

INTERNET START-UPS



PHOTOS: OLIVIA BRADLEY

IT'S ONLY NATURAL

TALK ABOUT A STANDING START! WHEN JANNINE BARRON LAUNCHED HER BUSINESS, SHE WAS ON THE DOLE AND HAD LIMITED CAPITAL. BUT USING THE POWER OF THE INTERNET – AND A LITTLE INGENUITY – SHE NOW HAS A STRONG BUSINESS THAT'S GOING PLACES. **STORY: MICHELLE HARTNETT**

Jannine Barron admits she wasn't exactly motivated by profit when she first ventured into the business world. In fact, when she started her now highly successful mail-order and web-based company, Nature's Child, she didn't even have a regular income.

"People congratulate me on how well I'm doing," the dynamic Byron Bay entrepreneur says. "What they don't realise is that building this business has been really hard work. I've had lots of major learning curves."

Nature's Child specialises in sourcing and supplying organic and chemical-free baby care, pregnancy and lifestyle products.

While internet and mail orders make up about 70 per cent of sales, a shopfront and warehouse in the Byron Bay Industrial Estate gives customers a chance to browse through the product range that includes clothing, toys, skin and hair care items, nappies, books and accessories.

The business also provides practical support for parents and families through free services including educational workshops, retreats and

seminars conducted by health practitioners, such as naturopaths and lactation nurses.

Nature's Child was started four years ago in the garage of Jannine Barron's rented home with only limited savings, unwavering encouragement and support from her husband, Tom Hain, and her determination to create a business that would benefit parents, children and the environment.

"When I first started, there really wasn't a lot of interest in the organic product industry," she says. "That situation – and the fact that I wanted to stay home to look after my two babies – actually gave me plenty of time to do market testing and research. A slow start suited me."

Born and raised in Campbelltown in Sydney's west, Barron went to university to study media and communications but opted for an overseas adventure rather than her intended career in journalism.

She occasionally worked in radio broadcasting while she travelled for the next eight years around England and Europe. Her wanderlust was also financed by a diverse range of jobs:

live-in carer for the elderly; personal assistant at the United Nations; lighting technician for bands; busker; and teacher.

She arrived back in Perth at age 28. "I was full of ideas, capable, and loaded with enthusiasm, but I had no idea what I wanted to do for a career," she says.

Harnessing her passion for volunteer and community work, and an interest in international issues, she joined a human rights organisation for two years before moving to Byron Bay in northern New South Wales.

An unexpected pregnancy then set in motion a chain of events that would eventually lead to the creation of Nature's Child.

When son Nelson, now aged nine, was three months old, Jannine Barron established the Byron Bay Parents' Support Group.

"My pregnancy was such a gift," she says. "Nelson really grounded me and gave me purpose. At the same time, I quickly learnt that being a parent means you need emotional support."

As well as sharing the challenges, frustrations and joys of being a parent, Jannine found the group's members also



had a common interest in sourcing items such as cloth nappies, chemical-free baby products and toys not fabricated with plastic.

“There were very few producers or suppliers providing these types of products back then,” she explains. “I started to think that maybe there could be a business opportunity in this area.”

She started to dabble in manufacturing and selling organic products after the birth of her second child, Harper, now aged seven. “He was my second inspiration for going into business,” she laughs.

Frustrated by her futile search for a double pram to transport both her sons, Jannine teamed up with friend, Suzanne Shahar, to develop a cotton baby carrier, Hug-A-Bub. (The product is now exported to 10 countries worldwide.)

She then ventured into a mail-order business with Murwillumbah mum, Michelle Meares, who was already running an earth-friendly nappy cleaning service.

The pair scraped together about \$500 to create a catalogue featuring a dozen or so organic baby care products and accessories. They compiled a mailing list of about 500 people, distributed the pamphlet, then crossed their fingers and waited for replies.

“We nearly jumped through the roof when we received our first orders,” Jannine laughs, recalling the encouraging 10 % response rate to the mail-out. “Just the fact that people were making the effort to buy was enough to confirm my belief that there was a demand for organic baby products.”

She now felt ready to try her own business and registered Nature’s Child on the day the GST was introduced to Australia: July 1, 2000. “What an omen!” she grins, recalling the coincidence.

But the biggest challenge for her was actually starting the business. At the time, husband Tom, now a self-employed IT consultant, had just finished studying and worked in a

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computer store. Her own source of income was a parental allowance.

While personal finances were tight for the young family, Jannine found that support for the business came unexpectedly from friends. “Somehow, people saw my vision and wanted the business to work,” she says.

Friends helped her establish credit accounts with organic producers and suppliers by placing orders. One acquaintance, who worked in the corporate world, provided \$5000 for her to buy stock. Meanwhile Tom, and a group of technically-minded friends, developed the Nature’s Child website (www.natureschild.com.au).

Jannine acknowledges the generosity that helped her business get underway. “I had the passion and vision for Nature’s Child but no finances to back it,” she recalls. “I’m just so grateful for the awesome support I received in those early days.”

Then in mid-2001, three friends agreed to work for free on a Nature’s Child stall at a Sydney trade fair. Against their advice, Jannine pooled her savings – about \$200 – and her parental allowance to cover the float for the stall. The risk of losing her capital paid off – to the tune of \$8000 in orders!

“The trade fair was a huge confidence boost,” she says. “I knew from the sales, feedback and my initial market research that organics was

emerging as a strong and viable industry in Australia. Now, consumers are really driving the demand for organic products and that gives me a great base to build on the Nature’s Child brand.”

Yet she’s the first to admit that her approach to business is more philosophical than conventional. “From the start, I wanted to be an example of

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how a business can be caring, supportive, open and community-focused,” she explains. “I believe that businesses should be about community as much as profit. Personal wealth is useless unless it’s shared.”

Jannine’s approach to her competitors is evidence that she practises what she preaches. Rather than view her rivals as threats, she treats them as allies, willing to pass on and share information about organic producers and business practices.

She treats customers as friends. Many drop her regular emails to share their news such as pregnancies, births and marriages. Her relationship with producers is also hands-on.

“I do whatever I can to source

products,” she says. “I surf the net, look through the local papers, talk to people at markets and visit small country towns.

“It’s probably a very creative, non-business way of sourcing stock, but that’s because there are so few earth-friendly, chemical-free producers. Thankfully, that’s starting to change”.

Despite the demands on her time that come with being a successful business owner, Jannine is adamant about maintaining a strong and stable family life.

“I suppose I have a different mentality to most business people,” she says. “I’ve made my work fit around my sons, not the other way around. I see so many people waiting for everything to be right before they have children. I think the secret to my success lies in my belief that kids can actually help to create your life, not take it away.”

Meanwhile Jannine’s other baby, Nature’s Child, is growing up faster than she could ever have imagined.

“I’m planning to take the business to another level and so I’m talking to investors,” she says. “I don’t want to just sell products. I want to nurture and support parents and add value to people’s lives and the environment in a way that hasn’t been done before.

“If I can make a living out of an idea like that, I couldn’t imagine what would make me more proud.”