

## Columbia Sportswear

### Never underestimate a stay-at-home mom's potential

---

**G**ERT “MA” BOYLE IS LIVING PROOF THAT A HOUSEWIFE AND mother of three with no formal business experience can take over a company and lead the transformation of it from an almost worthless, debt-laden business into a billion-dollar company. Columbia Sportswear was founded by Gert’s father, Paul Lamfrom, in 1938, in Portland, Oregon after the family fled Nazi Germany, where Gert’s father had run one of the country’s largest shirt factories. It started as a small wholesale hat company, the Rosenfeld Hat Co. It did not start making outdoor gear for hunters, skiers, and fisherman until the 1950s when the popularity of hats was on the wane.

The wisecracking Gert was born in Augsburg, Germany, in 1924. She never had any plans to go into business. She studied sociology at the University of Arizona and married Neal Boyle, who took over the family company in 1964. Despite never liking housework or cooking, Gert did what women were expected to do at the time, staying at home to raise her three children. Beyond tinkering with the designs of the clothing, adding extra pockets to a fishing vest for example, she did not have a formal role in the company.

All that changed when Gert’s husband died suddenly of a heart attack in December 1970. Gert discovered that the business was in bad shape. Neal had, just months earlier, taken out a \$150,000 loan to keep the business afloat, using their home, their beach house, and her mother’s property as collateral. The company’s lawyers and advisors urged Gert to sell up. They didn’t want a housewife running the

business. Gert has likened the next few months to the Hitchcock horror film *The Birds*. In the next twelve months, sales slumped 25 percent to \$600,000 and Gert reluctantly agreed to sell the business. Gert was literally holding the pen, ready to sign the papers when the buyer lowered the price to a paltry \$1,400 and her stubbornness kicked in. For so little money, she might as well run the business into the ground herself. After all, she had next to nothing to lose. “I figured I was going to be poor one way or the other, and I decided to fight for it,” she says.

Growing up in a family that ran a manufacturing business, Gert says she learned to listen a lot and ask lots of questions. “People don’t get ahead in business unless they ask questions,” she says. Her parents also taught her the importance of having a forward-looking strategy. “Looking ahead and running an enterprise is more than an occupation, it is a way of life.”

It was time for a clean sweep. The bankers gave Gert and her son Tim six months, and they moved ahead. The lawyers and advisors were fired, along with many staff members not prepared to move forward with Gert. She put together an informal board of new advisors that resulted in the company cutting its product range, getting rid of the dead wood, and concentrating on the products with the most potential. Columbia started manufacturing for other outdoor brands to boost turnover. A new team was assembled, who were all instilled with Gert’s frugal mindset. Tim left behind his plans to become a lawyer or journalist and joined his mother full-time. It has been an enduring partnership with Tim taking on the day-to-day running and Gert in charge of marketing.

Gert and Tim’s foray into outdoor wear was well timed. In the 1970s, outdoor wear became fashionable, it became more functional, and new products and materials, such as lightweight, waterproof, and breathable Gore-Tex, became available and sent every outdoorsmen into the stores wanting to update their casual wear. Columbia was the first to use Gore-Tex in its outerwear clothing.

Columbia Sportswear designed the innovative Bugaboo, a two-jacket-in-one parka with a waterproof outer shell with a fleecy jacket layer underneath. Skiers loved it, sales were in the millions, and the company's fortunes were reversed.

With stronger sales, there were now funds available for advertising, one of the key ingredients, believes Gert, in the success of Columbia Sportswear. She often cites a saying she heard as a child, "Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell and advertise." Initially Columbia could only afford specialized niche publications. Brand awareness skyrocketed after Gert was persuaded to star in a series of advertisements as "one tough mother," making son Tim test out Columbia gear with the catchphrase: "Before it passes Mother Nature, it has to pass Mother Boyle." Gert has been putting her face out there ever since. She likes it that way, not in the least because the company doesn't have to pay anyone else to do it.

The public could not get enough of Gert. And their campaign offered a real point of difference. Ma Boyle, with her fake "Born to Nag" tattoos, has a reputation for not suffering fools gladly (she has turned down three invitations to the White House so far).

Like fellow Portland business Nike, Columbia began outsourcing production to Asia, chasing bigger margins and keeping its pricing at the lower end of the scale. The range expanded with the top range of gear sold to specialist stores, less rugged gear at department stores aimed at the clientele who tend to wear their outdoor gear at the mall rather than on a mountain. Sales moved from \$13 million in 1984 to \$1.1 billion in 2004. The company successfully floated on the NASDAQ in 1998 with the Boyle family retaining 65 percent of the stock. Growth is still on the cards through offshore expansion, acquisitions, and improved domestic retail strategy. Gert's recipe for success, which she delivers in her autobiography *One Tough Mother*, is simple. Don't give up. Be prepared to change strategy. Tap into the wisdom and experience of others who know about what you are trying to do. Listen to your

customers. Be a team player. Focus on what makes you unique. Don't spend money you don't have. Walk before you run. Always tell the truth. Do your best every day.

"We are in the business of making products that our customers need and want," she says. "And when you make the right product and deliver it at the right price they come back asking for more. That is how you build a company bigger and better."

Gert has an estimated personal fortune of more than \$300 million. Despite her age, there are no retirement plans. Gert is still in at the office every weekday and personally signs every check for the company. ("I know what comes in. I want to know what goes out. If you know that your boss is going to look at your expenses, then you're going to be a little more careful.") This approach is a long way from her housewife days when she had a monthly ritual of taking all the household bills and throwing them against the wall. The one that flew the furthest, she would pay.

The big question remains: What will Columbia Sportswear do without Gert Boyle? Says her son Tim, "We'll just have her stuffed."

## NOTES

**"I figured . . ."** "Talking with One Tough Mother," Small business section, *BusinessWeek*, 4.7.05.

**"I know what comes in . . ."** Jung, Helen. "The Monday Profile Portland's First Citizen Gert Boyle," *The Oregonian*, 3.28.05, p. A01.

**"We'll just have her stuffed . . ."** Holmes, Stanley. "Gert Gets the Last Laugh," *BusinessWeek*, 6.10.02, p. 100.

## REFERENCES

Boyle, Gertrude with Kerry Tymchuk. *One Tough Mother: Success in Life, Business and Apple Pies*. WestWinds Press, 2005.

*Associated Press, Bloomberg, BusinessWeek, The Columbian, Fortune Small Business, The Oregonian, People, Sunday Pregonian, Women's Wear Daily*