

Mabel's Labels

Founded by 4 moms, Mabel's Labels designs, manufactures, markets and distributes personalized name labels and tags for children's belongings. It is the creator of the market, and its leader.

Headquarters	150 Chatham Street, Unit 1, Hamilton, Ontario, L8P 2B6
Year Established	2003
NAICS	315990 - Clothing accessories and other clothing manufacturing
Employees	40
Major Expansions	N/A
Exports	US
Parent Company	Avery Products Corporation
Other Locations	N/A

Neither “cute” nor “mommies” are words one usually associates with manufacturing. In the case of Hamilton-based Mabel's Labels, both are defining. The company designs, manufactures and distributes custom labels for children's wayward clothing and accessories.

They target the average, my-toddler-just-spilt-her-milk-the-baby-is-crying-and-there-are-still-17-hours-in-this-day mom.

Online mommies can choose from a mind-boggling array of colours, patterns, fonts and styles. The customized labels are soon cut, printed, and usually shipped that very day across North America. Ease of use is critical – some labels can be quickly ironed on, while others are peel-and-stick. And they are all laundry, dishwasher and microwave safe, as well as UV resistant and waterproof.

How did Mabel's Labels discover the perfect product? Twelve years ago, four mothers grew tired of financing the disappearance of their children's belongings at kindergarten and day camps. The markers and masking tape solution had proven unnecessarily unattractive.

At the time, the four founders – Julie Cole, Cynthia Esp, Julie Ellis and Tricia Mumby – still worked full-time as bankers, lawyers, and teachers. They had twelve children between them. Mabel's Labels was born in a family basement, surviving on basic materials, a few small machines, and orders from supportive friends and family.

Mabel's Labels was the first of its kind in Canada. Online communities started taking notice – Gizmo,

iParenting and PTPA Media all awarded the labels “best product” – and sales soared. To meet ever-increasing demand, the owner of the original basement moved her family to a larger house for the larger basement.

Now, their children are almost grown up, and Mabel’s Labels has a dedicated production facility just off the 403 in Hamilton. As we walk into Mabel’s Label’s office, we are dazzled by the vases overflowing with hand-folded paper cranes, the cheerful quotes pinned to bulletin boards, the big yellow stars taped everywhere, and the endless glitter.

Jordan Smart, Director of Finance and Administration, tells us that 90% of the business is traditional e-commerce, with manufacturing at the Hamilton location. The remaining 10% are non-customized labels sold en masse to such retail giants as Walmart and Target.

Mabel’s Labels has shipped to over 100 countries. They try to be borderless between the United States and Canada, with a large percentage exported to the latter, and 1-3% exported outside North America. In the last five years, they have attained 5-year growth of over 200%, earning them a coveted place on Canada’s Profit 500.

Despite such impressive export numbers, Smart unhesitatingly says that Mabel’s Labels has no interest in offshoring or even relocating to the United States. The bulk of their business is in the Greater Toronto Area, and the four co-founders and most employees still call Hamilton home.

There is an irreplaceable sense of community within Mabel’s Labels. All employees are heavily involved in the Big Bike Ride, when the entire company cycles around town on a single bicycle to raise funds for the Heart and Stroke Foundation. They also volunteer their time with Good Shepherd, and take responsibility for keeping an entire City of Hamilton park clean each year.

Community-minded generosity aside, Mabel’s Labels works hard to retain its competitive advantage. As others saw the success of Mabel’s Labels, the number of competitors surged. Nonetheless, the company is confident of customer loyalty and relies on repeat business.

“Once they try us the first time,” says Smart, “there’s a good probability they’ll come back. We’re the best.”

“We focus on giving customers what they want,” says Smart.

First, this means the highest quality. Mabel’s Labels can be 100 percent confident of this because they vigorously test competitors’ products. The best customer experience also means engaging clients on social media platforms, for which Mabel’s Labels has won several awards.

With its heavy web presence, Mabel’s Labels is constantly scouting for top tech talent. From systems engineers and graphic designers to new generation marketers, the firm needs them all. Nearby McMaster University and Mohawk College have turned Hamilton into a hotbed of tech startups, increasing the competition for workers with the desired skill sets.

Manufacturing in Ontario is very much alive, Smart says. While it can no longer be cast as the stereotypical manual labour process of old, neither will automation spell the end for workers. As information technology permeates the manufacturing process, it is not a question of replacing human beings, but of shifting the skill sets demanded of them.

And if you do it right, you could be as successful as Mabel's Labels. Recently, the four co-founders have won a string of awards, including the RBC Women Entrepreneur Award, SavvyMom's Mom Entrepreneur of the Year, and Chatelaine's W100 Top Female Entrepreneurs. They've served celebrity moms such as Victoria Beckham, Heidi Klum and Reese Witherspoon.

Along the way of forging their own destinies, these four women have nonchalantly become celebrities themselves.