

Hey... baby – dig these labels



DIANNE RINEHART

If it weren't enough that four best friends, who met in their University of Waterloo days, launched a Hamilton-based business, Mabel's Labels, together, consider the family connection: Two of them are sisters, and the other two have married into that family. Talk about keeping it in the family. Sisters Cynthia Esp and Julie Cole are the "world-class fixer-uppers," jokes their friend and business partner, Tricia Mumby –

who, after marrying their very young uncle, is now their aunt. Meanwhile, partner Julie Ellis married Esp and Cole's brother – and is now their sister-in-law.

Which would make for a very tight family business arrangement, indeed, on its own. But it's actually complicated further by the fact the four now have 11 children, aged one to eight, who are now all related to each other, too.

And while having so many children might derail some women from launching a business – or even going to work, babies are actually the *raison d'être* for Mabel's Labels, which manufactures labels for kids' products.

What the mums noticed when they got together with all of their other

friends who were also having babies around the same time, was that they all had the same brand of baby bottles, or baby wipes, or toys – and everything was getting mixed up, explains Mumby. Or they'd loan out baby clothes, and when they had another child, not know who to get them back from. Nor might the person who had borrowed them remember from whom they'd received them.

And the mums also noticed that daycare workers were starting each day – using up valuable time – trying to label each kid's belongings with masking tape and markers. Labels would also mean litterless lunches, by encouraging parents and their children to wash and reuse containers rather

than resorting to a new plastic bag every day.

Mabel's Labels, which manufactures microwave, dishwasher, and washing-machine proof labels for everything from cups, to clothes, to shoes, was born in 2002, and has grown along with the babies of these four entrepreneurs.

The company, which was 2007's SavvyMom Mompreneur of the Year Award winner, now enjoys a worldwide customer base (one third of its sales are in the U.S.) and employs 10.

In fact, it's proof that babies and business do work – and should show corporations what kind of growth they could experience if they made their offices family-friendly, providing day care and flexible hours in-

stead of making work so difficult that the best and the brightest female employees often leave to launch their own businesses.

Because being mums with tiny tots never stopped this family affair: All four mums have taken their babies on the road – breast-feeding them all the way – to attend trade shows across the land. At home, they work from the basement of one of their houses, hiring two babysitters to care for the children upstairs – only a few flights of stairs away when they need to be breastfed.

During times when they've had to work through the weekends, they simply set up cots and cribs, and held meetings at night. "You nap when you can, feed your people, play with the

kids, and go back and do the work," says Mumby.

And there's no such thing as a mat leave. Mumby remembers her maternity leave lasting exactly 10 days, at which point one of her partners gave birth. "I got the call she had her baby and my mat leave was over!" Just as well: "A small business is another baby," says Mumby. "You don't want to miss its first years, any more than your child's."

So how hard is it to run a business when you're friends – and family?

So why doesn't big business get that?

If it did, Mabel's Labels type success stories could be theirs.

Dianne Rinehart is a Toronto-based writer and editor.