

Venturous Moms

Easing the marriage between entrepreneurship and motherhood in the Fox Valley

STORY BY GINA MANGAN

IT'S A NOT-SO-WELL KEPT SECRET that women who run businesses from home get a lot of work done behind the locked doors of their bathrooms.

"I always say the bathroom is the most common place for women to have business meetings over the telephone," Neenah business owner Tamara Hasz says with a laugh.

She's joking. Well, maybe just a little.

The statement holds a grain of truth for an increasing number of women who have left the workforce to begin their own businesses while raising children. After all, where else can busy mothers escape interruptions as they strive to come off as composed and polished?

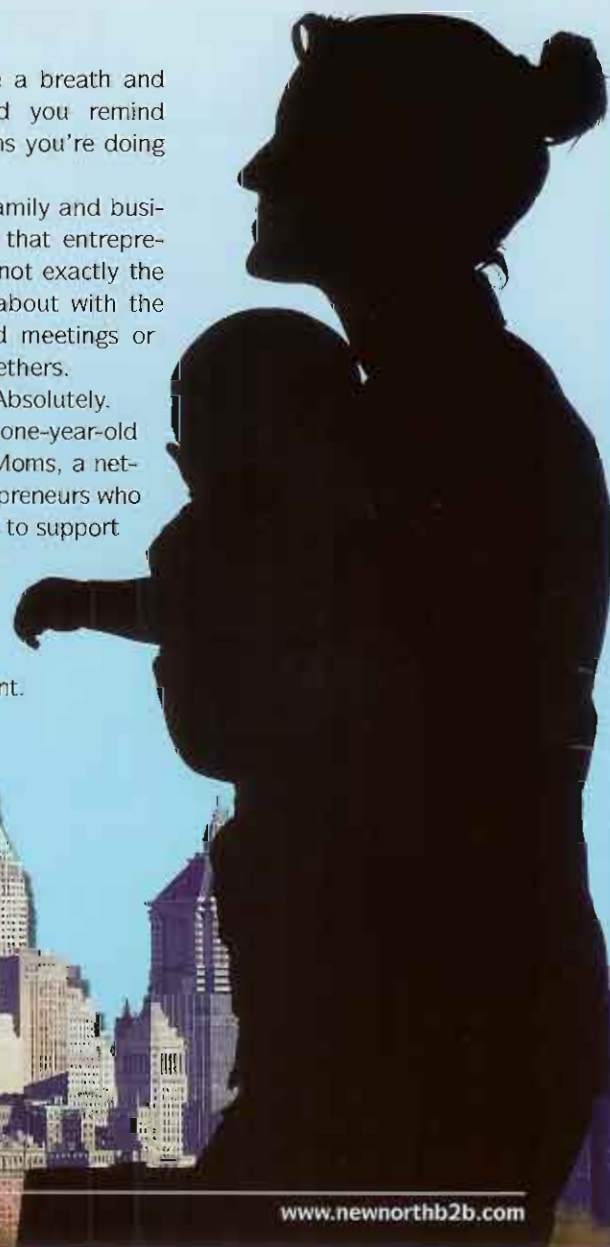
"There are those days when the kids are pulling at you and customers are pulling at you and you're sitting there going, 'I have to get this done, but the kids are out of control today. How am I going to do it all?' Those are

the days you step back, take a breath and say everything's alright, and you remind yourself of all the good reasons you're doing this," Hasz said.

Balancing the demands of family and business is one of the challenges that entrepreneurial mothers face. But it's not exactly the sort of thing these gals talk about with the guys during community board meetings or chamber of commerce get-togethers.

But among kindred spirits? Absolutely.

That's the idea behind the one-year-old organization called Venturous Moms, a networking group for women entrepreneurs who are also mothers. The mission is to support women who are capitalizing on their creativity, experiences and talents to create a lifestyle that offers greater flexibility, freedom and fulfillment.



Running family, home and business

ONE MIGHT CONSIDER VENTUROUS MOMS – which now has more than 30 paid members and three chapters – a cross between a mother's playgroup and a small business association. Here, the conversations shift smoothly from potty training and preschools to marketing and Web site development.

Although the members are largely entrepreneurial women who are mothers, the larger goal is to help each other grow their businesses by sharing talents, leveraging resources, and providing educational and networking opportunities.

The individual chapters meet monthly and come together quarterly for a larger event. Meetings feature guest speakers on topics ranging from legal issues to marketing to regional resources for entrepreneurs.

"These women are juggling motherhood and businesses and are just really busy, so we try to save them time by pulling together resources," said founding member and Venturous Moms President Terri Bittner, owner of Jessica Bishop Designs. "And if they're having a pressing issue in their business or at home, there's a group of women right there to bounce ideas off."

As word gets out, interest in the group continues to grow. Although the majority of women are mothers, Venturous Moms is also open to other women. The attention the group has received coincides with an increase in entrepreneurship among women, many of who are educated professionals choosing to leave fulltime employment for greener pastures at home.

Arbonne International independent sales consultant and

mother of four Kelly Burkert, another founding member of Venturous Moms, is part of that demographic. Arbonne International is a home-based network marketing company that distributes health and beauty products with very little overhead or start up investment.

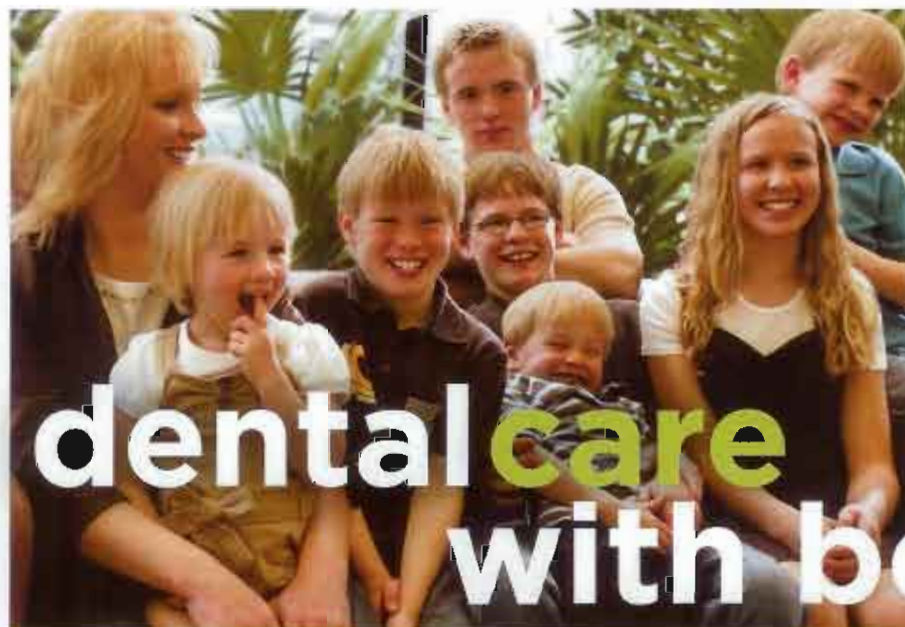
"I did the corporate thing, had kids and continued to work part-time until I finally said, 'I think I can do this differently,'" Burkert said. "We know from statistics that the workforce is changing, that women are starting to leave their jobs to raise families. Yet, they want to be productive in other ways, too, but on their own terms."

"I'm networking. I'm spending time with dynamic, inspiring and intelligent women. And there's this incredible energy."

Keevie Bremhorst, owner, Inspired Grounds

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2005 Report on Women Entrepreneurship, women account for more than one-third of all entrepreneurial activity in the U.S. The number of women-owned companies increased 20 percent between 1997 and 2002, twice the rate of all U.S. firms, according to the Small Business Association. Many of those businesses operate out of the home.

Bittner, who designs stylish handbags, totes and backpacks



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Venturous Moms

that can serve dual purposes for professional and baby use, said operating her own business from home allows her the flexibility she needs to work and spend time with her children, ages 8 and 2. She spends mornings with her kids and works during the afternoons and evenings. That same flexibility allows her the

time she needs for her older daughter's activities and the occasional chaperoning of school field trips.

"I still work as hard as I did in the corporate world – if not harder, but I now have the freedom to have flexibility in my life and my work environment," she said. "I love it."

Exposing kids to entrepreneurship

HASZ OPERATES TWO BUSINESSES while she raises her children, ages 2 and 4. After enjoying a career as corporate manager of a staff of 135 people, Hasz opened a bed and breakfast five years ago in her Neenah home, Aunt T's Bed and Breakfast. Two years later, she opened Chic Repeats in a building just down the street. Chic Repeats is a boutique that sells consignment clothing, as well as new clothing, furniture and toys. Operating a child-centered store allows Hasz to bring her children to work with her.

"When I created these businesses they were based on what would fit best into my life," she said. "I knew I wanted a business close to home, and I knew I wanted to be the one taking care of my kids during the day."

As an added benefit, she said, the kids are learning valuable lessons while in the presence of their working mothers. Not only are they in her care, but they witness their mother being productive and constructively dealing with people of all kinds and in a wide variety of scenarios.

"My children are getting that same socialization they might otherwise get in daycare," she said. "But it's moment to moment as children and adults come in and out of the store."

Of course, there are those moments when Hasz experiences the guilt and uncertainty that is every mother's cross to bear – the moments when her 4-year-old wants her to read a book

but she's in the middle of something business-related, or the days he doesn't want to go into the shop.

But if Hasz has that niggling worry about quality time, she takes comfort in the fact that she's not alone. There's an entire group of Venturous Moms to lean on if need be, she said.

Building business

IN ADDITION TO REGULAR MEETINGS and guest speakers, members also share resources and information about upcoming events, seminars and networking opportunities. In the interest of fostering a noncompetitive environment, only one representative from each type of business is allowed in a chapter. The group's Web site includes members' business profiles and links to their own Web sites. Bittner said she's currently involved in discussions with The Venture Center about delivering an entrepreneurial class to Venturous Moms members.

“...I can pick up the phone and find other like-minded women who have probably gone through the same thing. It's not always like that with other professional networking groups, where people show up with their cards in search of any possible lead. This is much more about giving support and sharing what works and doesn't work.”

Keevie Bremhorst, owner, Inspired Grounds

Many of the women have picked up new customers and expanded into other avenues of business as a result of the connections made through the organization, which has a \$150 annual membership fee.

It was a trip to a Venturous Moms meeting that inspired Frances Perkins – a film and video professor at the University of Wisconsin-Fond du Lac and mother of two – to transform her and her husband's video and film freelance work into a full-scale business called Northtown Productions. They soon

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after adopted the company name, became incorporated, designed business cards, and developed a Web site.

A few meetings later, Perkins was chatting about television and radio advertising with the guest speaker from an Appleton marketing agency. The next morning, Perkins received an invitation to produce six radio commercials for a Fox Valley-based chain of dry cleaners.

"Talk about instant gratification," she said. "The client was extremely happy, and now I get calls to bid on other projects."

Venturous Moms members also connected Perkins with The New North economic development organization, where she was invited to become a member of the communications committee.

Perkins isn't the only one who has made business connections through members of the group. Through her attempts to find a speaker for a Venturous Moms meeting, Bittner connected with a resource who encouraged her to expand her business into the consumer packaging area. She now has several product samples under review by a major manufacturing company.

"It's amazing how one thing has just led to another," Bittner said.

Keevie Bremhorst, owner of Inspired Grounds, personalized "Bag Lady Blend" coffee labels for Bittner, who then gave them as gifts to clients. Bremhorst, whose children are 9, 13 and 16, started her business three years ago. She designs catchy labels to customize coffee, tea and hot cocoa for corporate marketing tools and nonprofit fundraisers.

ONLINE

For more information about Venturous Moms, visit www.venturousmoms.com. Also see:

- www.jessicabishopdesigns.com
- www.aunttsbandb.com
- www.northtownproductions.com
- www.inspiredgrounds.com

The mentorship offered through Venturous Moms is invaluable, Bremhorst said.

"I know any time I need advice on any aspect of my business, I can pick up the phone and find other like-minded women who have probably gone through the same thing," she said. "It's not always like that with other professional networking groups, where people show up with their cards in search of any possible lead. This is much more about giving support and sharing what works and doesn't work."

But, perhaps, the greatest value of the group has come from the inspiration they provide to other members. Perkins, originally from California, said that after she had children, she found herself missing the connection with the kind of inspiring women she had known in the past.

"Venturous Moms is filling that void," she said. "I'm networking. I'm spending time with dynamic, inspiring and intelligent women. And there's this incredible energy. We went on BizTalk radio and the guy there is like, 'These ladies are going to lift the building off the ground.' I think we almost did." **B2B**

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