



Mothers of Invention: How Moms Help Huggies Innovate

All around the world, mothers are inventing new child-care products—so Kimberly-Clark thought, why not collaborate with them (and save the R&D budget in the process)?

By Soren Kaplan

As the maker of Kleenex, Kotex, Depends, Huggies, and other products, Kimberly-Clark is already a leader in most of its markets. But they were looking for the next big thing, something they could develop into another hit. So they assembled a team to explore the options and asked me for assistance with guiding the process.

One of the first things we did was set up several innovation sessions to explore possible new directions. As a way to spur our creativity and push beyond our current mindsets, we invited a number of outsiders to the sessions—external experts in fields related to (and also unrelated to) Kimberly-Clark’s core businesses.

One of these leaders was Maria Bailey, a renowned author and talk show host, and the go-to authority on anything and everything related to motherhood. Kimberly-Clark’s Senior Director of Corporate Innovation Steve Paljieg was sharing a cup of coffee and chatting with Maria during a break between sessions when she brought up an interesting cultural phenomenon. All around the country, mothers themselves were inventing new child care products. “Why not reach out to these ‘mompreneurs’ and see what they’re working on?” Maria asked. Steve was immediately intrigued by the idea. Going one step further, Steve thought, “Why not push beyond just seeing what innovative moms are doing by finding a way to innovate with them?”

“I realized that the only way to do it right was to go out directly to the innovators, to the moms themselves,” Steve recalled. “These are the people who have the need and who have already translated it into solutions.” Steve was definitely willing to work with these “mothers of invention.” But he knew that it would be a radical departure from how Kimberly-Clark usually developed new products— and that the process would require some serious innovation in its own right to succeed.

The main question was how to do it, and the answer wasn’t entirely clear. In fact, it led to even more questions, none of which was easy to answer either. For instance, how would he find these mompreneurs? Then, once he’d found them, how would he

structure the company’s financial and operating relationship with them? Would Kimberly-Clark simply offer to buy them out? Or could a more collaborative model be arranged?

Steve settled on a kind of hybrid approach. Instead of acquiring the rights to the inventions, Kimberly-Clark would provide sizable grants to fund the mompreneurs’ own businesses. But this wouldn’t be just a charity initiative. In exchange for the initial funding, Kimberly-Clark would get the right of first refusal if the moms ever decided to sell their stakes. Finally, instead of spending millions to find and evaluate these fledgling businesses, Steve realized that he could let the moms themselves come to him. He went back to the source of his original insight, Maria Bailey, and asked her to advertise the grant program to her millions of followers. Maria gladly agreed, and quality submissions immediately started pouring in.

The first dozen \$15,000 “Huggies MomInspired Grants” were awarded to women with products as varied as a two-piece zippered bed sheet for cribs to a sippy cup that accelerates children’s motor skills development. Since then, another round of grant applications has begun and Kimberly-Clark has even taken the program overseas, launching a similar MomInspired initiative in Australia.

All told, Kimberly-Clark funded the entire MomInspired program for a fraction of the cost of what they would have spent to create a prototype of any one of the dozen selected products. In return, the company not only has received massive amounts of positive (and free) media attention but also has built solid relationships with the grantees that could lead to profitable partnerships in the future. “The value of the program has been incredible,” Steve said. “We’ve had over fifteen million web page views and social media references that promote our program and our brand. And the best thing is, it’s not us driving it. It’s the moms themselves. They are the new ambassadors for Huggies. You just can’t buy PR like that.”

The process behind Huggies MomInspired has helped the company see and do things differently. Steve summed this up when he said, “I think it’s a little too proud to believe that our knowledge is perfect. We didn’t go into that session looking for alternative business models to source innovation. But then again, that’s the beauty of how these things work sometimes.” Today the organization recognizes the value of surprises and how going outside one’s comfort zone can help challenge and advance mindsets inside.

For Steve, all of this is indeed rewarding to see, but there’s a deeper dynamic and greater intent underneath the visible business results. “It’s been such an emotionally rich journey for me,” Steve reflected. “I mean, moms will say to me that ‘until I got this grant, I couldn’t decide whether to keep my kid’s college fund or start my business. You have solved this problem for me.’”

And that emotional richness ran even deeper than Steve initially realized. His mother passed away just before the first MomInspired grants were awarded. At a young age, she had worked at a neighborhood family grocery store. When she was sixteen, the owners decided to close the store and retire, but they gave her the unique opportunity to take it over, which she did. Steve’s mother ran that little business for more than three decades. But it wasn’t until Steve was writing her eulogy that he consciously realized the connection between his mother’s experience and the program he’d just worked so hard to bring to life. “My mom was a great example of a woman who, against all odds, was able to build a successful business and provide for another generation of her family. I really think of MomInspired as payback for all that she was able to do and all the sacrifices she made.”

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Author

Soren Kaplan is the author of two bestselling and award-winning books, *Leapfrogging* and *The Invisible Advantage*. He is a former corporate executive, an affiliated professor at USC’s Center for Effective Organizations, and founder of InnovationPoint. Based in San Francisco, he delivers keynote speeches, leadership development, and consulting on business strategy and innovation throughout the world.

