

You can label these four moms a savvy group

Parents know that schools are like the Bermuda Triangle. Things go in that never come out: mitts, hats, lunch boxes, shoes and so on.

Frustrated by the never-ending stream of things that went missing at day care, play groups and school, four busy moms came up with a solution. They started Mabel's Labels Inc., to make labels for the stuff kids lose.

Although based in Hamilton, the company's roots are in Kitchener and Waterloo. Sisters Julie Ellis Cole and Cynthia Esp met Julie Cole and Tricia Mumby when they were all students at the University of Waterloo.

They later became family when Julie Cole married the sisters' brother and Mumby married their youngest uncle.

With nine children among them, the four partners knew their labels had to be tough to survive environments from dishwashers and microwaves to puddles and UV rays.

They spent a year researching. Stick-on labels for bottles, cups, bowls and toys were tested by running them through dishwashers hundreds of times. Iron-on labels for clothing withstood the test of machine-washing over and over again. And an extra tough label was developed for use in shoes and boots,



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Each set of labels is personalized with the child's name. So they're easier to identify, parents can add picture icons and have labels printed in a variety of bright colours.

The partners didn't set out to be business owners since they already had full-time careers. Mumby credits each woman for bringing unique skills to the business.

As a lawyer, Julie Cole understood the value of a trademark and initiated the process to secure protection for the name Mabel's Labels. She also looks after publicity and marketing.

Julie Ellis Cole, a financial planner for a bank, is the financial wizard for the company. Cynthia Esp, a teacher, attends to production matters and Tricia Mumby, a print production expert, covers the technical side of the business, including the company's website.

Most of the labels are sold

via the web to parents in countries all over the world. The United States represents the biggest market and almost 70 per cent of sales.

Although labels may sound simplistic, Julie Cole says starting the business was quite complicated.

"We had to find an Internet provider, credit card provider, phone provider and a bank. We had to register the business, draw up a partnership agreement and design a brochure and website."

When Mabel's Labels started, it had no money for promotions. But the women knew the labels could be sold by word of mouth and told all their friends about them.

As it turns out, they knew lots of people — small business owners, brand managers at large companies, journalists, publicists, designers.

"It's amazing how many resources we had just within our network of friends," Mumby says.

They knew they would have to use the right approach to get publicity so they asked a journalist what he looked for in a media kit. His advice was that the folder and its contents had to be colourful and personalized.

The women listened and



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Tricia Mumby, with five-month-old Ruby, is one of the four partners behind Mabel's Labels Inc.

scored a big break when *Dailycandy.com*, a website that highlights fashion, food and consumer trends, featured their labels. They also were profiled in *Canadian Living* magazine and highlighted on the CBS *Early Show* by expectant mom Laurie Hibberd, one of the show's contributors.

Since Mabel's Labels can't count on publicity, it attends four or five trade shows a year that focus on babies and small children. Ads in large U.S. mag-

azines like *Parents* are cost prohibitive, but it does advertise in regional publications such as *City Parent* in Toronto and *Big Apple Parent* in New York.

Brochures go in welcome packs for summer camp programs and day cares. Labels are also used in fundraising efforts by schools and other groups.

Mabel's Labels has only been in business two years, but has already expanded its product line. Kosher labels were introduced to identify dishes used for meat versus dairy. And for children with allergies, labels can be printed with the child's name and a list of foods to be avoided.

Although a natural fit in day cares and primary grades, the labels are also being used by sports teams, summer camps and in senior citizen homes.

The company is a part-time venture for all four women.

But according to Mumby, "our goal is to become a brand name, for Mabel's Labels to become the Kleenex of the kids market."

If the labels stick as well as the name, it just might.

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