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Winning at the NEW “Mommy Track”: Seven Ways to Use Smart Connecting Skills to Become a Mompreneurial Maven

As the economy struggles and household incomes fall, “mompreneurs” are picking up the slack. How can these busy, busy women win the constant battle for time? Maribeth Kuzmeski says it’s all about making connections—and she offers a few tips on doing just that.

Hoboken, NJ (September 2009)—As the recession drags on and the unemployment rate steadily increases, more and more families are feeling the pinch. And that means moms who once spent their days running a household, reading stories, and supervising art projects are donning their entrepreneurial hats to fill the family coffers. What’s more, many mothers who already work outside the home are starting side ventures as well. Call it *The New Mommy Track*. Whether they start their own companies for the flexibility or just because they can’t find a job elsewhere, mothers everywhere are choosing one of the most demanding career paths around.

If you’re one of them, Maribeth Kuzmeski has a word of advice: Raising children AND running a business leaves little room for mistakes. And that’s why you should make it your top priority to polish up the most important skill of all: relationship building.

“When starting businesses of our own, women tend to spend a great deal of time focusing on what we already know,” says Kuzmeski, author of *The Connectors: How the World’s Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95). “We want to be seen as credible. We want people to listen to what we have to say based on our expertise, product knowledge, and abilities. And there is nothing wrong with that. Trust me, I’ve been there! But that flies in the face of the best out-of-the-gate business start-up strategy, which is placing a focus not on *what* you know, but on *who* you know.”

Kuzmeski says that as they’re starting out, these mompreneurs should ask themselves, *How many powerful business relationships do I have?* If women can list five, Kuzmeski stresses that they should consider what they could accomplish if they had 100 strong business contacts.

The bottom line: For moms entering the world of entrepreneurship, success lies in building business relationships and finding ways to truly connect with everyone from customers to vendors to other small business owners. (Fortunately, most women are naturals at connecting—we just need to put our abilities into practice.)

Learning how to create those strong business relationships is the focus of Kuzmeski's new book, *The Connectors*. It's packed full of tools and techniques aimed at helping readers develop better, more profitable connections—tools and techniques proven to be effective by some of the world's most successful professionals.

“The connections with the right people and the viral exposure they give you are the reason businesses succeed or fail,” says Kuzmeski. “Yes, of course you need a quality product or service to sustain success, but getting the exposure you need is the ‘make or break’ factor. So, mompreneurs *must* direct their energies to what gets results. Don't neglect *what* you know—your expertise or your product quality—but at the same time place a *daily* focus on *who* you know in order to fast track your business to success.”

If you're a mom trying her hand at entrepreneurship, here are a few relationship-building strategies that can put you on the path to mompreneur success.

Create your current and future Powerful Connections list. Set a goal to increase your list of important business connections from five to 100-plus. Once you've compiled your list of current and future Powerful Connections, reach out to each of them. You might be thinking, *That seems easier said than done*. Well, here's how! First, pinpoint people you already know (even if only slightly) who might become important business contacts. Then consider what other relationships you'll need in order to build a successful business. Ask yourself: With whom do I need to be able to connect in order to create loyal clients, find the best vendors, and when necessary, hire the best employees? Next, consider the best ways to reach out to those you've included on your Powerful Connections list.

“Seek out people you know who may be able to introduce you to people on your list,” says Kuzmeski. “Write a note or letter, and follow up with a call complimenting something your ‘Powerful Connection’ has recently written or said. Or find a connection point based on something you have in common. Then reach out with persistence through phone and email, or try a social networking avenue like asking to connect through LinkedIn.”

Become the media. One great way to connect with those on your Powerful Connections list is by “becoming the media.” Members of the media interview others, write articles, and host radio and TV shows. Today, thanks to the magic of social networking, you don't have to be a trained media professional to interview those with whom you'd like to connect. Kuzmeski recommends using a web-based company called Blog Talk Radio (www.blogtalkradio.com) that anyone can

use easily (and for free). Basically, it allows you to host your own real, professional, and very awesome radio show. You can link to your shows from your website, people can listen online live or archived, and they can even download your show to their iPods! The key is, you can use this medium to reach out to people on your Powerful Connections list. Just call them up (or email them) and ask if they would let you interview them about their successes.

“You’ll find that most people will be flattered and more than happy to do it,” says Kuzmeski. “The best part is that you will have permanently opened up a previously closed door to developing a powerful connection for you! And by promoting the interview via Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites, you will both get a lot of exposure from fellow businesspeople as well as from potential and current clients.”

Develop an advisory council for your business. Host a semi-annual meeting inviting well-established businesspeople to give you feedback on your business, the direction it is taking, promotional ideas, referrals, and so forth. (Feel free to do it more often depending on the interest level!) Don’t hesitate to invite people you don’t know to be on your advisory council: people on your Powerful Connections list, local business leaders, and others who could provide you with their valued expertise. Reiterate to those you ask that it will take only a few hours of their time each year. When the meeting rolls around, be prepared with an agenda of items to discuss, and follow up with them afterwards, sharing the advice you heard and the things on which you are moving forward right away. And remember, you don’t need to spend a lot (if any) money on the location for your meeting. Try holding your advisory council meeting at a local library, community center, or even in the conference room at your bank.

“When you involve others in helping you review your business, it is very likely that they will become strong advocates for you,” says Kuzmeski. “And don’t avoid doing this just because you are afraid no one will agree to do it. From my personal experience, more often than not, others will be happy to help. After all, it is a feather in their caps to be asked to advise someone else. Getting a business off the ground can be very difficult to do without any guidance. An advisory council is a great way to not only build long-lasting connections, but also to get priceless advice from experienced professionals.”

Take your conversations from casual to powerful. Casual, friendly conversations are nice. But powerful interactions with others will produce powerful results. Meaningful interactions happen when you connect with another person and make a lasting impact on him or her. That means forgetting about yourself and your agenda for the moment and honing in on what’s important to the other person.

“Listen carefully and pay close attention to what the person has to say,” advises Kuzmeski. “Sure, you’ve heard that you need to be a good listener a million times, but that’s because it really is important! To make sure you are being a great listener, make a commitment to talk less than 50 percent of a conversation. In fact, the less *you* talk the more powerful it becomes for the person on the other end!”

Get them talking. In order to curiously listen to those with whom you are building business relationships, first you’ve got to get them talking. How do you do that? Ask solid questions.

Great, interesting questions lead to great, informative answers, and therefore, better connections. Remember these important words from Albert Einstein: “The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

“You can’t gain trust by showering others with stories of your accomplishments, nor can you do it by interrupting, jumping to conclusions, or climbing on a soapbox to demonstrate how much you know about something,” says Kuzmeski. “The first step is to ask questions and listen with curiosity in order to really understand what your connection is saying and what is important to him or her. It is easy to say and hard to do—but it works!”

Here are a few questions that will attract the attention of those with whom you want to connect and will also get them talking:

1. What would you do if you had unlimited time and resources?
2. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment[s] to date?
3. What person has had the greatest influence on you? How?
4. How would you define success?
5. What should I be doing to have success as you define it?
6. Ask about things you already know about the person. For example, “I read your book and loved it. What did you mean by _____?” Or, “I heard you like to skydive. How did you start doing that?”

Show your passion! “Many times I’ve seen women shy away from showing their true passion for what they are doing because they feel it may come across as too promotional,” says Kuzmeski. “Well consider this: If you are truly passionate about your business and the benefits it has for others—you must share it! No one will ever be able to show more passion for your business than you.

“You just have to make sure that you are sharing that passion tactfully—make it about who you serve, not about you,” she adds. “If someone will buy what you are offering, that means it must have benefit and value, right? Talk in benefits for the end user only, and you will be able to inspire others to get behind your business idea.”

Join a women’s organization. While women’s organizations such as the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) and the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation (BPW/USA) each have their own distinct role to play on behalf of their constituents, there is one theme that is common to all of them: making connections and developing relationships. Kuzmeski says she’s been involved with several organizations herself, speaking on business and marketing strategies at conferences for Women’s Leadership Exchange (WLE), NAWBO, and eWomenNetwork.

“Most of my experiences prior to working with those organizations had been in fields that are dominated by men,” she notes. “And, I have to admit, I was initially surprised at how supportive and helpful the women in these organizations are. Women’s organizations are truly purposed for helping women connect better in business, and that is exactly what they can help you do. Perhaps the best statement summarizing the driving force behind these organizations is within a statement

found on the NAWBO website: ‘We know that no one succeeds alone...and NAWBO offers the means for women business owners to contribute to the success of others.’ Sometimes there’s no better place to go for support than to those who have walked the same path as you!”

“Mompreneurs have a lot on their plates,” says Kuzmeski. “Juggling kids and business responsibilities is very hard and very time-consuming. And in the same way that you raise your children with the help of a network of family and friends, you must create and enlist a strong business network in order to steer your business toward success. It’s the only way to survive this recession and enjoy prosperity for years to come!”

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About the Author:

Maribeth Kuzmeski is the founder of Red Zone Marketing, LLC, which consults to Fortune 500 firms on strategic marketing planning and business growth. Maribeth has personally consulted with some of the world’s most successful CEOs, entrepreneurs, and professionals. An internationally recognized speaker, she shares the tactics that businesspeople use today to create more sustainable business relationships, sales, and marketing successes.

Maribeth is the author of four books, including *The Connectors: How the World’s Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life*. She has frequently appeared on TV and radio, and has written articles on marketing strategies for hundreds of publications including *BusinessWeek* and *Entrepreneur*. She regularly speaks to audiences on topics relating to business development, marketing, and sales strategies.

Maribeth graduated with a degree in journalism from Syracuse University and has an MBA from George Washington University. She lives in the Chicago, Illinois, area with her husband and two teenagers.

About the Book:

The Connectors: How the World’s Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

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