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A group dynamic:

Mother develops behavior improvement program with a nearly all-local business team

By JAMES J. ALLEN

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After Katie Basson's second child was born, her 4-year-old son Sebastian grew jealous of his baby brother. He threw tantrums, became utterly disagreeable and drove his parents to their wit's end.

"We found that none of the consequences we set as parents were working," said Basson. "We had come to a point where our family had lost its harmony."

The former first- and second-grade teacher at Newburyport's Kelley School thought back to reward tactics she used in her classroom and lessons in behavior she learned studying for her psychology degree. She decided to put together a strategy, bought a simple chain necklace and some charms and began testing her hypothesis.

Over a year later, Sebastian has overcome several bad habits and become a model for a new product his mom is launching with the support of a nearly all-local crew. Called "BITs Kit" for short, her program is the first and flagship product by Behavior Improvement Today, the company Basson founded and Sebastian inspired, which has shown quick changes in young attitudes.

In a system that targets kids ages 4 to 9, parents sign a contract with their child, specifying the behavior that needs changing. If they show good behavior, children are rewarded with a token. For poor behavior, a token is revoked. Boy or girl, Basson said they proudly show off their necklaces, which collect the bits throughout the day. When the tokens add up, a sticker is put on the contract, and when the stickers add up, the child earns a grand prize the parent helps pick.

While the idea may sound simple enough, putting the parts together and offering support to parents employed a number of talents.

But while Basson didn't have to go outside her family to find the root of her business idea, she hardly had to leave her neighborhood to find the help to get it designed, written, built, packaged and marketed. People in the Newburyport area offered it all.

"I didn't realize I was rubbing elbows with so much talent," said Basson.

She first ran into Ruth Sheets, who runs Ducks in a Row Consulting on Market Street, and who she

knew from visiting the same chiropractor. Excited about her new business brochure, Sheets showed them to Basson, who told Sheets about the prototype system that had helped her son. She told of her son's naughty behavior that had come to a head during a trip to Maine with her extended family. As usual, Sebastian had been acting up to fetch attention.

"The trip put us in this pressure cooker," Basson said, recalling "a situation where I decided I had to design something new."

The rewards began working. And when the two were at lunch one day, a waitress inquired where Sebastian had gotten his necklace and charms. He displayed his jewels proudly, explained they were for being a good boy, and Basson told of her system. "That sounds great, where can I buy it," Basson remembered the waitress asking.

The idea of selling the product appealed to Sheets, who works most often with small businesses in different phases of their development, including start-ups. "People with big business ideas but no way of getting them there," she explained.

Basson was "a positive person with a lot of common sense," said Sheets, two crucial elements in conceiving a successful new product.

Keeping local people in mind, Sheets began building a business team. She offered the writing and public relations services of Adair Rowland, who wrote most of the product's copy. And Rowland recommended Irene Johnson, who did all layout and print production, and Edith Heyck came up with Bitsy, the animated monkey logo that shows students how BITs works. Johnson took the team's ideas and "transformed them into graphic elements," said Basson.

Heyck, in turn, introduced Basson to John Parrott, his wife, Victoria, and Bruce deMustchine of the Rowley-based Christopher Group, which aided in the product's design, manufacturing in China and marketing. Lately, the group has been in talks with bookstore giant Barnes & Noble, which is showing interest in the product, John Parrott said.

"We've all known each other and worked in different capacities with each other, but never all together," said Rowland, who credited Basson with much of the product's success thus far.

"She's really got winner written all over her. She's pretty much inspired all of us." Basson has field-tested the BITs system both inside and outside the circle of her business team.

Parrott said it worked on his daughter Abby's refusal to stay in her new bed after growing too tall for her crib. Using the BITs kit, rewarding Abby over a period of time when she stayed in bed solved the problem.

"This was a tool for parents that we felt were at their wit's end," said Parrott. "It really helps build self-esteem in the family." After further talking with Basson, he predicted the product would be a success. "One thing you need is someone who has an energy level like Katie's," he added.

Another mother who was trying the program to get her son to stop hitting others discovered that he had figured out that he could get a few good whacks at his brother, apologize quickly and get right back the tokens he'd had revoked. The parent was again at her wit's end and got hold of Basson.

"Up the ante," Basson recalled saying. Force him to play alone for 15-20 minutes before he gets back the reward, she said.

That consultation is another thing parents get when they buy the BITs kit, said Basson. She answers e-mails, goes on-line to post responses on the Behavior Improvement Today Web site, www.bitskit.com, where she also connects with parents in chat rooms once a week. With the help of a Web designer, who "serendipitously also had a degree in psychology," Basson said, products are already being sold.

She plans to market the BITs kit to local bookstores, leave leaflets in local pediatricians' offices and send direct mailings to teachers' and parents' groups. Behavior Improvement Today is also planning kits with different themes, such as sports, and kits for teachers, older and younger students.

"I want to be a place where parents and teachers can come to improve a child's behavior," she said.

And while she'd like to improve children's behavior near and far, Basson didn't have to go much further than the city limits to find people to help realize her idea. "It's an amazing testament to the people of Newburyport," said Parrott.

Basson agreed.

"It was all available right here."

Ruth Sheets of Ducks in a Row Consulting provides strategic business consulting to start ups, fix ups, and build ups to turn business pains into business gains. With an operational and marketing focus Ruth works with companies in various stages of transition to launch new products and services, target new markets, eliminate barriers to business viability, and establish and achieve business goals. To obtain more information about Ruth Sheets and Ducks in a Row Consulting please visit www.ducksinarowconsulting.com or call **978-463-2264**.

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