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**By Stephanie Hoo**

## **Baby Bucks**

With the Internet replacing the old “word of mouth,” it only makes sense that the search for baby sitters has gone online.

Yet, when Sittercity.com founder Genevieve Thiers sought investors to start her company -- a sort-of Match.com for parents and baby sitters -- she was laughed out of the room.

The business of baby-sitting? Paid by moms with cash out of the cookie jar? No one took her seriously.

“I went to some venture capitalists and an angel investor as well,” Thiers recalls. “But they all basically said... I have no idea what you’re talking about, my wife handles all of this, I don’t get it.”

It seemed, as usual, that the mostly male corporate world didn’t understand the value of what is mainly women’s work.

“And so I never actually received any startup capital at all. I founded the Web site completely on my own salary from IBM,” she says, referring to her previous job. “I took everything I made.”

It has paid off. From her initial startup of \$20,000 four years ago, Sittercity.com last year raked in about \$1.2 million -- all of it plowed back into the company for more salaries, more marketing and more outreach. The Chicago-based firm now has 11 full-time employees, and it projects revenue to reach \$3 million this year as it seeks to spread nationwide.

Launched in September 2001, “it has been profitable since the second month,” Thiers says. It currently lists 150,000 sitters and has 20,000 parents as members.

Among them is Jodi Hutchinson, a mother of two in Madison, N.J., who works for Time Warner in New York. “I have found the greatest baby sitters through hat site,” she says. “For a working mom it is so completely efficient and easy to use. I love it. I don’t know how I’d find baby sitters otherwise.”

When she found herself needing a new babysitter last spring, “I asked around -- I asked my dentist, I asked my haircutter, I asked anybody that I came in contact with: Do you know anybody? ...and I got nothing back, so I was in a panic.”

She saw a flier for Sittercity.com as she was posting her job opening at a college campus, “and I thought: That’s a great idea! You can do everything on the Web -- you can get your groceries on the Web, you can find a mate on the Web, you can do your banking on the Web. Why not find a baby sitter on the Web? Of course!”

“I’ve referred all my working mom friends,” she adds. “Five, six other moms have called me back to say: That was a lifesaver.”

As for those investors who didn’t get it? “They don’t understand the need for it,” she says, drawing out the eeee’s in need. Unless you’re a working mom, “it’s hard to understand the need.”

Thiers, the founder, came to baby-sitting naturally as the oldest in a family of seven children. Now 27, she put herself through Boston College baby-sitting for more than 30 families. Even with her busy sitting schedule, she received more requests that she could possibly handle.

She started matching inquiring parents with other students looking to make extra cash, and an idea was born.

While baby-sitting agencies charge hundreds of dollars -- and nanny agencies charge thousands -- Sittercity.com costs parents \$39.99 the first month and \$5 a month after that.

Baby sitters can leave profiles for free. The site includes a sitter’s references that parents can check, feedback on both parents and sitters, and tips on how to interview a prospective baby sitter. There’s also a link to [backgroundchecks.com](http://backgroundchecks.com), which searches criminal records nationwide (postings are limited to sitters over age 17).

Thiers figures the success of her site has capitalized on two key business trends: The do-it-yourself culture spawned by the Internet, and the rise of women into managerial positions which makes them confident enough to check references and do background checks themselves instead of relying on a costly agency.

Sittercity.com’s business is currently concentrated in four cities -- Boston, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles -- but Thiers figures there are 34 million moms who need her service. “We’re working on getting to all of them.”

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