



Natick company provides support for mothers

By **Anthony Fireman**/correspondent

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NATICK — After a baby is born, parents are high on infant infatuation.

Initially, family and friends gather round to congratulate and provide. Yet, eventually, the fanfare ends. And after it's gone, the mother and father are left with a re-engineered life.

Early on, they change diapers, conduct round-the-clock feedings and do laundry often in various stages of exhaustion. And these newly minted parents, who fantasized about a new baby being a utopian exploit, clearly see the truth: Babies and children are great fun and raising them has unmatched rewards; however, parenting is the hardest job there is.

For moms, the pressure they endure can be different from that experienced by dads. Yes, dads definitely do their part, no doubt about it. However, moms are typically the CEP: Chief Executive Parent. By the same token, it's well known by now that in many families, when the patriarch heads for the office, so does so the matriarch.

And for mothers, the opportunity cost of choosing work over family, and vice versa, can be a lonely and isolating business. When Erin Martin Kane found herself dealing with this very issue, her new baby, Manic Mommies Media Inc., was born.

Based in Natick, Manic Mommies is an online social community providing both working and at-home mums an outlet to deal with the rigors of motherhood. While the company's genetics primarily include podcasts, blogs and Web-based forums, there are also offline activities.

Kane, the company's president and executive producer, and Kristin Brandt, its executive editor, use podcasts to deliver a true, and, at times, raw account about the trials and tribulations of the dual-track life of career and motherhood. They don't pretend to be experts; just a couple of moms who are wrestling with similar issues while facilitating a national dialogue.

"While mainstream magazines like Working Mother do a great job offering expert advice about how to do things better, we try to focus on the realities of being working moms who struggle with how to 'do it all.' We like to say we're 'refreshingly honest' about our flaws," says Brandt.

Kane conceived the concept when her son, Brendan, was born in 2004. She decided to leave her communications manager position at WGBH, where she had an eight-year career working on the show, "Frontline." She did so to start her public relations firm, EMK Public Relations. During her entrepreneurial grind, she also found herself the primary care taker for her sons, Tommy, now 8, and Brendan, now 6.

Although she loves family life, Kane describes spending days at home as rigorous and isolating. "I felt very much alone working out of my home and taking care of the kids in tandem," she says. "After a while, I knew I needed some form of support and camaraderie."

That came from Brandt. Both women were friends and Ashland neighbors. (Kane has since moved to Rochester, N.Y.). They often met for coffee and had many conversations about their days as moms. Additionally, both possessed a deep interest in social media technology, recognizing the important impact they now have on the business world.

"Understanding social media (at the time blogs and podcasts, but now including Twitter, Facebook, etc.) was the original inspiration for Manic Mommies. But we soon discovered our stories, families, struggles and triumphs are subjects our growing listeners responded to."

This being the case, in July 2005, when Brandt's husband, Steve, was watching the Tour de France on a French side street, they formulated the idea for a podcast. So sitting at Brandt's sticky kitchen table, a microphone between them and a pile of dirty clothes at their feet, Kane and Brandt recorded the first humorous and entertaining Manic Mommies podcast.

While the funny tales were flying, the end product was, and continues to be, a candid, spinless and empathetic account about their lives. "Our objective is to provide empathy to the working mother. ... What women get is an honest and unfiltered account of what it is to manage career and family," says Kane.

The site's popularity has grown slow and steady over the past six years. As of today, listeners have a library of more than 240 shows at their disposal, touching on topics from maintaining sanity, leaving kids at day care and pouting children and husbands.

In addition, on iTunes, Manic Mommies has grabbed the spotlight. Its shows are consistently ranked in the top 10 under the "Kids & Family" category, sharing center stage with "Despicable Me" and "Sesame Street." Moreover, many celebrities have appeared on the show including James Denton from "Desperate Housewives," Julia Louis-Dreyfus from "The New Adventures of Old Christine" and,

the late Elizabeth Edwards.

With the show's success, Kane and Brandt decided to develop an offline gathering for community members. Hence, in 2007, they organized an annual trek called Manic Mommies Escape.

Typically taking place in a warm locale, the event allows women to unwind and recharge with an array of activities.

"It's a reason to get away from the house, the job and the role of motherhood. For moms, it's about putting themselves first," says Kane. Past destinations have included Napa Valley, Newport, R.I., and the Bahamas.

Over the years, the demand for the excursion has blossomed beyond capacity. Thus, also in 2007, the two company leaders designed a membership program called GalPals.

"While the podcast is free, GalPals is \$19.99 a year. With it, members can get Working Advantage discounts on a variety of personal experiences and effects that include Carnival Cruises and clothes from Banana Republic. The GalPals program also gives priority to members who are looking to book reservations for Manic Mommies Escape," says Brandt.

This year's Escape costs around \$150 (not including airfare and accommodations). It does include a welcome reception, a Saturday and Sunday brunch, Saturday night cocktails, a riverboat cruise, workshops, fitness class, book club, live entertainment, live podcasts, a scavenger hunt and a T-shirt. The location and date have not yet been set.

The two executives also noticed there are other moms who cannot necessarily attend the Escape due to familial situations such as tight budgets, busy schedules and special needs children. Therefore, Kane and Brandt partnered with Big Tent Design Inc., a Web-based social platform, that allows listeners the opportunity to connect with other listeners in a private online setting.

Kristin Radcliffe of O'Fallon, Ill., and a Manic Mommies loyalist, has used the technology and says she loves it.

"I've connected with a group of eight moms that have been an awesome source of support," Radcliffe says. "We now have an invaluable structure to help one another deal with the chaos of motherhood."

Now a national brand, Manic Mommies has caught the attention of iconic global corporations including General Motors and Intel Corp. Rebecca Harris, social strategist for General Motors and mother of two, met Kane and Brandt by happenstance.

"Our relationship with Manic Mommies came out of some early work we were doing in the social media space," says Harris. "GM was looking at different ways of trying to get our product messages to groups of people our brand teams have identified as 'consumers' of these products."

General Motors also has a plethora of women balancing work and family. Many have helped expand the Manic Mommies community.

"We have a lot of mothers in our company working in various capacities who participate and feed in ideas to the community," says Harris. "Most of these interactions are fostered out of activities or events that we work on with Manic Mommies."

Intel, a California-based developer of processor technologies, has been a staunch supporter of the company as well. Alison Wesley, its media relations specialist, is also a working mom and an active listener. Wesley helps leverage the Manic Mommies brand by inviting Kane and Brandt to participate in Intel marketing events.

"(Since 2010), we've sponsored Kristin and Erin to come to the Consumer Electronics Show," says Wesley. "This provided them with the opportunity to participate and bring back the most interesting findings to their community."

Kane and Brandt have expanded their business and brand by licensing it out to other companies for official use. MeadWestvaco Corp., a Virginia-based packaging solutions company, uses the Manic Mommies logo on a series of its calendars. These can be purchased from Amazon.com, Target, Office Depot and a host of other online and offline retailers.

But what about dads? "We've been told our show and site are a great resource for dads looking to 'get into their wives' heads.' Other than that, we can't really comment on a dad's experience, but we do believe they deserve a similar resource," says Brandt.

Adds Kane, "The community built and created itself. We just wanted to provide an outlet for women to convey what life is like." Based on emails from fathers, she knows that men use manicmommies.com, too. "We don't exclude dads," she says. "In fact, many listen to the podcasts to better understand what their wives are dealing with."

Manic Mommies Media Inc. is located at 34 Main St., 3rd Floor, Natick. The blog is www.manicmommies.com and the podcast is called "Manic Mommies" under the "Kids and Family" category on iTunes. New podcasts are uploaded to iTunes every Sunday night. Both moms also write for blogs: RealSimple.com and Embassy Suites' businessbalance.com.

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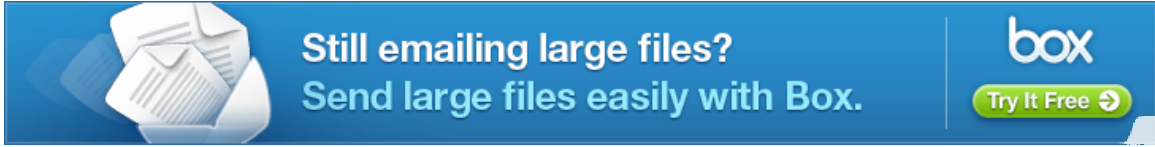
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