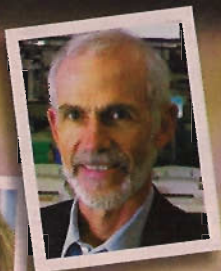


From beginners to Bigshots

DREAMING OF RUNNING YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

Read about successful entrepreneurs and the small-business tools they use to start and grow their companies



Jill Litwin,
owner of
Peas of Mind,
a maker of
organic food
for kids.
PAGE 4

Minding her peas and carrots wins investors

Written by

SUSAN SMITH
HENDRICKSON

photograph by

PAOLO
VEGICIA

Founder of organic frozen-foods company worked with a blend of services for small businesses to get off the ground

Jill Litwin, founder and CEO of a healthy frozen-food company for growing kids, is a typical entrepreneur in many ways. She works (all the time). She gets overly excited about the launch of her third product, Peas of the Pizza with vegetables baked into the crust (and stresses about it). And, like most small-business owners, she has to, by default and natural desire, have her hands, or at least her head, in all aspects of her company, from product development to checking whether the delivery trucks are running on time.

Despite her instinct for control, she has sought help since day one in taking Peas of Mind LLC to the next level. You name a small-business resource — the U.S. Small Business Administration, SBA partners SCORE and Small Business Development Centers, Incubators, California's Employment Development Department — Litwin has patronized them all.

She came up with the idea for Peas of Mind in 2003 while working as a color-forecasting director for a snowboard company in Vermont and offering to prepare nutritious, convenient food for a colleague's toddler son.

"The business found me," says Litwin. "I always knew I was meant to go out on my own, but I didn't know this was what it was going to be."

On the verge of turning 30, on New Year's Eve 2004, Litwin decided to head West to start producing her creation, Puffets, a hand-held frozen puff of organic milk, fruit or vegetables, grains and beans — on a larger scale.

"All signs pointed towards the Bay Area," says Litwin. "San Francisco has health-conscious mommies who have income that can support this type of food, and organic ingredients are readily available. The area is progressive about adopting new things, and there is so much great support for starting businesses."

Litwin's first stop after arriving in San Francisco was a business-



"Always know where your next buck is going to come from — where and how long that process will take." — JILL LITWIN

planning class at Remission Entrepreneurship Center, a small-business development organization. She gave herself three months to write a business plan, while freelancing in her old profession.

Plan in hand, she headed to La Cocina, a business incubator for women developing food-related businesses. Litwin was its first participant.

"There were two staff members and me and a state-of-the-art

kitchen," says Litwin who now volunteers at the incubator. "We built our businesses together."

When her formulas to make a batch of 40 Puffets needed to be reworked for a batch of 400, La Cocina brought in a food scientist. Later, when Litwin was ready to hire her own ordinary scientist, the nonprofit brought in a human-resources specialist. When it was trademark time, the incubator brought in an attorney.

All this outside expertise led to success.

A year after moving West, Litwin signed a variety of local, independent grocers to carry Puffets. While her business was growing, she was working double-time. By day, she could be found minding or delivering Puffets. At night she tackled e-mail.

"I would bake it, freeze it, pack it and deliver it the next day out of a cooler in my car,"

says Litwin. "Four in a box, 12 in a case. It was endless."

By summer 2006, Litwin had reached a breaking point.

Help arrived this time in the form of Anni Minuzzo, a specialty-foods adviser with the San Francisco, Solano and Napa counties SBDCs. Minuzzo had owned a biscotti company for 20 years that sold to the likes of Williams-Sonoma. At the SBDCs she runs a three-hour workshop and offers individual counseling.

"I've taken what I learned and built a workshop out of it so that other entrepreneurs won't fall into the same traps that I did," says Minuzzo.

With Minuzzo's support, Litwin found a co-packer and signed with third-party distributors that have placed Peas of Mind's Puffets and Veggie Wedgies vegetable french fries in Target, Whole Foods in Northern California and the Mid-Atlantic and grocery chains in the Midwest and Southern California. Products are also available online, where a four-pack of the five-flavor Puffet variety pack sells for \$48.65 on Amazon.com.

Minuzzo also has helped Peas of Mind become a certified woman-owned business and introduced Litwin to advisers to help her with a business evaluation, the first step in raising capital.

Besides opening up her Rolodex and setting up a list of short-term objectives that build toward long-term goals, Minuzzo also acts as a sounding board.

Minuzzo is proud of Litwin's successes, such as recently raising \$350,000 from hands-on investors and launching Peas of the Pizza, which she expects will double Peas of Mind's sales.

"Anni's done it. She's been there emotionally," says Litwin. "She gets it in every way."

Litwin also seems to get it. Determination, smarts and commitment, all of which she has, according to Minuzzo, are essential. But as she has also known from the start, so is seeking out the right help. •