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By Janna Oberdorf

Sitting on a Gold Mine

As the oldest of seven, Genevieve Thiers was a born babysitter. “My mother realized I was a gold mine,” she remembers. “I had to baby-sit for my brothers and sisters and for children all over my neighborhood.”

Now 27 years old, Thiers has turned this familial chore into a successful business. Just a year after graduating from college, she launched Sittercity.com, an online database that links babysitters with parents in over twenty cities nationwide. Here, Thiers tells *figure* how she built her empire.

What gave you the idea to start your business?

I baby-sat my whole life and even paid my way through Boston College by babysitting for more than thirty families in the Boston area. Every time I baby-sat I would get a phone call from another family begging me to sit for them. I just kept thinking, “Why are these parents so desperate?” I realized that there were thousands of really great babysitters, but no way for parents to find them.

What was your first roadblock?

It was really difficult to get the business started, but I was right out of college and full of enthusiasm. I really believed in my idea and pitched it to a group of Boston investors. All the investors were men with no experience hiring babysitters. They looked at me like I was starting a babysitters’ club rather than a business with a legitimate demand. No one wanted to invest in me.

How did you finally get the business on its feet?

I took a job at IBM after graduation and spent every penny I earned to start Sittercity. Armed with 20,000 Kinkos flyers, I went to every college in Boston. I posted flyers on dorm bulletin boards and left them under students’ doors. With a combination of blisters and handouts, I built an online database of 600 babysitters in Boston.

Where did you get the idea for Sittercity’s online design?

When I decided to build an online babysitter database, I researched dating Web sites as a model. I made a profile on match.com to study their format. As I was searching, I got an e-mail from a really cute guy. I was single at the time, so I thought, “Why not go on a

date?” We’ve been dating ever since! I figured if I could be snagged without even trying to use the site, these types of sites must be amazing for people who actually need them.

How do you attract parents and babysitters to your site?

Our greatest asset is word of mouth, but we also try to be creative. Parents often say they fall in love with their sitters. We took this idea literally and created “Speed Sitting” sessions, modeled after “Speed Dating.” At evening “date” sessions, parents meet local babysitters in five-minute intervals. If they like a babysitter, they can get his or her phone number and references. We also have Sittercity college representatives on over a thousand campuses to recruit babysitters.

How has the business grown?

We now have databases for over twenty major cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas. We have more than 75,000 babysitters and more than 40,000 parents signed onto the site. And we just keep growing!

What do you like most about your job?

I know the babysitting market like the back of my hand. I’ve baby-sat every day of my life! Because I work for myself, I’m passionate about what I do. I’m completely in control of my destiny – which is risky but incredibly rewarding.

To learn more about Thiers, visit sittercity.com. Babysitters can join free; parents pay \$39.99 the first month and \$5 each additional month. Thiers is also working on a book, tentatively titled “Don’t Just Sit There: A Parent’s Guide to Finding and Keeping a Babysitter.”