

Vogue Mama

online maternity consignment

Enterprising moms : Santa Barbara-based businesses Vogue Mama and Pax Baby reach other mothers online
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Kristina McKean, above, founded Vogue Mama, a Web site for buying and selling second-hand designer maternity clothes, similar to eBay, which she runs from her Santa Barbara home. Mrs. McKean's mother, artist Kay Lemke, created the graphics on the site. Below, Mrs. McKean shows a Susan Manalo maternity halter dress to Penelope, one of her daughters, in their home on the Westside. The designer dress is one of many items shoppers can bid on at www.voguemama.com.
STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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It used to be that some moms sold to other moms by lugging boxes of Tupperware, children's books and other paraphernalia from their car trunks to living rooms filled with fidgety kids. And while house parties haven't completely disappeared, tech-savvy moms have tapped into an even wider circle of parents by plugging in to the Internet. In recent months, local stay-at-home moms Kristina McKean and Jillian Davidsson have staked their claims on the Internet with Web sites featuring products aimed at other mothers and moms-to-be. Though they don't know each other, both decided to start their first businesses online but to market them the old-fashioned way: from mom to mom, through word-of-mouth referrals and with help from online parenting network SBParent.com, which posted links to their sites.

VOGUE MAMA

For Mrs. McKean, a fashionable 35-year-old mother of two, the day came when she realized she'd been holding on to maternity clothes that she no longer needed, many of them expensive designer labels.

"I was going through my attic one day," recalled Mrs. McKean, who slightly resembles actress Penelope Cruz. "I thought, 'I don't really want to wear this again. It would be great if I could sell this and buy new things.' "

After searching eBay's maternity clothes listings, she found nearly 18,000 items, an overwhelming amount for busy moms-to-be to sort through. "When you're pregnant or have small children, you don't have a lot of time," said Mrs. McKean. "I thought I could create a niche where only high-end maternity designer clothes would be listed."

Clothing and fashion have always been a passion for Mrs. McKean, who developed products for Gap Inc. in the Bay Area and worked as an interior designer before she had her daughters, Paloma, 3 1/2, and Penelope, 1 1/2.

When she was pregnant, she felt it was even more important to buy the right clothes. "I felt cute for two months, and the rest of the time, I just felt really big," she confided. "I felt if you wore things that were more form-fitting (which she says designer clothes tend to be), it was more flattering to your figure."

"If you're into designer clothes, it's hard to switch, but you don't want to spend a fortune on something you're not going to wear again," she added. For example, "some of (designer Diane von Furstenberg's) dresses can be a couple of hundred dollars. But when you're pregnant, you can gain 10 pounds in a week."

The solution: Vogue Mama (www.voguemama.com), a Web site where moms-to-be can buy second-hand designer-label clothes directly from other moms without breaking the bank.

Mrs. McKean hired Precision Systems, an Oregon-based business that built eBay Express and other Web sites, to design the site, which she oversees from her home on the Westside. As with eBay, users create an account and list items for sale with descriptions, prices and photos, and the site hosts timed auctions. "The transaction really happens between buyer and seller," she said. "Buyers pay with Paypal or credit card."

Mrs. McKean receives a 15 percent commission on each transaction. She's also added a feature that allows sellers to designate a nonprofit to receive a percentage of the sale if they want to.

The site is sectioned off into categories for tops, bottoms, dresses and outerwear. So far, clothes by Diane von Furstenberg have attracted the most hits, but the site has also carried clothing by popular designers Juicy Couture, Isabella Oliver and chiarakruza, among others.

Since Vogue Mama's launch two and a half months ago, the response has been "really amazing," said Mrs. McKean. She received 50 e-mails on the day after the launch and the site has hosted around 20 transactions so far, which she counts as a success, considering the minimal publicity.

"I hope that the site becomes a place . . . where everyone will go to and they know they can find or sell really great pieces," she said. The site "is geared toward mothers, but it's also great after you're pregnant," she added. "It's so great to be able to get some money back and buy something fun and new for the next chapter of your life."

PAX BABY

If Pax Baby founder Jillian Davidsson, 26, can wax poetic about baby carriers, cloth diapers and U.S.-made toys, it's because she believes whole-heartedly in what she sees as their various benefits, not only for moms and babies, but also for the planet.

"We live in the Kmart generation, where everybody wants something really cheap," said the Santa Barbara mom. Whether it's disposable diapers that go into the landfill or toxic lead-based paints in cheap toys, "basically you get what you pay for." And she positively glows when she talks about the growing numbers of stay-at-home moms designing and selling their own innovative products for parents and children. "There are moms inventing new products every day. My goal is to really help those moms get their products out there," said Mrs. Davidsson.

The baby and toddler products that she sells through her Web site, www.paxbaby.com, reflect her values and her parenting philosophies. "All my products are mom-invented or mom-made," she said. "They're made in the U.S. and fair trade and organic. (They're) all my favorite products."

She calls the products "essentials for a peaceful baby," which is reflected in the company's name, and she's used most of them with her own children: Eli, 4 1/2; Rose and Lucy, both 3; and Kolbe, 14 months.

The former beauty salon owner admits she had a lot to learn when she became a mom: Before the birth of her eldest son, she'd never changed a diaper.

That changed quickly, and now motherhood has become her primary calling, as she juggles caring for all four kids (one is adopted), with her husband, Aaron. Both are stay-at-home parents who work part-time. "We're a herd," she joked. "We always knew we wanted a large family. . . . We're actually hoping to have six or eight (children). We'll see how it goes." She started the Web site after she fell in love with a soft-structured baby carrier designed by Beco, in which the baby faces the parent, rather than dangling outward, and is supported by a waist belt and straps. "I bought one for my little guy and

loved it so much," she said. "It supports their whole bottom. It's better ergonomically for the baby and better for the mom. The baby's weight falls on your waist instead of pulling on your neck."

She now sells a range of baby carrier and sling products in contemporary designs, from the Wrap 'n Wear, a long piece of fabric that can be wrapped around in a dozen ways, as it's been done in traditional indigenous cultures, to a recycled fleece Peekaru vest that zips on over carriers.

Bring up the subject of cloth diapering, and "people really freak out on me," she said. Many parents feel they can't handle the mess or imagine themselves struggling with pins. But Mrs. Davidsson says the new styles aren't your mother's diapers. Sewn with Velcro or snaps, detachable inserts and water-whisking suedecloth, this generation's cloth diapers are as easy to use as disposables, she said. "It's just a little bit more work . . . but it feels so good not to be filling the landfills," she said. Plus, they come in fashionable colors, plush fabrics and fun prints, like leopard and polka dots.

Among the two dozen other products sold by Pax Baby are organic T-shirts and baby leg warmers; feeding accessories, like Klean Kanteen sippy cups, made of stainless steel; wee-go baby bottles, which are glass but feature rubber sleeves to prevent slipping; silk playtime costumes; nontoxic, wooden toys; custom blankets; and lotions, balms and creams.

But although her nearly 2-month-old Web site has attracted customers from as far as the Midwest, Mrs. Davidsson is still working on setting up an online shopping cart and takes all her orders over the phone. She also makes product presentations, which she calls "baby wearing parties," to groups of parents at places ranging from the Santa Barbara YMCA to holiday boutiques. At heart, she says, "I'm very touchy-feely. I like to have the ability to show Santa Barbara moms the products in person." Sounds like some things just don't change after all.

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HOW TO SHOP

With Santa Barbara maternity store Due closing soon, Vogue Mama founder Kristina McKean hopes that her Web site will especially appeal to local moms and moms-to-be looking for designer maternity clothes. Since she's currently building inventory for the site, she invites area residents to get in touch with her to drop off or pick up clothes. You can e-mail her at info@voguemama.com. Visit www.voguemama.com.

Pax Baby founder Jillian Davidsson can be reached for baby wearing parties, product demos and ordering information by calling 708-2500. Her Web site, which features a range of products for babies, toddlers and parents, is www.paxbaby.com.