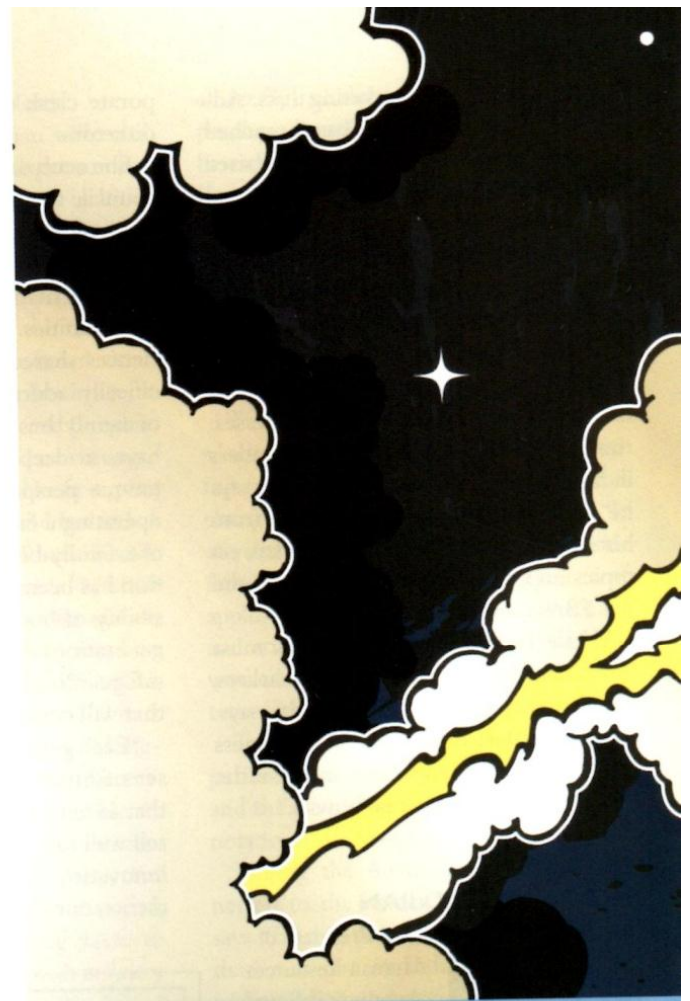
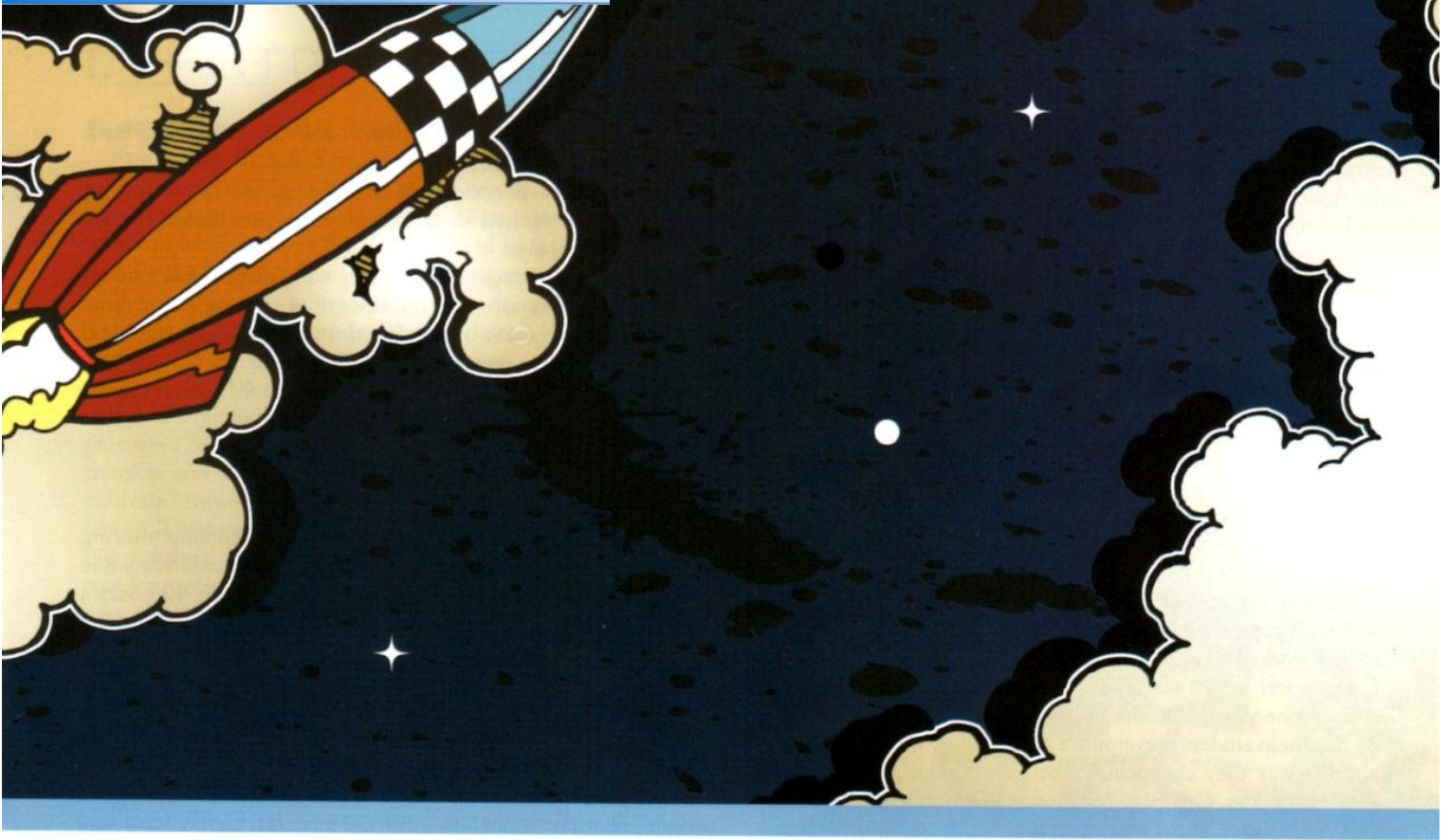


FAMILIES AND COMPANIES CHANGE WHEN BUSINESS TAKES OFF LIKE A ROCKET

By Micky Baca



A successful family business – one in which demand takes off like a rocket – is the stuff of entrepreneurs' dreams. But in a rapidly-growing business, as the economic dynamic changes, so does the family dynamic. Sometimes the burgeoning business can morph away from its origins and from some of the family members who were there at the start. Other times, the family members ride the rocket. We examine three very different home-grown Massachusetts businesses, where they came from, and where they are now, to see how their exceptional journeys have shaped the people that lead them, and vice versa.



READING WITH TLC

Sisters changing lives with literacy

It wasn't always easy for the two sisters who founded Reading with TLC in Weymouth to convince the education community that their unique, flash-card-based supplemental reading program worked. Penny Alemian Castagnozzi remembers looking out at the audience during one of their earlier seminars to see people with their arms crossed in skepticism.

"Sometimes it was an uphill battle, and we had to win these people over," Castagnozzi says. "We never have that anymore."

In fact, she and her sister, Nancy Alemian Telian, say their family business is growing so rapidly that they are now considering bringing in outside expertise soon to keep up with demand, particularly in the IT field, to help with applications for smart phones, tablets and interactive white boards. After 20 years of closely nurturing what Castagnozzi calls "our baby," the two women acknowledge that they can't continue to do everything for the business themselves as their program gains national and international acclaim.

In the first eight months of 2011, Reading with TLC's sales grew by 60 percent over the same eight-month period the previous year, they report. Last year, eight-month sales jumped 30 percent over sales for all of 2009. They attribute some of the growth to their hiring of Nancy's husband Alan to oversee distribution and help with marketing, which enabled them to do more speaking on a national level by booking engagements and traveling with them. They also



PENNY CASTAGNOZZI (LEFT) AND NANCY TELIAN (RIGHT)

started offering free national seminars for large groups of educators across the country. Training trainers has also helped spread the program nationally. A strategic bundling of clinician/teacher-appropriate materials has increased the size of the typical order. And they have added a preschool component.

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instrumental role of speech/language pathologists in improving literacy skills. Addressing these professionals at state and national conventions has resulted in a new group spreading the news.

The Reading with TLC program is used by thousands of schools in every state in the U.S. and in eight other countries, Telian notes. They are preparing to launch webinars as well as apps for smart phones and smart boards.

From coffee table to conference halls

Reading with TLC had its beginnings in Telian's efforts, as a speech pathologist in the Boston schools in the early 1990s, to find a better way to teach children to sound out words. She found success in using flash cards with fun drawings, which showed students how to shape their lips to pronounce letters – what she later called Lively Letters. The images also showed a story about the sound to engage students and help them remember the sounds. The idea worked so well, Telian created a kit.

Castagnozzi, who was working in elementary education, joined her sister one year later. She developed a second set of illustrations that help students pronounce sight words, words that don't sound the way they are spelled, like "some." Her system, called Sight Words You Can See, features pictures embedded in the words that trigger funny stories to help students remember the pronunciation.

The sisters' tools drew attention from others in education. "Teachers asked us to share it in our own school systems, then people from other school systems asked us to show them," Castagnozzi recalls.

What would eventually become Reading with TLC was launched as a sole proprietorship in 1994. It had \$35,000 in gross sales that year. The sisters split their time between tutoring and running the business. By 2001, the sisters decided to become full

Parents and teachers are all so excited about the results they've had and they're excited to tell their colleagues, wherever they are.

— Penny Castagnozzi

partners and establish a corporation, Telian-Cas Learning Concepts Inc., doing business as Reading with TLC, which is also the name of their reading program.

The first school system to use Reading with TLC outside of Boston, where it was developed, was Stoughton. The company held its first seminar for teachers in Louisiana in 1994, and began charging for training that year. By 2003, the system was being

used in every state in the country and inquiries were coming from overseas, including Australia, Kenya and India.

"Parents and teachers are all so excited about the results they've had and they're excited to tell their colleagues, wherever they are," Castagnozzi says.

Telian says she always knew Reading with TLC would take off because the results are so extraordinary. A turning point came in 2006 when a speaker at the American Speech, Language and Hearing Association, convention highlighted their program's success. "People ran to the Reading with TLC booth," she says. They had to have a friend help handle the onslaught.

Ready for prime time

While for years both sisters did other jobs – including tutoring reading students in their homes – to support themselves while running their business on the side, they now put in 40 hours a week in the business, which operates from their homes, a mile and a half apart.

"It's kind of fun," Castagnozzi says, noting that she and Telian have always been very close and complement each other well. "We're like each other's yin and yang. When one's down, the other's up," she says.

In the past, the sisters have elected to take very small salaries in order to re-invest money to grow the business. Castagnozzi says their salaries were less than many of the teachers they train. However, those days are near an end, due to the business' dramatic growth over the last few years.

The addition of Alan Telian has allowed the sisters to attend more national conferences and trainings. He books the engagements, helps with the contracts and travels with them, since both sisters have a degenerative vision disorder, retinitis pigmentosa, that affects their night vision and peripheral vision.

They rely on advice from Alan and other family members to help gauge business decisions and don't have an official advisory board, though they are considering forming one to help with product development.

Evolving technology is helping them advance their business – expanding their base via email, conducting virtual seminars, and most recently leveraging social media.

Within five years, Telian says, she can envision taking on a partner or investor to propel the company's growth as well as freeing them up from the growing time commitment. "That way we can pick and choose speaking engagements and still be able to do the creative materials," she says.

The free seminars for large educator groups are an acknowledgement of the economic challenges educators face, as well as to mark the company's 20th anniversary.

The company tag line sums up the sisters' ultimate goal: "Changing lives one letter at a time." Their mission, Telian explains, is to help any individual who needs help sounding out words to learn to read. "We want to get this into the hands of as many educators as possible," she says.