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Born of a mother's love

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What started out as a kitchen experiment has transformed into a multi-million dollar business for Inga Tritt.

A former stylist, Tritt teamed up with a research scientist and several chemists three years ago to create products she felt comfortable using on her young daughter's sensitive skin and scalp.

"I found the grocery store products exacerbated the eczema situation, and the natural products left Maya's hair and skin even drier," Tritt said. "I knew that there had to be something out there to be better, but there wasn't."



Tribune photo by Jayson Mellom

Inga Tritt launched The Original Little Sproute with money from the two salon businesses she sold.

So with the money from two salon businesses she had sold, Tritt began mixing her own solutions for sensitive skin. The Original Little Sprout was born.

The baby hair and skin care line is available online and in stores across the United States and internationally, and the company counts celebrities including Courteney Cox, Brooke Shields and Diane Lane among its fans.

Tritt recently spoke with The Tribune about the product line and how she balances motherhood and her business.

How do your products compare to the more traditional baby care products that parents have been using for years?

We offer a fusion of the best natural ingredients with the best clinically tested safe ingredients. We wanted to create products that we can feel good about using on our children that offer professional performance. There are ingredients in many common baby products that I don't want on my child's skin. For example, DMDM hydantoin, a commonly used preservative in baby hair and skin care, works by releasing formaldehyde. People call or write us saying that they can't believe how quickly their child's cradle cap or eczema cleared up. It's not magic. We just use good ingredients. But, our products aren't cheap. (The products range in price from \$10 to \$20.)

Why not make a more reasonably priced line?

The raw ingredients we use are expensive. I knew I could make a cheap line, but I have the toughest customer in the world: moms. When I was starting out, I had the chemists break down the composition of the baby products in the market. I found that some companies didn't list all of the ingredients they used. We have full disclosure on our bottle and our Web site for our customers.

What do you think parents need to know about the baby products they buy?

Parents don't have the time to do the homework about all of the common ingredients that could be harmful. Baby shampoos are traditionally made either with numbing agents or made with a higher pH to match the pH of the eye. Either way, the eye doesn't recognize the foreign substance so it doesn't produce tears to flush it out. That means that the sulfates typically in a shampoo are not washed out by tears.

Your product line has expanded rapidly in the just three years. How have you advertised your product?

Everything has been done by word of mouth. We only have a Web site up. Someone will use the product and then tell their friend, and then a salon will call up saying they want some of the product. I think that more and more moms are looking for healthier products to use on their children. That's what led me to create these products in the first place.

What's next for The Original Little Sprout?

I have a few new products in mind. For example, I want to expand the collection to meet the needs of specific ethnic hair types like African-American hair. I also want to use our Web site to provide some basic education so that parents can be savvy consumers. We'll include a list of top offenders.

What advice do you have for other women who believe they have a good product to sell?

~~Don't listen to anybody. Follow your dream. That thing about doing what you love and the money will follow is true.~~ I started my salons with no money. I didn't have the kind of established credit to get a loan so I put everything on my credit card. Everyone said I was crazy. It's important to not be fearful. A good business plan is critical, too. There are so many local banks that are helpful now with programs designed specifically for women.

How do you balance being a mom with running a business?

Moms are good at multitasking. I have my priorities straight. First, I'm a mom, then I'm a wife, and then I'm a businesswoman. We do all of the office work out of our homes and the products are manufactured in Riverside, Calif. We make it a family trip when we visit our manufacturer. Everyone in the family is helping out so it turns into a satisfying experience. It's not just a job.

Inga Tritt

Job: Founder of The Original Little Sprout

Age: 38

Residence: Atascadero, with husband, David Vartabedian, and 4-year-old daughter, Maya.

Background: Raised in Santa Barbara, Tritt attended Santa Barbara City College and Cal State Northridge before deciding to become a hairstylist. She attended Santa Barbara Beauty School and worked for several beauty salons. She opened her first salon, Gutierrez Street Hair and Skin Center, in 1997. She grew the business into a spa with massages and nail services before selling it in 2000. That same year, she opened Amara Spa by The Sea in Summerland, which she sold in 2002 before moving to Atascadero. She founded The Original Little Sprout in 2003. The lineup of products has grown from three products in 2003 to 13.

Annual revenues: Undisclosed

Retailers: Products are available throughout the United States and internationally, and can be found locally at Buttons N' Bows in Arroyo Grande, Harvest Health Food and Heart and Soles Day Spa in Atascadero, New Frontiers and Johnson's for Children in San Luis Obispo and Mollywogs and Templeton Beauty Salon in Templeton. Products are also sold online at BabyUniverse, BabyBecause, CarlaPie Closets and Forget Me Not Kids.

Online: www.theoriginallittlesprout.com