



**Small businesses started by moms have a built-in advantage over big brands when reaching out to their target market: they are their target market. **REBECCA HARRIS** talks to 'mom-preneurs' about how to connect with this coveted audience**

**A**n odd fact made its way into a Twitter discussion Julie Cole was having about food: she admitted she's never had a milkshake. Her followers chimed in with their own examples of common fare they've never had: poutine, a Twinkie, coffee, ketchup.

Cole, the co-founder of Hamilton, Ont.-based Mabel's Labels and mother of six, turned the discussion into a blog post at Mabelhood.com, where she expanded on the topic of "weird food kids love," writing, "my kid loves hot dogs but in the form of a cold wiener straight from the fridge."

Conversing on Twitter, she says, allows her to have "real live relationships" with her customers, noting that 80% of her activity on Twitter and Facebook is personal and 20% is promoting products. "Twitter allows you to engage with your community without it all being a pitch."

For this reason, Cole believes it's harder for the "big guys" to connect with moms. "If you're that 55-year-old guy in a suit and you're trying to connect with moms, maybe you can do it... but it's really hard if you're not part of the community," says Cole. "It's all about engaging in an authentic way. And it's easy for people like me to do that with their customer base because they're me."

Certainly, large corporations are making strides in connecting with moms. GM Canada, for example, has a successful blogger outreach program and moms are lovin' McDonald's "Quality Correspondents" program, in which a group of mothers participate in behind-the-scenes field trips to McDonald's operations and then blog about it.

But it's that personal connection—the sense that mom entrepreneurs are “just like us”—that gives companies like Mabel's Labels the edge over big brands when it comes to connecting with moms. And let's face it, people are more apt to share anecdotes about their kids' weird eating habits with @JulieCole than @GMCCanada.

“It is very easy to build trust and credibility when you're talking about your business from a very personal place, and small companies almost always start from a very personal place,” says Kim Page Gluckie, founder of Calgary-based MPowered Marketing, which provides consulting services to female small business owners. “Big companies have layers of hierarchy and have to approve messages and try and fit a brand mould... [It's a challenge to] sound like anything other than a company trying to sell a product.”

Of course, Tweets alone won't push product, and one advantage big marketers have is big budgets. So how do mom-run businesses get the word out? Most rely on word of mouth, which is a “really powerful way for any marketer trying to reach moms,” says Sarah Morgenstern, a former management consultant who founded Savvy Mom in 2004 along with Minnow Hamilton, who previously had a career in advertising.

A recent survey by Savvy Mom found that 94% of moms consider friends' recommendations when making a purchase decisions: 19% said they “very often” rely on recommendations from friends, 35% said “often” and 40% said “sometimes.”

Savvy Mom, an online publication that offers “solutions for moms” across Canada, relies on word of mouth to promote its own business. “We've never done any traditional advertising,” says Morgenstern. “It's not as effective. You're competing against a lot of other ads, whether you're in a magazine or on a website. It's hard to get our messaging across in a one-page ad or one banner, but you can get the message from one friend to another.”

Morgenstern notes that most of Savvy Mom's 40,000 newsletter subscribers have come from word of mouth. “We want the content to be good enough that someone will recommend it to another mom,” she says. “We don't want to have 40,000 e-mail addresses that we got through a contest. We want to have [addresses] of people who trust our editorial team as the go-to people for their mom dilemmas.”

Cole agrees that word of mouth is “absolutely the best way” of getting the message out. “People are more reluctant to trust traditional media,” she says. “I don't buy anything without going to my mama panel of influencers and I know a lot of people who don't buy anything without consulting me because I run a [child-focused] company and I have six kids.”

When Mabel's Labels opened for business seven years ago, Cole and her team, with no money for advertising, wrote a letter and sent it to everyone they knew, and asked them to pass it along.

By 2008, Mabel's Labels' word of mouth efforts were slightly more sophisticated after launching Buzzmama, a marketing program that allows moms to earn free Mabel's Labels products when they spread the word about the company. There are currently more than 2,500 “Buzzmamas” in the program. Participants submit details about the conversations they've had about Mabel's Labels and earn free products.

“We found that our customers who were dedicated to us were our best advocates,” says Cole. “So we thought, ‘We've got people who are doing this for us anyway. Let's reward them, inspire them and help them spread the Mabel word.’”

Even if she had a big marketing budget today, Cole says the company still wouldn't splurge on splashy ad campaigns.

“Seven years ago, we would have liked to have done more traditional advertising. But at the time, Twitter wasn't there, Facebook wasn't there. Those ways of reaching our customers weren't there. Now that we have these amazing social media vehicles to better embrace our word-of-mouth

## WHERE THE MOMS ARE



Baby slings may be the new must-have accessory for moms, but the gadget they really can't live without is their computers. Canadian moms spend an average of three hours online per day and 19% spend six or more hours online, according to a November 2009 study by Mom Central and Sharpe Blackmore Euro RSCG. Other key findings include:

Each month, **Canadian moms spend 1,000 more minutes online** than their U.S. counterparts and twice as much time as those in the U.K.

**77%** made an online purchase in the last year

**90%** of online moms use the Internet to research products and services

**Online purchases are most common among younger moms** (under 44, 79%) and moms with children under one year (83%)

**38%** of moms have provided advice about products or services through forums, review sites or on a blog

**Moms with babies under one year are the most likely to get product advice from other people on the Internet** (51%)

**78%** use social media and almost half access a social network every day as a way to stay in touch with friends and family

**The most reliable source for information about products is referral from family or friends—90% consider it reliable**

**59%** consider magazines a reliable media source and 57% consider television commercials reliable

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Mabel's Labels co-founder Julie Cole and her son Clancy; a sampling of the much-talked-about labels



strategy, it's just been fantastic."

Of course, marketers can't force positive word of mouth—you have to have a great product to begin with. "But you can get that product by listening to moms, too," says Savvy Mom's Morgenstern. "Asking your consumers what they think of your product and letting them know how you're responding to that feedback goes a long way. Moms like to think they are influencing and improving products, that someone is listening to them and what they're saying is actually making a difference."

Rebecca Brown, founder of Toronto-based Bunch Family, says the key to reaching moms is to not forget about dads. Bunch Family, which holds events like dance parties for parents and kids, is careful to direct its messaging to the family unit as a whole, not just moms.

"It's true that a lot of time the moms are the decision-makers," says Brown.

"But moms are kind of tired of making all the decisions for their families. There's way more shared parenting going on than is reflected back at parents through media and advertising... Women want brands to support them and reflect the equality they either have or are looking for in their relationship with their spouse or partner. And dads aren't really down with being portrayed as clueless meatheads."

One common marketer mistake is making assumptions about moms, adds Brown. "You don't turn into someone else when you have a child. You're still you and I think there's a kind of tiredness at seeing this lame, unsexy version of parenting reflected back from the marketing world."

Cora Brady, managing director of marketing consultancy Mom Central Canada, says marketers need to cast aside stereotypes and really understand their consumer. "They also need to go where the moms are," she says. "It's about figuring out where they are, what they're talking about and then figuring out how to become part of their community or add value to their community."

Cole agrees that marketers need to understand their market more deeply. "They have to understand that moms are very tech-savvy so to approach them as though we are not is a mistake and it can be condescending and insulting," she says. "So you need to know that moms are online and moms get it."

And when it comes to social media, "they have to get the right person representing them. People sniff out a fake. If people sense that they're not authentic they will lose trust and they will move on. They will disengage."

More importantly, "you've got to be very careful because one bad Tweet can do a lot of damage," says Cole. "We are a ruthless crew and you don't mess with the mamas."