Growing into the business

Dominique Tillen is the founder and managing director of Brush-Baby Ltd (brushbaby.co.uk), whose first product was an ergonomically-designed chewable toothbrush for babies.

As a mother I was initially surprised and then frustrated that I could not find a suitable product for my child. I wanted to look after Lulu's dental health. 'Milk' or 'baby' teeth are often disregarded, however, in my previous public health role, I knew that they are important during a child's formative years

- for speech development, eating habits and facial appearance - and they set a precedent of spacing for adult teeth in later life.

My own personal frustration was that Lulu would 'chew' her conventional toothbrush, and I knew that by doing this the brush was not getting to the back teeth

or doing the best job that I wanted it to do.

As a parent I looked around at all the product offerings available for babies, toddlers and infants and realised that there wasn't a suitable product for my daughter; they seemed to be cut-down versions of adult dental products which were not specifically designed

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as ‘seed capital’ for the company. Mentoring support from business mentors including my twin sister Isabelle (a dentist) was also gratefully received along the way.

I have worked full-time for Brush-Baby Ltd from the start. This was a major decision from the offset because it is a company producing items that require stringent safety measures in their construction. Testing and logistics require time and attention.

I had to ensure that the logistics for the business were in place before approaching retailers so that if I achieved my aim and secured contracts to supply leading retailers, I would be in a position to fulfil them. Once the infrastructure was in place I set about employing other members of staff so that they could ‘grow’ into the business. This is how I have conducted my business from day one - growing into the business.

Initially I worked from home with a part-time accountant, but I have now moved Brush-Baby into commercial offices a three-minute walk from my front door in a rural converted dairy. I currently employ one full-time employee in sales and three part-time staff in Accounts, Marketing and PR who are able to fit their family and studying commitments around their roles at Brush-Baby.

As with many other working mums, combining business with home life is all about ‘juggling’! However, as a business owner I have become very good at time management mostly by default and have definitely learnt how to work smarter! So now I ensure that I ‘make time’ for family and fun activities. Obviously the proximity of my office to my home is a major benefit and ensures

that there is a definition between home and work life merely by the physicality of having an office where I conduct my business and can physically close the door at the end of a working day. Whether I do that mentally or not is another point!

Childcare arrangements are sometimes tricky as my husband works full-time too but after school clubs, play dates and the fact that Lulu sometimes comes into the office as well makes it all possible.

I’ve always been an early riser so on an average day I have been known to be up and out of bed at 5am! Now that Lulu is older it’s easier as opposed to when she was a baby. I love this time of day when I have the house to myself and it’s a great time to get my thinking and planning done.

I am very lucky in that where we live is surrounded by gorgeous countryside so more often than not I’ll go for an early morning run or a good long walk with our family Dalmatian Sam! Showered and breakfasted before the others means that I have some early morning time with my husband Brian before he sets off for work and with Lulu. Doing the school run gives us some nice catching up time. I recently read an article where a parent said that the school run is invaluable in gaining time in their children’s life and I wholeheartedly agree. Yes, it can be stressful but it is a lovely routine and gives a start and end time to both our days.

An early start in the office before anybody comes in means that I can plan my day ahead without interruption before other members of staff come in. I’m keen on offering a flexible working policy and the working day starts for other people after the school run too. Our Sales Manager has a horse so she has commitments there and our PR lady is combining work with studying floristry at a local college.

for babies’ smaller mouths and more sensitive gums and their unique dental development.

This then led me to believe that there was a ‘gap’ in the market for infant dental care products. As a parent if I was experiencing these problems I believed that many other people were too. I had the courage of my convictions and in conjunction with a dentist I designed the first product in the Brush-Baby range - an ergonomic Chewable Toothbrush, made from soft silicone which capitalised on the chewing action that a small child makes when s/he is teething.

I was made redundant from my role in the public health sector and so decided it was ‘now or never’ to pursue the Brush-Baby product. I used my redundancy money

DAY IN THE LIFE

Our core working hours are usually 9.30am-3pm and in that time we arrange meetings or catch-up times when we are all together. Hot-desking is the order of the day but we're all linked by email and sharing files on the central database means that access is virtually possible everywhere which caters for illness, childcare, weather conditions and the other 101 things that try to catch us all out!

During school terms my working day finishes about 4.45pm when I collect Lulu from After School Club or other activity and I return home for Lulu to do her homework and start preparations for the evening meal. I have to admit that

I often take my laptop home with me to do some more work, such as catching up on emails etc. However, I think that it is important that Lulu understands that we have nice things, holidays etc because her parents are working and that money doesn't grow on trees! She also gains an invaluable insight into a commercial environment too and understands that this is 'mummy's work'. School holidays present a logistics problem but I have grouped together with other mums and we share childcare

responsibilities and costs and all manage to have some quality and more importantly fun times with our families and friends too. After all, what's the point of working?

Formerly working in public health and as a mum I am a strong advocate of the 'you are what you eat' principle and although I don't particularly enjoy cooking, I get by and believe that as a family we eat well and enjoy a varied diet. And yes, although I am working in the dental care sector we're only human and do enjoy sweet treats (but always remember to look after our teeth!) Lulu particularly enjoys baking and we've been using xylitol in cakes recently and seeing if Daddy can taste the difference!

Sam our Dalmatian is a pleasurable distraction and ensures that I take a break from work and get some fresh air! In fact it gives me great thinking time! I enjoy family time – we are keen socialisers. I love family gatherings and mixing with our PTA group and friendship circle. Brian enjoys

Dominique (above right) receiving her Nectar Business Small Business Award from Karren Brady in 2012 and Brush-Baby's latest launch, the world's smallest electric toothbrush, the BabySonic (left).

swimming and golf and Lulu and I are taking horse-riding lessons.

Regarding my plans for the future, obviously of paramount importance is the welfare of my family – to be happy and healthy is key. To achieve professional success would be a bonus. As I am now an employer I have a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of my employees and so would like the company to be successful from this perspective. Brush-Baby is now on the shelves of leading high street retailers including Boots, Sainsbury's, John Lewis, Waitrose, Mothercare and JoJo Maman Bebe, so my initial aims of seeing my product on supermarket shelves has become a reality. However, as our dental care range is designed for children from newborn to six years of age, I would like to see continued product refinement and development and for Brush-Baby to become the generic name for infant dental care! This is a big 'ask' in such a multinational-dominated market but I really do believe that it's possible.

We've just launched an electric toothbrush for babies – the BabySonic – and as the world's smallest toothbrush it's taken the market by storm. Parents (and more importantly babies!) are loving the size of the mini brush-head and the fact it vibrates as opposed to rotates, helps to massage and soothe sore teething gums and clean emerging teeth.

We will shortly be launching a new children's toothpaste range which we hope will cater for children who sometimes find the more adult-tasting minty toothpastes too strong for their palates. Anything that encourages children to look after their teeth is key to our development.

Dominique, 50, lives in Reading with husband Brian, an engineering consultant, and their daughter Lulu, nine. Before founding Brush-Baby Ltd, Dominique was a Public Health Research and Project European Prospective Study Co-ordinator. Brush-Baby's products have received awards from leading parenting magazines including *Practical Parenting & Pregnancy*, *Mother & Baby* and *Right Start*; they were also runner-up in the South Coast Business of the Year and received the Nectar Business Small Business Award in 2012.