

COVER STORY

SMART MOMS WEAR MANY HATS

Garla Smith and Michelle Yanik

Many homes have a rack just inside the front door filled with an assortment of hats. Who wears them? Are they functional or just for looks? Working women with families wear many hats. Sometimes these hats are just invisible.

Meet Garla Smith and Michelle Yanik, co-owners of Smart Moms, a staffing company that provides services to businesses using a workforce of stay-at-home moms. Both have children, run a household and a business to name a few of their hats. Neither ever thought they would wear the hats they wear now with Smart Moms.

Garla is a manufacturing engineer by trade and spent four years at Hewlett Packard and Applied Materials in Silicon Valley. She helped transition new designs to volume manufacturing. She relocated to the Triangle, had two daughters and became a stay-at-home mom. "After a year I realized I wasn't mentally challenged – doing the whole mommy thing," she explains. "I remember getting away for a weekend – just having 'Garla time' and realized what was wrong. I missed the professional side of my life. Michelle and I had been friends and when I came back from that weekend we talked about looking into a business opportunity."

Michelle had left a career in public relations and marketing to stay at home with her son and daughter who are now eight and ten. She held various positions throughout those years working closely with Fortune 500 companies, non-profit organizations and associations.

Both were stay-at-home moms with marketable skills. Garla remembers, "We didn't have any business specifically in mind so we went to Barnes and Noble and bought some books to see what kind of work we could do from home. We couldn't find anything that interested us so we talked with other moms we knew."

continued 



Garla (left) and Michelle rarely stop working

Through these conversations they recognized there were stay-at-home moms with strong professional skill sets and looked to see who could benefit from this talent pool. Garla and Michelle decided to create a business to serve the needs



of two frequently overlooked groups. They brought stay-at-home moms and small business owners together and thus Smart Moms was born.

"The company name speaks to our moms as clients: They are smart. They are efficient. They are going to get it done for you," says Garla.

Their children inspire them. "They keep us challenged; the company is like our third child for each of us – we push on. Garla's favorite word is perseverance. Having daughters, we

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want to make things better for them when they enter the workforce," says Michelle as she smiles.

NO IDLE SKILLS HERE

Michelle shares, " There are many truly skilled women who come out of careers. Although they do not go to a job every day, they still use skills such as computer usage, organizational management, project management, negotiating and leadership. Garla works with them to recognize they haven't been idle."

Many are involved in volunteer activities throughout the community and don't think of putting those positions and skills on a

resume. Reliability and personal behavior are very important to placing the correct mom (they actually have a few Smart Dads) and ensuring that the fit is a good one. Skills are checked as part of the interview process and these are listed on resumes to include previous experience, even as a stay-at-home mom.

"We can point a candidate in the right direction for online training or Wake Tech if there are courses that can assist in preparing them for specific jobs," Garla comments. "We tell them, here is what you need to be placed by Smart Moms."

HATS FOR EACH

Both women are active in the business, but wear different hats. Garla is the "behind the scenes" person who works with the moms, their recruiter and the database. She also networks to build the candidate pool as well as manage the Web site.

Michelle works with employers and helps to determine needs and fit. Many are small businesses such as technology companies, CPA firms, marketing, a headquarters of a chain restaur

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rant, public television, realtors, home improvement companies, contractors that need a virtual assistant, associations and property management companies. She also handles marketing, public relations and customer service. Both women constantly bounce ideas and feedback off each other.



Garla and Michelle celebrate their 3rd anniversary in 2006

A STRONG POOL

Smart Moms maintains a recruiting database that contains a smaller pre-screened group within the larger database. Applicants can apply online. Most candidates have seven or more years of experience in their field and 95 percent are women. Over 50 percent of this recruiting database has a B.S. degree or higher.

Since 2003 the company has successfully placed writers, editors, graphic designers, administrative assistants, appointment setters, bookkeepers, customer service representatives (working from home), transcriptionists, virtual receptionists and even survey data entry clerks. The majority of the database could act as evaluators/reviewers of a business' products or services. Because the Smart Moms workforce contains so much amazing talent, the possibilities are unlimited.

WHAT IS A SMART MOM?

A woman who has left a full-time career, really loves being a mom and being involved in the community and realizes they are not using their full potential and wants to make some income is a Smart Mom.

She is ready to blend home and work again when work is not full-time and taxing. She is the kind of mom who wants to get back in the game. She is also resourceful, has taken the initiative to stay active, maybe has taken a class at a community college, has helped in a friend's business or volunteered.



Employment opportunities are geared across the board. Any organization that has the need for contract or part-time workers and can deal with associates who work from their homes is a good fit. Smart Moms work from home or in the business depending on the job.

The most popular requests for a Smart Mom are positions that are ongoing. Some requests are for a specific project; larger companies have crunch time and will call for those placements. Some clients take on more than one Smart Mom within their organization.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Smart Moms has a variety of solutions to meet the employer's needs and budget. There is a classified ad program that allows immediate access to the database. Ongoing placements allow the employer to avoid payroll and benefits costs and just concentrate on working with the candidate.

The company also has a direct recruiting effort that offloads the searching/recruiting process to Smart Moms to find that exact candidate that matches their job requirement. They pay nothing until two viable candidates are found that match their criteria.

Once a commitment from a business is placed, they work closely with their recruiter (who is also a Smart Mom) and make sure the candidates are the ones they want to place through the use of assessment tools.

"Employers often ask, what do I do if their kid is sick?" Garla chuckles. "They always work it out. An employer needs to be open-minded. A mom is a committed employee and contributes a tremendous amount to the business. They will be diligent and get the job done and work around a challenge."

Smart Moms has stayed the course from the original mission and vision. The company has added more options to meet the needs of clients. The database is vast and is always growing to meet even more needs. There are people of various skill levels, as not everyone needs experts.



First Network and Learn for Smart Moms, March 2008

SMART MOMS

BUSINESS OWNER BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

"We love being home-based business owners," says Michelle. "The biggest benefit is that we have some flexibility with our schedule. This flexibility does not mean we don't provide excellent customer service. We work hard to

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keep our customers satisfied, return calls promptly, address problems as they come up and do our very best to listen to our clients' needs and desires."

"We had to learn our challenges," says Michelle. "In the beginning we felt we had to get everything going. We realized at some point that we couldn't do it all."

She continues, "Some of our challenges have included collections, managing our own administrative load (we solved this by outsourcing to our own database) and challenges with sales. Every business has a weak point. We have addressed ours by

outsourcing, revamping our processes and getting further education to increase our skills (i.e. sales). Most of all, we believe that perseverance and balance are the key to any home based business."

Garla adds, "We had to learn to balance work and home; it is a work in progress. I am always asking Michelle how she does it at her house and how she stays organized. She uses a white board to track family activities and now we do as well. We exchange ideas with each other to find that happy medium."

The impact Smart Moms has on two groups of people who are so different – moms and businesses is rewarding to both women. Making the match successful is important to them.

Both women have busy schedules: they get kids out in the morning to school and go to work themselves. Certain days

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are spent networking and others on administrative functions and Web site activities. Somehow they squeeze in volunteer



hours as well. Evenings are focused on making time for family and then getting back on the computer to finish business for the day.

"It is important to make those investments in your children and family," explains Garla, "I take the time for both. I need that balance to nurture my family. It is obvious I needed this added dimension of my professional life and I can do both."

THE CRYSTAL BALL

Because the need to work from home is so vast, the Smart Moms database contains candidates from around the U.S and abroad. These candidates are seeking virtual positions and some are looking for a way for Smart Moms to place them in jobs in their hometowns. So, a part of the long-term goals are to be able to help employers anywhere in the U.S. seize the opportunities for growth with candidates in their own towns or working virtually.

The next big goal is to develop strategic relationships with larger companies to become a staffing arm for temporary needs. Smart Moms' specialty is part-time. They know how to figure out who is right for part-time and match backgrounds, skills, etc. and develop those relations. Gone is the mentality that, "If you work from home, I can't watch you." There are many extremely efficient and effective workers all around the globe who work from a virtual office.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

When asked what type of advice would Garla and Michelle have for women looking to start home-based businesses, they shared, "Research early on. Once you figure out what field you want to go into, interview others in that field. Use your network. We sat down with others in the staffing business and asked questions such as how do you charge the client, what forms do you use?"

They felt that having a designated space strictly for work is really important. Mail needs to have separate places for home and work. Don't put it in the same pile. By having a designated business line when it rings, you know this is a business call.

Garla and Michelle emphasized the need to stay disciplined and focused.

Check with the Secretary of State to see what you need for the business side. The Small Business Association (SBA) and SCORE both have strong resources. They went to SCORE and it was very helpful. "We were committed to being serious about our business," both women emphasized.

Smart Moms' commitment to selecting only the best quality candidates with the right skill sets who are devoted to part-time work has earned them the reputation of part-time employment experts.

Garla sums everything up by sharing, "My hope is that we continue to find companies who acknowledge the talent we have

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and are willing to create these opportunities for moms in the workplace." Yes, they are moms, they are smart moms. Moms who wear many hats well.!

For more information on Smart Moms, visit their Web site www.smart-moms.net.



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