

Swathed in success

Mumpreneur Nicole Cassey's problems with her new born babe was the inspiration for a new micro business she named Bubbaroo selling a range of cotton swags and pouches. By **Nicola Card**



Jacob (right) suffered early in life but his mother Nicole Cassey developed a swaddling comforter that prompted her to start a business

NEWBORN JACOB was a very unsettled baby. Severely afflicted with gastro-oesophageal reflux disease he frequently regurgitated feeds, would toss and squirm and kick off his blankets, leaving him exposed and chilly.

During the weeks spent at Perth hospital and at home, his exhausted mum Nicole Cassey comforted and re-covered him, day in, day out. However the troubled state of affairs was to become the driving force for an innovative remedy that developed into a thriving business.

"Like most sleep deprived mums I was desperate, but couldn't find any suitable or specific swaddling products on the market. I couldn't believe it because swaddling dates back to biblical times. So I designed a swaddling wrap and a sleeping bag that encased and comforted him."

Once swaddled Jacob was a lot less restless which gave Cassey more time to sleep... and to think. Knowing that the pouch and swag would come in handy for all sorts of tots in cots, she carefully researched the market and safety tested designs, fabrics and fasteners, with a view to establishing her own business.

"Babies have been in the secure and safe environment of the womb for over nine months and then we expect them just to be settled out in the big world. The Bubbaroo Joey Pouch I designed simulates the womb's security, and babies can still move their arms and legs," she explained.

By then she'd decided against returning to her job as an investment banker in London. "My career was going very well. However because of Jacob's condition I was keen to stay close to him. But I needed something to keep my brain stimulated - it was quite a shock to be in a house on my own with a screaming baby after working very long hours on a trading floor with 1000 other people."

Her next and big step was to source a local reliable manufacturer, but several attempts met with frustration, which forced her offshore.

"We went to Hong Kong and Guangzhou on a fact finding mission to source a manufacturer. I also did a lot of research via the internet and enlisted ▶

the help of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, before finding my first manufacturer.

"Now all fabric and materials are sourced from China and the incoming products are sent to our warehouse in WA or direct to our distributors. But before that all products are subject to rigorous testing and quality control inspection by independent testing agencies."

Some aspects are far from ideal: Cassey has learned that supply difficulties and delays are part and parcel of dealing with China, and emphasis has to be placed on building relationships, or 'guanxi'.

Nevertheless, business is flourishing and more than 6000 items fittingly named Joey Pouch Swaddling Bag (for newborns) and Joey Swag Baby Sleeping Bag range (for babies and toddlers) have been sold since being launched under the Bubbaroo brand in May 2006 at the Sydney Expo.

Bubbaroo Joey bags are now on sale at 36 retailers nationwide in nurseries, boutiques and gift shops. "But we have deliberately steered clear of the major department stores to keep our products exclusive," Cassey commented.

"Bubbaroo's focus is a high quality product with simple, minimalist design and premium quality fabrics and materials – so we're quite niche. But we're a new player so it's important to get the Bubbaroo name established," the mumpreneur said. "The main issue for me has been creating brand awareness."

"At the start we had a limited pool of funds so it was important to minimise expenditure while doing as much as possible to enhance brand awareness. I approached retailers directly. Distribution is critical and you need face time with the retailers. Sourcing agents from Perth for the Eastern seaboard was very difficult, and in the end I had to shelve that idea. I speak to wholesalers in varied industries and they all say that finding the right kind of representation is exceedingly difficult."

For added exposure, Cassey has targeted maternity hospitals running antenatal classes and the celebrity angle is now being pursued. She also circulates media releases but then gets bombarded by advertisers.

The online side of the business props up retail sales and represents approximately 30 per cent of sales, some from overseas customers. "The website



The Bubbaroo range of baby swaddles

“**Now that the business is generating funds I can experiment more and expand the range but at the end of the day it's all about ROI – it has to make sense from a financial perspective**”

has been designed to be search engine optimised. We also allocate budget to Google Adwords and in future more resources will be directed towards the promotion of the website," she said.

Sometimes help is offered freely. "One lady contacted me from New York placing an order as she 'absolutely loved the product' and later she kindly emailed me a list of potential target stockists in the US!"

Late last year Cassey added more garments and colours to the Joey range, quaintly described as 'muted tones of delicate pink, mystic blue, mocha and white with contrasting warm grey binding'. "Now that the business is generating funds I can experiment more and expand the range but at the end of the day it's all about ROI – it has to make sense from a financial perspective."

"With a commerce background I can understand a P&L and balance sheet, budgets, financial ratios, etc and my strong foundation in negotiation, marketing and project management makes me get stuck in, get the job done, and done well."

Now caring for a second child and being "everything from the Bubbaroo designer to the receptionist to the sales person to the marketing person to the logistics person" in the home-based office, Cassey has hired a university student who is majoring in marketing. "She's gaining fantastic experience – she manages the website, drafts e-newsletters, drafts sales material, manages our various databases, attends clients, conducts research. You need to delegate in order to conquer!"

As with many business operators, some of the biggest rewards flow from a flexible working environment and expressions of gratification from mums and parents, Cassey said, adding the low points are "trying to juggle family life with the business, and setting boundaries. Because I work from home it's very easy to work all the time... I'm now trying to set boundaries and not race into the office continually or constantly check my BlackBerry." ●

For more information see
www.bubbaroo.com.au