



Mother's care for special needs kids sparks business



By Deborah L. Cohen

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(Reuters) - As an occupational therapist, Aviva Weiss often spotted shortcomings in toys aimed at special-needs kids. It wasn't until her own daughter was slow to develop that she did something about it, eventually building a thriving business.

"There's no reason why parents shouldn't have products that don't just help kids, but feel good, look good and are affordable," said Weiss, the 31-year-old founder of Fun and Function (www.funandfunction.com), which sells everything from clothing to gym equipment and games for kids with developmental disabilities such as autism.

She began hatching the idea for the company eight years ago after one of her daughters was delayed when learning to crawl, and eventually required therapy. Weiss became disillusioned with the selection of clothes designed to soothe the nervous system of children with hypersensitivity to their environment.

"I started purchasing products but I wasn't impressed," said Weiss, who had worked in hospitals as a pediatric occupational therapist. "I got a weighted vest. I paid a lot of money and it was really ugly."

Before long, she and her husband Haskel, an educator, began exploring the market, attending trade shows, seeking advice from trusted mentors and taking entrepreneurship classes at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School near their suburban Philadelphia home.

"We drank up everything we could learn," said Weiss, who tapped \$400,000 in savings and help from family to cover startup costs that included a color catalog, inventory, product development and legal fees, among other costs.

"We must have been very confident. We leveraged everything we owned," she said.

Two years after incorporating in 2005, they began selling wholesale and online, all the while juggling

full-time careers and a growing family that now includes five kids ranging in age from 18 months to nine years, including two other daughters who required developmental therapy.

“We were up ‘til all hours of the night,” said Weiss, who in 2008 decided to focus solely on the business, which she runs from her house. “It was stressful.”

And it wasn’t without mistakes early on such as underpricing some items and falling short in catalog layout and design.

“We didn’t know anything about merchandising,” she confessed.

\$2 MILLION BUSINESS

Dedication to figuring it out paid off. This year Fun and Function, which in 2010 was recognized as a fast-growing “Philadelphia 100” business, is on track to reach about \$1.8 million in sales, up 40 percent from last year.

“The feedback we got along the way was so enthusiastic,” said Weiss of parents of special-needs children. “It was a driving force for us.» Along with her husband, who serves as CFO, and a staff of two, Weiss relies on a network of some 20 contractors around the country. Her customer base includes parents, teachers, therapists and schools.

“We’re pretty virtual,” said Weiss, who in addition to offering products from other manufacturers, has developed her own product line, including stylish weighted vests designed to look like regular clothing. While some items cost as much as several thousand dollars, most are in the \$20 to \$60 range, she said.

There are no figures on the size of the market for special needs toys, which remains a fraction of a broader U.S. toy market research firm NPD Group tracked as nearly \$22 billion in 2010.

Observers contend the niche is growing, fueled in part by steadily increasing public awareness for autism and other developmental disabilities more frequently diagnosed and treated than in years past.

“I think it’s something we’ve been talking about for probably the last five or six years,” said Kathleen McHugh, president of the American Specialty Toy Retailing Association, a trade group. “The more information that gets out there, the more it builds awareness. The more awareness, the more the market will increase.”

McHugh noted that big retailers have tuned in, such as Toys ‘R’ US, which in 2007 formed a partnership with Autism Speaks, a nonprofit group. The retailer now publishes a “toy guide for differently-abled kids.”

HUMAN TOUCH

To stay competitive, Fun and Function plays up the personal touch.

Weiss answers product queries herself, and the Fun and Function Facebook page is filled with pictures of her and her daughter, as well as other users of products.

The company fosters an active social network, where parents are encouraged to tap each other’s advice and support. Recent posts ranged from questions about etiquette during physical therapy to storm-coping tips for autistic kids.

That kind of attention is not lost on customers such as Shannon Stilwell, a 37-year-old mother of two autistic sons in Cypress, Texas, who has purchased clothing and toys from Fun and Function.

“It’s not just a company; it’s a real interactive community,” Stilwell said, adding that the affordability of the products was a big draw stacked up against the high costs of therapy. “You don’t want to waste your money.”

Weiss herself is quick to point out that Fun and Function remains closely tied to her family’s personal experience. All the products she designs, which require extensive third- party lab testing before they can be sold, must first meet the approval of her own kids.

“I like to see what happens when they get their hands on it,” she said.