

Bella Tunno

Name: Michelle Tunno Buelow

Product: The Bella Tunno line of baby accessories

Need identified: Quality baby accessories with a sense of style.

Solution: Creatively designed yet functional burp clothes, bibs and other items made with fashionable fabrics and a flair for style.

Michelle Tunno Buelow is the Owner of Bella Tunno, a baby and children's accessory company "dedicated to the balance of fashion, function and philanthropic good." It all came about because of her first daughter, Riley Rose. "I really think that when I got pregnant and went to my baby showers, I started to notice that there may not have been stuff that met my style," confesses Buelow. Her focus became trying to meld fashion and function — to create baby accessories that were neither trite nor boring.

"I still am an ordinary mom and hope to always be," says Buelow. "It just made great sense to combine being a mom with an entrepreneurial idea. I think my background in branding, management consulting and Internet strategy, paired with the ability to stay home with my daughter, gave me the opportunity to move forward on my own. I also think that if I really knew what it took and how the business would grow I may have been too intimidated to move forward. In a sense, I credit my success to naiveté."

"I liked the creative part," she says. "I liked doing it myself and filling a void in the market." Buelow also had a cause. Bella Tunno, she says, was "founded with a heart toward philanthropic causes." Her brother had recently passed away just three months shy of completing his doctorate, and Buelow had been very involved in his research on controlling wild fires out West. She made a promise to finish his work — it will publish soon — and wanted to create a memorial fund through proceeds from her new company. Having accomplished both goals, Buelow is now moving on to other causes.

Buelow turned to family and friends to help with her dream. "My family has been a huge source of support and help," says Buelow. "My mom and dad actually bought me a sewing machine which, unknown to any of us at that time, was the birth of Bella Tunno. My mom has been a silent partner all along, helping with my collateral, office management and most of all, my Web site. She actually taught herself Web site development so that she could build and manage my site. My husband has a great business mind and is very risk-tolerant. He loves the idea of having our own business and helps with everything from technical issues to taxes.

"I also met with local business people, store owners, showroom owners, retailers and pretty much anyone who would take the time to share a little knowledge with me."

"In terms of inanimate help, I found the Internet to be a great source of knowledge. It's amazing how much information can be found right at your fingertips. Being a new mom at the time, it was also the only consistent source I could access at 11 p.m. or 5 a.m."

"Attending my first market was a huge help — I met so many other women that had their own business in this industry. So many of them have become great knowledge sources and good friends. Most of my volume comes from permanent showroom relationships around the United States, as well as international distribution relationships." Buelow also looked to private sources for her start-up funds. "Our start-up costs were personally financed," says Buelow. "We decided to grow only at a rate that we could support financially. We had offers for financing, but as long as we could do it on our own, we really felt like that was the best decision. We were willing to accept all the risk because we believed in Bella Tunno that much."

"Even in the midst of one huge crisis after another, I never really believed it wasn't going to work," says Buelow. "I have had manufacturing issues, sourcing issues, fabric discontinuations and backorders, just to name a few of the struggles. I've gone days without sleep and I've shed my fair share of tears. But I believe in the philanthropy behind Bella Tunno, the products developed by Bella Tunno and myself entirely too much to think it couldn't work."

One of the biggest challenges was going from hand-sewn specialty items to mass production. "I knew nothing about manufacturing - but knew that close proximity to my manufacturing was important," says Buelow. "I started with home seamstresses, then moved to small manufacturing shops and now I'm working with four sizable manufacturers. As your needs change, you need to be flexible and have a growth plan in place, but it's important to grow in a manageable way."

Then came distribution. Taking the product out to meet with potential distributors and store owners was a way to hear the market's reaction first-hand. "I started out with a story and a bag of samples here in Charlotte - I showed my line to 11 stores and 10 of those placed orders," says Buelow. "One of those stores was instrumental in teaching me about markets and directed me to an amazing showroom in Atlanta. Buelow emphasizes the importance of attending a large market with your product, saying "You get to hear how potential customers respond to your line, you can observe how the showroom staff sell/describe your line and you can walk away with priceless feedback."

Bella Tunno is off to a good start. Available in 400 baby boutiques nationwide, including 15 in the Charlotte area, Bella Tunno appeared in the MTV Style Lounge, and was part of a celebrity gift bag given to A-list moms-to-be, including Brittany Spears and Angelina Jolie at The Golden Globes. Buelow hopes to become the brand leader for fashionable baby accessories. "I want to be the brand people turn to for the funky and functional baby accessories," she says.

Along the way, she says she has learned some important lessons about business — and motherhood. "I have learned so much (good and bad) about business in the last year and a half," says Buelow. "Mostly, I have learned so much about myself. Starting your own business is overwhelming and exhilarating all at the same time. It's easy to get lost in the business and let the rest of your priorities fall aside. My biggest challenge isn't running my business; it's keeping my priorities in line. I am first a wife, then a mom, then a daughter and friend and THEN I am a business woman. I chose this business so that I could raise my daughter in a moment-by-moment way and I intend to continue being a hands-on example in her life."

Buelow says she has come away with a few essential lessons. "One — Control what you can, worry about what things you can fix, do your best every single moment, and then free yourself from the rest.

"Two — Always keep your family and friends first. . . . When all else crumbles, it's really only people that you have in your life.

"Three — People are innately good. I was prepared for cutthroat business interactions and stab-you-in-the-back experiences. I've been so pleasantly surprised with the 'golden rule' cycle that exists in the world.

"And four — If presented with an opportunity where your passions and your strengths can intersect, don't let that chance pass you up. The gratification and feeling of accomplishment is amazing when you're doing what you know you're meant to do."

Buelow has this advice for other inventor moms: "The highs are higher than you'll ever imagine and the lows are lower than you can prepare yourself for — don't let either of them take you off course too far. . ."

**home**  
feature articles  
columns  
archives  
**calendar**  
**charlotte parent**  
2006 editorial calendar  
advertising  
about us  
company news  
where to find us  
contact us  
letter to the editor

**resources**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls

**contests**  
family support groups  
family-friendly 40  
special publications  
recalls