

## BIZ LADIES PROFILE: JILL LITWIN OF PEAS OF MIND



Sometimes a business opportunity can develop out of a simple gesture – or so was the case with Jill Litwin, founder of Peas of Mind. Surrounded by a group of working mothers who could not find quick and easy nutritional foods that their kids actually enjoyed eating, Jill knew she could help. She began cooking for their kids, a small endeavor which soon turned into a community of families, and then a business. Jill has since founded *Peas of Mind*, which offers frozen foods for health-conscious parents who are seeking quick, easy and nutritional options, and today she is giving us a glimpse into her career path and all that she has learned along the way. -Stephanie

Read the full interview after the jump...

#### Why did you decide to start your own business?

*Peas of Mind* really grew out of my memories of what my mom cooked for me as a child, because she was an amazing cook.

I was living in Vermont working as a colorist for Burton Snowboards and was surrounded by busy moms who were feeding their kids canned green beans because there wasn't a better option for quick nutritious food for their little ones. Literally nothing! Plus, they were always playing a guessing game wondering if their kids were getting enough fruits and veggies.

I knew these women didn't always have time to cook the way my mom cooked for me, but they should still be able to feed their kids the same quality nutritious food. So I started cooking for their children. I taught myself all about childhood nutritional needs and became a part of this amazing community of Vermont moms and their kids. It was really small at first, and as more moms asked me to cook for their kids, I saw that this was a genuine, untapped market.

#### When you first decided to start your own business, how did you define what your business would be?

I always say that I was born with the entrepreneurial DNA. I had lemonade stands, I started clubs in middle school, I even had a sewing business in college that led me to become a seamstress for Alexander McQueen.

This "entrepreneurial DNA" gives me the right mix of: 1 part mathematician (I was a math major), 1 part pragmatic thinker, 1 part creative self (I later went to art school) and of course, 1 part moxie.

Being my own boss and building something myself had been percolating for years under the surface, and helping moms feed their kids was just the right idea at the right time.

In terms of defining my business, Peas of Mind, we make innovative frozen food for kids!

Kids love the classics – pizza, nuggets, etc. – so we just reinvent them into healthy versions loaded with veggies. Every single product is jam-packed with at least a full serving of vegetables and tons of nutrients. Plus, we make food that kids will actually eat because its recognizable (fries!) and that moms can feel good about giving to them. We fill our products with responsibly sourced, clean food so our ingredient lists are pronounceable and straight out of your pantry. Most importantly, I knew we needed to create products that were affordable to all families. These are the guiding principles to this day, nearly six years later.

#### What was the best piece of business advice you were given when you were starting off?

I was very fortunate to start my business with the help of *La Cocina*, a San Francisco business incubator for female food entrepreneurs. In fact, I was *La Cocina*'s first program participant, which meant we were able to go through the process together and learn from each other.

I received a lot of assistance from various volunteers and business leaders throughout the Bay Area.

The absolute best advice, however, was that it is totally normal to feel like you are spinning your wheels in the beginning, and it's okay!



#### What was the most difficult part of starting your business?

To be taken seriously as a young woman in the grocery industry with no prior experience. It is a cut-throat, male-dominated industry which can be really hard to penetrate because everyone guards their business relationships and holds their cards close to the vest. There is no transparency. For instance, no one will ever tell you where their products are manufactured so it's incredibly hard to find a manufacturer for your business. There are no yellow pages or Yelp listings for this stuff!

I was persistent and just kept digging for answers even when it felt like I was running into locked doors at every turn!

#### Can you name the biggest lesson you've learned in running a business?

The biggest lesson I have learned is that I must be a chameleon at all times.

#### Can you name a moment of failure in your business experiences?

I lost a major account a few years ago because of a paperwork error on someone else's behalf. A single missing page cost me a huge opportunity that I had invested a lot of time and money into. Nowadays I'm much more careful about whom I trust and I always submit my own paperwork.

#### What has been the biggest sacrifice you've made in starting your business?

As a business owner, I quickly became accustomed to working through important events and rarely being able to take vacations...so it should come as no surprise that I had to work through my honeymoon or work from the hospital bed the day my first child was born.

#### Can you name your greatest success in your business experiences?

For me, creating our innovative line of Veggie French Fries was a pretty monumental moment for Peas of Mind.

I had to really think outside the box but knew I wanted to somehow transform a floret of broccoli, a bunch of carrots and a head of cauliflower into the infamous and widely loved fry. But after weeks of R+D and consuming literally thousands of fries, the Veggie Wedgie was born. Parents send us thrilled emails saying their kids won't touch broccoli but they will gobble up our broccoli fries! That feeling of warmth and success outweighs all the sacrifice.

To manufacture the Veggie Wedgie on a larger scale, we needed to create custom equipment and innovative manufacturing techniques. Seeing this process come to life on the shelves of grocery stores all over the country is just really exciting! I'm also really proud to be one of the companies on the forefront of changing a conservative and slow-moving grocery industry to refocus on kids' health.

#### What business books/resources (if any) would you recommend to someone starting a creative business of their own?

*Rework* from the 37Signals team has distilled some great lessons into short but incisive lessons from the trenches in a way that I really identify with. I come back to this book repeatedly when I'm struggling with a business issue.

*From Kitchen to Market* by Stephen F. Hall for anyone looking to start a food business.

#### In your opinion, what are the top three things someone should consider before starting their own business?

1. You will need endless endurance – it is truly a never-ending marathon – for putting out fires, jumping hurdles and getting up after being knocked down emotionally or financially. Ask yourself if you are strong enough for that.

2. You have to go all-in. If you're serious, this is no longer a side-hustle part-time project. Do you believe in it enough to truly invest not just your finances, but your time and your emotional life?

3. Can you handle being your own boss? Because now you do have a boss and it's worse than any boss you've ever had – you can't escape yourself. I expect a lot from myself and I'm my own worst critic, but I also realized my strengths and weaknesses and hired a team to balance my skill sets and talents.