

Mompreneurs: Businesswomen prove stay-at-home moms don't have to give up careers

By KATY BISHOP

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This entrepreneur has an unusual schedule: She gets a lot done during nap time.

Maureen Ramos balances her time caring for 8-year-old twin boys and a 23-month-old daughter and working on two home-based businesses — Corporate Greeting Cards, a greeting card marketing business, and Samica Bags, a reusable grocery bag retailer.

As Ramos got to know other families in her Naples neighborhood, she discovered a “little underworld” of work-at-home moms.

So, she decided to found a “mompreneur” networking group with a handful of other women, and when work outgrew naptime, she started a co-op day care.

One day a week, other moms drop their kids off at Ramos' home and she takes care of them for three hours. In exchange, she gets three-hour blocks of child-free time.

“Do you know what I can do in three hours?” she said, with a laugh. “I think you become more efficient when you have children. You have to.”

Multitasking moms

At about 11 a.m. on a recent Wednesday, Ramos sat in the twins' room with her daughter, Sarah, wiggling in her lap.

Ricky Garcia, also nearly 2, zoomed cars up and down plastic race ramps. The twins were in school, and it was Ramos' turn to take care of the co-op day-care kids.

That morning, Ramos woke around 6:30 a.m. and dropped off the twins at Calusa Elementary. At 9 a.m., Ricky's mom dropped him off and the co-op day care began.

In between playing, dancing and reading, Suzanne Donnelly, one of the mompreneurs, called Ramos for help; she needed a name for her hand-beading business and for her eBay store.

Juggling a kid on her lap and a phone in her ear, Ramos called Norann Kliewe, a restaurant owner and the mompreneurs' “marketing guru,” to bounce name ideas off her. Then, she called Donnelly back.

The verdict: Classic Beads for the business and To Bead or Not to Bead for the eBay store.

There are about 10.4 million women-owned businesses in the United States, according to the Center for Women's Business Research, and about 85 percent of those businesses are home-based and owned by mompreneurs.

"We talk at least three or four times a day, pretty much (all of us)," Kliewe said. "... They're very supportive, and it's great to have them to bounce ideas off of."

Naptime worktime

After grilled cheese sandwiches and bananas for lunch, it was time for Ricky to go home, for Sarah to take a nap and for Ramos to get to work.

As soon as she got Sarah to lie down, Ramos shifted into high gear. She picked up toys, washed dishes and got dinner started in the crock pot.

Then, she paused to check e-mail at a laptop on the kitchen counter, munching on a banana.

"Ooo!" she squealed, a few minutes later, and did a little dance. "Wow!"

A potential customer had sent an e-mail asking for information about ordering 1,000 to 5,000 grocery pod bags.

"That would be my biggest order so far," Ramos said.

She grabbed her laptop and settled into her office, the family dog, Misty, at her feet. It was time to squeeze as much work out of the remaining two hours of Sarah's three-hour naptime as possible.

Making of a mompreneur

On another weekday morning, the house was quiet, but only because it was Ramos' turn to reap the benefits of the co-op day care.

Sarah was with another of the mompreneurs, so Ramos had time to sit down and talk about her businesses.

Ramos, 38, worked in sales for more than 13 years. The profession runs in her family; her mom, dad, two sisters and brother all work in sales, and she always had a knack for it, too.

She worked while the twins were young, but when she and her husband, Pedro, began thinking of having another child she decided to stay home and start a business.

"I went from being one of the breadwinners to a whole new world," she said. "...I felt that me being home at that time was critical for the twins because they were in school, and I wanted to have those early years with a new baby that require so much more mom time."

In her home office, pictures of her kids smile down on her computer.

A presentation board for the corporate greeting card business stands on an easel in the corner, and below, a pile of reusable cloth grocery bags are folded into a big wicker basket.

Ramos launched Corporate Greeting Cards Inc. on Jan. 1, 2005. The business offers a greeting card service, sending customized cards for holidays and birthdays to customers' current and prospective clients. To send out 50 to 250 cards four times a year it costs \$2.35 each.

She spends about 10 hours a week on both businesses, working on the greeting cards about 80 percent of the time. In between, she also manages six residential properties she and Pedro own in Florida.

The card business makes about \$15,000 a year, which was beyond her original goal, Ramos said. To make more, she'd have to work more, and that would take time away from the kids.

About a year ago, she decided to launch Samica Bags, a name she created from the first two letters of her kids' names: Sarah, Miguel and Carlos.

Her grocery pods are brightly colored, fabric bags that are 15 inches high with a 12-inch-wide circle base; they retail for \$25.

A Naples drapery company makes the bags, and she just started offering EcoSpun fabric bags made from recycled plastic bottles.

"You've got to start taking care of the earth and you start with your own backyard first," Ramos said. "I'm not perfect, but I'm trying."

Since she started selling the bags in November, sales have been about \$500 a month, except in December, when they tripled to \$1,500.

The business is in its infancy, but it's growing, she said.

She's just beginning to move into wholesale production.

Winding up and down

Every day after Sarah wakes up from her nap, Ramos goes to pick up the twins from school.

"That's when the real circus begins," she said. "It's insane, but manageable chaos. I might check an e-mail or two, but it's hard to find a minute."

The twins need help with their homework, sometimes dinner still has to be made and the dog needs a walk.

When Pedro gets home from work, they eat and the kids go to bed. Then the couple relax on the couch and soon after, it's bedtime for them as well.

The next day, it's time for Ramos to start the mompreneur balancing act all over again.