

Hey Mabel! Great labels

BY MEREDITH MacLEOD

The quartet of moms behind the rapidly growing Mabel's Labels empire weren't flattered when a host of imitators started knocking off copies of their idea.

Instead, they got mad and everyone knows the power of an angry mother.

"One reason we grew so quickly is that we were fairly quickly copied," says Mabel's Labels' co-founder Tricia Mumby. "That made us more fierce. It was hideous at the time, but it's been good for our business."

Echoes fellow Mabel Julie Cole: "All ideas and products are ripped off. It's not flattering, it's enraging."

They figured if they didn't go for broke, they would be left behind. That wasn't good enough.

The four close friends behind the smiling Mabel character (there isn't a Mabel among them) joke about taking over the world with their line of kid-oriented labels to keep track of clothes, shoes, lunch boxes, toys and myriad other paraphernalia that seems to disappear into thin air.

Despite the laughter, there is a clear undercurrent of ambition.

After only five years in business, they've grown sales 100 per cent each year and now have 10 full-time staff, eight to 20 part-timers (it swells around clock to school and summer camp seasons) and more than 100 commissioned Mabel agents selling their products. Most of them are moms who love Mabel's labels.

That's a recurring theme with the Mabel's gals.

They describe themselves as "mompreneurs" and say the "mommy network" has been critical to their success. "Moms tell other moms when nothing works for them," says Cole, who lives in Burlington.

Each in the group, Cole, a lawyer, her sister Cynthia Esp, a teacher, Mumby, a graphic designer, and Julie Ellis, a financial planner, has given up her full-time job to run the company.

The group met in university and have become family as well as business partners.

Ellis married the sisters' brother and Mumby married their youngest uncle. They've hired a New York City-based public relations company and have targeted Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube and bloggers to get their message out to web-savvy parents and generate traffic to their website, where the vast majority of their sales are made.

They scored an early big break when they launched Mabel's Labels on the lycandy.com, a website that highlights the latest in fashion, food and summer trends, featured their label. Some early media attention in Toronto's Parent and Canadian Living, backed up with an aggressive advertising plan, also gave the company a quick start.

It was so much so they wondered whether they could keep up with the orders pouring into their Hamilton home-based operation.

Now some day cares, schools and camps are promoting Mabel's Labels, to keep track of belongings and as



JO-IN RENNISON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Mabel's Labels was started five years ago by four Hamilton mothers for their kid's belongings. Now, from left, Julie Cole, Julie Ellis, Cynthia Esp and Tricia Mumby employ 10 full-time and five to 20 part-time staffers.

part of the move toward litter-free lunches.

The labels can also be used to list children's allergies as a reminder for teachers and caregivers.

Labels are also offered as a practical fundraising idea for schools, teams, camps and clubs.

Mabel's Labels has recently signed a deal with Kids & Company, a 20-site day-care provider that partners with employers. An ample supply of labels is now a part of each child's registration.

"When we started, people didn't get it," says Mumby. "We were constantly having to explain that when you have a kid, you will lose everything."

"Now, it's amazing how many people know about us," chimes in Ellis. "We say Mabel's Labels and they say, 'Oh ya, I've heard of you.' We've got people begging us to let them sell the labels."

All that means they are about to move the operation into much larger commercial digs.

It's obvious many parents can relate to the frustration that led to developing their product. "We would get together to socialize with our kids and we were constantly asking, 'Is this your sippy cup?' 'Is this my blanket?'" says Cole.

"It's so tiring to keep track of stuff." With 11 children between the four of them, there was a lot of "stuff" to worry about. Not to mention the black hole for belongings that are day-care centres and schools.

So sisters Cole and Esp joined university friends Mumby and Ellis to create Mabel's Labels. Their self-adhesive and iron-on labels are tough enough to survive dishwashers, microwaves, washing machines and the wear and tear and dirt of kids. They also won't fade in the sun. The assorted-sized labels include the child's name and an icon — both to express a child's interest and to help kids who are not reading yet identify their belongings. There are even super-sticky labels for the inside of shoes and boots and metal tags for backpacks.

Mabel's is just launching a new line of stationery and personalized stickers. According to its website, mabel.ca, celebrity customers include Laura Dern, Elisabeth Hasselbeck. Brooke Shields was so grateful she sent them a personal thank you note.

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