “Over the past few months the traffic for my site has increased and the ranking of my Web site has consistently improved.”

Home is Where the Parents Are

Who: Max and Linda Geiser, parents of two children, ages 2 and 8; owners of Wallter, Richmond

What they do: Both of the Geisers have design degrees and decided to try their hand at making home accessories. “Our first sale was three pillows that we made and put in a local store on consignment,” Linda says. “They sold that first day, and we made Wallter a full-time business in 2004. We now design and manufacture home accessories.”

Her best business advice: “Good ideas and determination are essential,” Linda says. “Start small, build slowly and try to put some money away for the slow times.” She also advises not getting swept away in the hustle and bustle of managing your own business. “My husband and I had to sit down and make task lists for each of us,” Linda says. “We came up with a schedule that included park time and playdates for the kids that are just as important as answering emails and invoicing customers.”
Doing it by the Book

Who: Sherry Richert Belul, mother of an 8-year-old son; owner of Mad Moon Creations, San Francisco

What she does: Launched in 1996, Mad Moon Creations makes personalized tribute books that reflect the uniqueness of every recipient, Belul says. “Our books, customized with stories, wishes and photographs from the recipient’s closest friends and family, are a unique, heartfelt way to celebrate any occasion.”

Why it works: “I’ve always had a great love for people’s stories and also for photographs,” Belul says. “I used to make personalized photo cards and gifts as a little kid, and I was yearbook editor in high school and college. I then went on to become a public relations/marketing specialist and then publications director as part of my career.”

Her best business advice: “I knew early on that I couldn’t afford to spend money on advertising,” Belul says. “Since I had a background in public relations, I set out to get free editorial in magazines as a way to promote my business. Because my business is so unusual, I was able to generate a lot of free press in magazines.”

Linda Childers is a calendar editor at Bay Area Parent who works from home – and does a lot of carpooling.

Other Stay-at-home Jobs

Medical Transcription – Many medical transcriptionists work from home converting and dictating shorthand from doctors about their patients’ medical history, lab tests, etc. Both Cañada College in Redwood City (canadacollege.edu) and Cal State East Bay in Hayward (ce.csueastbay.edu/certificate/medical_transcription/index.shtml) offer courses for students who want to gain experience in this field.

Childcare Provider – Love working with children and looking for a way to stay home with your own kids? Consider becoming a licensed childcare provider. To find out more about how to start your own daycare, visit ccld.ca.gov/PG487.htm.

At-home Party Sales – Are you a natural at sales? Do you enjoy giving parties? Many companies including Avon Cosmetics (avon.com) and Arbonne Health and Beauty Products (arbonne.com) hire stay-at-home parents to sell their products through home parties. Some local companies to consider: Petlane Pet Products (petlane.com) and Rodan and Fields skincare (rodanandfields.com). For more information, visit the Direct Sales Association (dsa.org) and Internet Based Moms (internetbasedmoms.com).

Tutor – Sylvan Learning Centers hires people with a current teaching certificate and Internet access to work as online teachers assisting students with homework (sylvan.com). Some parents have also started their own home-based tutoring companies offering guidance in a foreign language, music, reading and test preparation.

Customer Service – Some companies such as Alpine Access (alpineaccess.com) and JetBlue Airways (jetblue.com) hire customer service
representatives to answer calls from home. A good phone manner, typing skills and Internet access are needed. Bilingual skills are often a plus.

Resources

Consider asking your current employer about telecommuting possibilities. Remember, it never hurts to ask, and today’s business climate may make that option more attractive to employers.

Launched in 2006 by three Bay Area working moms who know the importance of having a life-work balance, San Francisco-based Flexperience connects marketing, human resources, legal and finance professionals with work-from-home, flex-time and project-based work. There is no fee to job seekers. flexperience.com.

The Better Business Bureau warns against work-at-home scams and says parents should never have to pay for information on job opportunities. For more information visit bbb.org/us/article/408.

Medical transcription, notary publics, call center agents and travel reservationists are also jobs that employ parents who work from home. Before undergoing training in these areas, make sure the school is fully accredited and can offer assistance with job placement.

Books

Making Work at Home Work, by Mary Byers (Revell, 2009)


The Work at Home Success Bible, by Leslie Truex (Adams Media, 2009)

Will Work from Home: Earn the Cash Without the Commute, by Tory Johnson (Berkley Trade, 2008)