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What I Learned From Barbie's Mom

By Donna Schwartz Mills

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When my daughter received a gift certificate at KB Toys for her birthday this month, she announced her intention to spend it all on Barbie.

Never mind the fact that she already owns a Veterinarian Barbie, Lifesaver Barbie, Prom Queen Barbie, two Barbie Ballerinas and a Prince Ken... She's got Barbie's Beach House, a Barbie Steering Wheel, two Barbie autos that each seat four, a Barbie tape player, Barbie Hair and Makeup Model, Barbie Nail Designer Software, and a big box full of clothes. But Megan wants to have a *collection*, a peculiarly human urge understood well by the Mattel Toy Company, which comes up with all this stuff.

It's too bad they don't make a Work at Home Mom Barbie. If they did, they could draw on the life of Ruth Handler for inspiration. Handler, who passed away last week, is best known as the inventor of the Barbie doll. She was also one of the most successful female entrepreneurs of all time, beginning in an era when women were expected to stay in the kitchen and out of the boardroom.

Like many of us, Ruth's career as an entrepreneur began by accident. Money was tight when she married her husband, Elliot. She was working as a secretary and he was studying industrial design. He decided to use his skills to make some housewares for their apartment. *She* decided that there was a market for them. They operated their first business out of their garage. Ruth handled the sales, which reached

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\$2 million within the first few years... and that was in 1945 dollars. Today that amount would equal ten times as much!

Ruth and Elliot joined with another designer, Harold "Matt" Mattson, to form the Mattel Company (named for Matt and Elliot). They manufactured picture frames. Elliot realized that he could take the wood scraps from the frames and turn them into doll furniture. This side business proved to be so successful that the company changed its focus to toys.

The folks at Mattel credit Ruth with playing an integral role in their success. Her natural talent as a marketer helped the company turn a profit its very first year as a toymaker. But her biggest was her ability to identify a market void and fill it ("niche marketing," which is what the experts all tell us we should be doing.)

It was just such an instinct that led to the Barbie's birth. The 1950's were an era when little girls played with baby dolls — in fact, those were just about the only kind you could buy. But Ruth noticed that her daughter, Barbara, was fascinated with paper dolls representing adult and teenage women. She would change their dresses and imagine how life would be all grown up.

The male ad executives at the company were not impressed with Ruth's doll. Neither were the mostly male buyers who saw her debut at the American Toy Show in 1959. But as Ruth had guessed, little girls loved her — and 350,000 Barbies were sold that very first year, which was a record. Mattel introduced more dolls to the Barbie line over the next several years, some of which were named after other Handler family members, such as Ken — Ruth's son — and Stacie, Todd and Cheryl, who were named after the Handlers' grandchildren.

All was going well until 1970, Ruth was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was a difficult time, bad decisions were made and the Handlers' eventually left the successful company they had founded. But Ruth not only survived her bout with cancer; her experience inspired her next business venture.

Ruth told the Los Angeles Times about her fruitless search for natural-looking prosthetic breast. What was available at the time was less than adequate. "I looked at the shapeless glob that lay in the bottom of my brassiere and thought, 'My god, the people in this business are men who don't have to wear these,' " she told the Times. Once again, Ruth discovered a niche to fill.

Ruth found a designer who created a new prosthetic to her specifications. Made of liquid silicone and polyurethane, it looked and felt natural. Her stroke of genius was her realization that like shoes, it needed to be made up in "lefts" and "rights." Then Ruth assembled a sales team made up of other breast cancer survivors, who demonstrated her new product to department store buyers and helped train their sales staffs on how to fit their customers. In 1991,

Ruth sold her company to a division of Kimberly-Clark and retired.

"Women—and men too—can do almost anything they set their mind to," said Ruth. "You have to believe in what you want to do and have the courage of your convictions."

Good advice for us all. Rest in peace, Ruth.

Donna Schwartz Mills writes about the specific needs of work at home parents at her website, The ParentPreneur Club, "For Parents Who Want Choices, Not Office Politics."
<http://www.parentpreneurclub.com> Tools, tips and advice you need to help grow your home based business while raising a family. Subscribe to our weekly newsletter sending a blank email to: <mailto:subscribe@parentpreneurclub.com>

5 Ways To Tell If A Preschooler Is Living In Your House

By Deborah Shelton

1. You reheated the same cup of coffee three times this morning.
2. There is always one more person in your bed in the morning, than there was the night before.
3. You can't imagine life without the Cartoon Network.
4. The lock on your bathroom door is purely for decoration... After all, no locked door could withstand, "Mom? What are you doing? Mom? Can I come in? Mom? Can I show you something? Mom? Can I

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give you a hug? Mom? Can you hear me? Mom?

5. You have started—or signed—a petition to banish the word "why" from every language known to man.

Deborah Shelton is a mother, freelance writer, and author of the brand new book, "The Five Minute Parent: Fun & Fast Activities for You and Your Little Ones." Visit Deborah's website for more family-friendly ideas:

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My Mother, the Person

Two Very Forgotten but Crucial Words – Thank You

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Indian Summer

Time Stretching Tips

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GUERRILLA MARKETING Volume 1

Say A Few Words

GUERRILLA MARKETING Volume 2



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