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Startups

101

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ENTREPRENEUR.COM AOL KEYWORD: ENTREPRENEUR

HEARTBEAT PRODUCTS INC. >>

Back Beat

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PAIR STRIKE A CHORD WITH BABY-TOTING MOTHERS TIRED OF BACK PAIN.

VITAL STATS >> Jennifer Gilbert (l.), 38, and Robin Stein, 39, of Heartbeat Products Inc.

COMPANY >> PortaMEe, a New York City-based line of high-style baby carriers

PROJECTED 2007 SALES >> About \$600,000

BACK TO BASICS >> In 2004, Robin Stein was a stay-at-home mom with a 21-pound 6-month-old and an aching back. She tried all types of baby carriers but didn't like the way they fit or looked. Because Stein had previously worked in product development and merchandising, "developing product was a sport," she says. She began sketching ideas for a carrier that rested the baby on the hip. "A hip carrier is more natural, and kids develop faster when they make eye contact with you and you can see what they're doing," she explains.

FRUITS OF HER LABOR >> In the fall of 2005, Stein posted a note on Craigslist looking for people who knew how to sew structured handbags and work with leather. She then spent more than a year making prototypes. When she started wearing the PortaMEe, "people were handing me their cards and telling me to call them when I started selling," she says.

SUPPORT SYSTEM >> Stein had met Jennifer Gilbert in November 2004, when she joined a women entrepreneurs' group. In mid-2006, Gilbert signed on to fund the business and become a 50 percent owner. "Sales is not my strength, but Jennifer is a genius at sales," says Stein. "I had a list of my top 10 dream accounts. [Thanks to Jennifer,] by the end of 2006, we were in many of our top 10, including Bergdorf Goodman, Best & Co., Giggie, Neiman Marcus and Takashimaya."

COMFORT LEVEL >> Because the market was crowded at the mass price point, they decided to price PortaMEe higher than most baby carriers and target higher-end retailers. So far, the strategy has paid off: The company was recently forced to turn orders down until new shipments arrived.

MOVING AHEAD >> With a co-branded product with Pottery Barn Kids and a new infant headrest that both launched in September, Stein and Gilbert have plans to move into a new fulfillment center and are looking to raise more capital to fund growth.

LIZ HAMBURG helps entrepreneurs launch new businesses as the founder and president of Upstart Ventures. She can be heard on WOR radio (710 AM in New York) on Launchpad, a weekly segment focusing on entrepreneurs and small business.



PHOTO: LARRY FORD