The "Stuff" That Dreams Are Made Of:

Build-A-Bear's Founder Offers Advice on How to Start Your Own Business

By Tobi Schwartz-Cassell

When a parent has to endure her child's hospitalization, there's not much that can make her smile; so the mom who recently ventured into her local Build-A-Bear Workshop must have looked as downtrodden as she felt. When the Bear Builder Associate queried, "What brings you to Build-A-Bear Workshop today?" she told her. And told her. And told her. As the mom fished out her wallet to pay for the bear, the associate told her to put her wallet back into her purse. The bear was on her, as was a wish for her daughter's speedy recovery.

That mom walked out of the store with much more than a stuffed animal.

"We sell smiles." exclaims Founder and Chief Executive Bear Maxine Clark. "As long as a customer walks out with a smile, it doesn't matter if they bought something. I consider that we made a sale."

Okay, so a smile won't put a roof over your head. But Clark has managed very well on the smiles that have turned into big, fluffy profits for Build-A-Bear Workshop - a 400-plus-store, award-winning, multi-million dollar international chain that's earned the coveted Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. In her book, *The Bear Necessities of Business: Building a Company with Heart*, and in our recent chat, Clark shared secrets of success for women - particularly Baby Boomer women - who are considering starting businesses of their own.

Plumb Your Passion

"First you have to ask yourself, 'What's my passion? What do I love?' If you don't love it, it won't have your heart and soul."

But, she adds, it takes more than love to make a business come alive. "The businesses that women start that are successful are the ones that hit a nerve; that fill a void in somebody's life. Think about a bad experience you've had and figure out how you can make that experience better for yourself and others.

"I know a woman who had kids who loved doing crafts, but they made a mess on her dining room table. So she came up with a giant shower cap-type cover that gripped the table and didn't come off. You have to think about what you're doing every day, and if it's something you need everyday, why wouldn't that product be successful?"

A Goal is a Dream with a Deadline

"It takes a plan - a business plan - to organize what you want to do. Creating a business plan will convince you of whether it's a

good idea, and whether you should put your heart and soul and your hard-earned money into it," says Clark. "And especially now when it's hard to get bank loans, you really need a business plan. So get your plan together, and in a year when we get out of this economic mess, you'll be ready to do it!"

Don't Give Good Customer Service - Give Phenomenal Customer Service

"The concept of great customer service has been a part of me since I was about five and I was shopping with my mother and sister. We didn't have a lot of money so we didn't buy, but we looked. Going window shopping was an event. Store owners didn't make you feel bad for just looking.

"I remember going into the tea room at a department store with the beautiful place-mats and the cherry drink with the parasol. It was very special. And that stuck with me. You have to make the customer feel special."

Empower Your Employees

Build-A-Bear Workshop employees are trained to do whatever is within reason to make a customer happy. The associate who handed over the bear to the heavy-hearted mom is a prime example. "We don't have a lot of rules. Our basic rule is 'yes.' My philosophy is that most people don't walk into a store trying to cheat you. So we don't treat people like criminals! Nothing they can do is going to put us out of business.

"People bring in their old teddy bears that aren't even from Build-A-Bear Workshop, but they need them stuffed and they want to pay us for that. We'll stuff them but we won't charge them."

How many times have you had a dancing child with you who really needed to use the restroom but the salesclerk said they don't have one? Says Clark, "You know that every store has to have a bathroom! And we instruct our associates to allow our customers to use the bathroom!

"We have a very thorough pre-employment screening process. We can teach someone how to run the register and unpack merchandise, but we can't teach someone how to be a person who cares."

Clark has heard stories of customers who've come in to buy a limited edition animal, only to find that the store was out of it. "When our associates see something they want to buy for themselves, they reserve it in the back. I hear time and again from customers that the associates go to the back and bring them the animal they were planning to buy for themselves, so that they can buy it!"

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Giving Back

"A big part of our company's DNA is our support of charitable causes. We've been doing this since before we even made a profit."

Clark tells the story of a letter she received in January 2002. It was from the mother of a young girl named Nikki. A victim of bone cancer, Nikki would often visit the Build-A-Bear Workshop in Hartford, Connecticut. Nikki's mom wrote to Clark telling her how touched she was that the store associates came to Nikki's funeral. She also told her that Nikki had written in her diary her wish that Build-A-Bear Workshop would make a bear for children in the hospital. In 2003, Nikki's wish came true. "Purple was her favorite color," says Clark. "So we made Nikki's Bear in purple. And now there's Nikki's Bear I, II, III…"

Throughout the company's entire 11 years in business, it has donated more than $20 million to causes that help children, families, animals and the environment. Just some of the organizations that have benefitted from the company's kindness are those dedicated to pediatric cancer, juvenile diabetes, autism, literacy, domestic pet crisis programs and the protection of endangered wildlife.

"My mom was a social worker and I always joked that I was going to be a capitalist. But as I grew up, I realized I was becoming my mother, and I am working in the best of both worlds!" She quips that the title of her next book is going to be, "Becoming My Mother's Daughter."

In her current book, Maxine Clark says that above all, when it comes to business, you must simply allow yourself to dream. And to the budding entrepreneur she says, "Start by believing that you can truly achieve whatever you set your mind to do." g

Dream the Dream Supreme

In her book, "The Bear Necessities of Business," Maxine Clark offers this advice to the budding businesswoman:

- Start by believing you can truly achieve whatever you set your mind to.
- Never discount the power of a positive attitude.
- Not dreaming big enough is one of the biggest mistakes entrepreneurs make.
- Don't let outside forces limit your possibilities.
- You alone are responsible for creating your own success.