

It's a level playing field in cyberspace, size doesn't matter, and plenty of mums are finding their work-life balance by doing business through the screen and the post.

PHOTOS: RANDY LARCOMBE **WORDS:** MICHAEL BLAYNEY

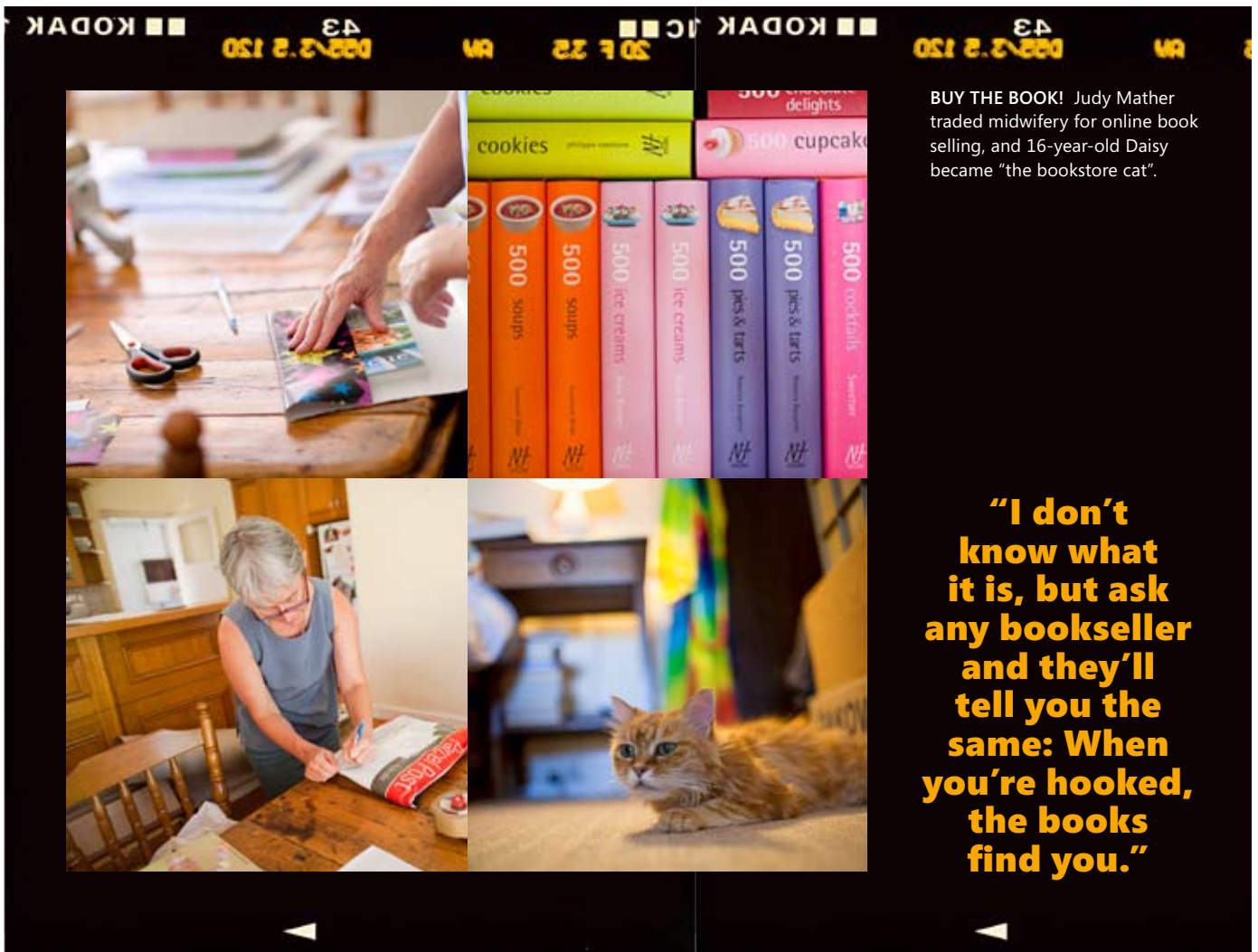
CLICK THE "ABOUT US" LINK ON BOOK-SELLING WEBSITE www.judyoz.com and a somewhat revealing photo of the site's owner pops up on screen. A smiling Judy Mather is seated behind a desk, hand on mouse, dressed shoulder-to-knee, pretty in pink. The caption beneath reads, "... here's another photo of me, hard at work! Yes, that's a pink dressing gown I'm wearing."

There was a time in Judy's life when her work attire was a little more conventional. Less than four years ago, she was working as a midwife at a large private hospital in Adelaide. In fact, she'd been walking the wards for 22 years when she woke up one day in late 2006 and decided there had to be a better way to earn a living.

"The decision to quit nursing was quite simple. I just thought 'I don't want to do this any more; I'm sick of being tired,'" she says. "That very same day I quit."

Now the owner of a successful website selling new and used books, Judy loves working her own hours and being her own boss. But her career "sea change" did come with some initial trepidation.

"I thought I'd have to do some nursing a few days a week to tide me over. [Husband] Greg and I were putting a child through private



school last year, but so far I haven't had to go back to my old life."

Melissa Norfolk, online business consultant and co-author of *Starting an Online Business for Dummies* (Wiley, \$39.95), says many women are relishing the chance to take their business online. "Setting up a website is very popular, especially for mums at home with kids. Generally, they start with a product they're unable to find themselves, and discover they're not the only ones.

"You can definitely start small and compete online with the big guys. People are operating out of their garage, and you can't tell by looking at their website. New players can present a professional image without all the infrastructure and overheads. It's completely changed the way people do business," she says.

Kirsty Chapman-Smith fits Melissa's "stay-at-home mum with a niche product" profile to a tee. "I needed some items for my children and I couldn't buy them in the shops, so I jumped online and discovered eBay," Kirsty says. "After some trial and error, I started selling children's party ware. In February 2009 I opened my own website."

Her website at www.discountpartysupplies.com.au has found its feet away from the eBay community and recently celebrated its first

birthday. Kirsty has high hopes that her range will expand down the track and operate from a "bricks and mortar" premises. Storage is an issue as her business outgrows her four-bedroom Adelaide home base, where she lives with her husband, three school-age children and her youngest, who turned 4 in May.

"We have a formal dining and lounge room. They've both been taken over by products bit by bit. The sofa was first. Now there's no furniture in either of those rooms. It's full of fittings and now it's laid out just like a shop," she says, thankful that her husband is an understanding soul.

"Good things take time. Being at home I can take the kids to school, I can do a bit of work during the day. I'm here when they get home from school, and I can make tea for them. When they go to bed I hop back onto the computer. I measure the business not just by the profit sheet, but also by being there for my family."

Judy Mather's online schooling also came courtesy of an eBay store, a relatively cheap and simple way to start things running.

"I started selling off my own books, purely because I had so many," she says. "From there I just started finding books. I don't >



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know what it is, but ask any bookseller and they’ll tell you the same: When you’re hooked, the books find you.”

After two years of part-time selling, Judy had formed links with several publishers and decided to break away from the eBay security blanket. “The lack of control I had over my business was playing on my mind. I figured that it was time to go out on my own.”

In contrast, Nick Smith from Melbourne has decided to take on eBay! His enterprise, www.ozfreeonline.com, has several major players in its sights and Nick is adamant that he can make it work.

“Before the dotcom crash, there was a real belief that you’d be able to provide these sites for free, and the advertising on the site would pay to run the site,” he says. “I have sound financials proving that not much has changed.”

A classifieds and listings site, www.ozfreeonline.com is competing for the same dollar as online heavyweights www.realestate.com.au, www.seek.com.au, www.ebay.com.au and www.carsguide.com.au.

However, list an item on Nick’s site and there’s no money upfront or back-ended commissions. It’s 100 per cent free.

A successful entrepreneur in his own right, Nick sold mobile phones when they were the size of house bricks. His staff grew to 90 before he sold the business in the mid 1990s. In the last 10 years, his focus has been the internet, with search engine optimisation (SEO) his particular strength.

The sometimes confusing “science” of SEO can make or break a web business. Put simply, SEO is the active practice of optimising (or manipulating) a website in order to increase the traffic a site receives from search engines such as Google.

“Site owners must spend money on SEO,” Nick insists. “Build links, get articles written, there’s a huge array of things that Google uses to rank sites. People make mistakes by not budgeting to improve their Google ranking. After you’ve built your site, you have to be proactive. It’s cheap to start a site, but SEO is an ongoing expense.



HOME WORK

Kirsty Chapman-Smith balances parenting four children with her online party supplies business.

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Spinning your web

- 1 Start small and build.** Be flexible. If an item isn't working, introduce a new range. Trial and error should be an ongoing education, not a source of frustration.
- 2 Know your target market and competition.** Be wary of crowded marketplaces.
- 3 Discover a niche market and conduct free research** using Google AdWords.
- 4 You can use eBay as an initial testing ground, but be prepared to move on with your own website.**
- 5 Consider childcare as an option on your busiest days to save your sanity!**
- 6 Make the website as easy as possible to find through online and offline marketing.** Regular injections of search engine optimisation are vital. Building a site is one thing, exposure is more important. Generate buzz through social networking sites.
- 7 Communicate quickly and courteously.** Customers will look elsewhere if their requests aren't dealt with promptly and reasonably.
- 8 If your business idea relies on retail, be prepared for a Christmas rush.** Consider gift wrapping as a value-add.
- 9 Take note of the best postage solutions and keep an eye on the best storage possibilities.**
- 10 Research any tax and import obligations and budget for quarterly PAYG and GST slugs.** All the relevant information is at www.business.gov.au.



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Australia Post retail outlets also stock a wide range of packaging products including tough bags, bubble wrap, mailing boxes and tubes.

For availability see page 73.

It's a hard game to make money online without marketing. There's no alternative."

"The idea is to make it as easy as possible to find the site," says Judy. "I take my own pictures of the books with plenty of words in the description. Get the text right and it attracts the bots [automatic search software] that trawl the net."

Although Nick is SEO driven, he can also see the benefits in spreading the marketing dollar around.

"Many people are wary of the internet," he says. "When you're up against well-known and credible companies, you also have to be well-known and credible yourself. The challenge now is to get ourselves up to speed with our marketing offline, so people will click online."

While Nick continues to take on the net's tall poppies, Judy is happy to slip on her pink dressing gown of a morning and continue to sell books.

"I'd always been an employee," says Judy, now approaching her fifties. "This is the first time I've gone into business. Right now I'm selling to more customers, and my turnover is slightly higher every month. The business is growing and I'm happy." ●