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FEATURE STORY:

## Million-Dollar Baby

A bathroom-design software idea may take a remodeling business to the seven-digit mark

By Ellen Sturm Niz

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Only 3 percent of women-owned businesses hit the \$1 million mark, but designer Jane Regan thinks her kitchen and bath firm is on the cusp of reaching that elusive mark.

Although she's only been a k & b designer for eight years, Regan brings 20 years of software-engineering know-how to her business, Montara, CA-based HB Building & Design. It's this unusual pairing of experience that led Regan to create "BathPacks: Designed Online, Installed On Time," the million-dollar idea she thinks will catapult her business—and possibly the future of bathroom design—to the next level. Regan plans to franchise BathPacks to qualified contractors nationwide, pairing them with local clients who have designed their bathrooms online using the unique BathPacks software program—with guaranteed installation in three weeks.

Largely due to the BathPacks idea, Regan recently received the Make Mine a Million \$ Business Award, designed to help women build their businesses to \$1 million in revenue and beyond. Regan also won last fall's Women's Initiative Silicon Valley Region Women-Owned Business of the Year, and her business is also currently No. 1 in *San Francisco Chronicle's* Best of the Bay competition.

In between receiving awards, working with clients—she is currently designing six bathrooms, three kitchens and three decks—and finding a way to bring BathPacks to completion, Regan sat down with *K+BB* to share the journey of how she discovered her million-dollar baby.

### Q: How did you go from being an engineer to working as a kitchen and bath designer?

**A:** For 20 years, I was a leading technologist in the Silicon Valley, working as a systems engineer and director of Internet technology for several major companies and traveling the world. Even though I was working full-time, I also did most of the billing and estimating for my husband's general contracting firm, which he started in 1999.

After 9/11, I no longer wanted to spend my life on an airplane. Plus, our youngest daughter was a sophomore in high school. I sat at home for several months. Then I received a postcard from UCSC (University of California, Santa Cruz), advertising a program for becoming a design assistant. I went to the Intro class and got an A! I took several more classes—again all A's!

By this time, my husband and I had built our own home, so I had an advantage because I understood how construction worked. I then went to Cañada College, where the classes and program were much more serious about the business of design.

I was lucky enough to get a job at a local kitchen cabinet showroom that lasted two years. When the construction side of the shop slowed down and I was laid off, I decided to start my own business as an outgrowth of my husband's contracting firm in 2004. I got my resale license, logo and business cards, and already had two clients who followed me to my new location—my home office! I've now been a kitchen and bath designer for the last eight years.

**Q: Why did you decide to focus on kitchen and bath design over other rooms?**

**A:** I decided my niche would be kitchen and bath work because it is more technical and more in line with my background as an engineer. Bathrooms are way too hard for the average consumers to design themselves. It's very technical. The same with cabinets—you have to be very knowledgeable. For a recent client, I doubled her cabinet storage without changing the footprint of the room. It's mathematics and science. That's what I do.

My favorite kitchen and bathroom designs tend to be ones that incorporate accessible design. I like that they provide real relief for the homeowner but at the same time retain beauty. Putting those things together and doing it for a reasonable price is my dream for all people with disabilities and aging-in-place issues. Our niche since 2005 has been barrier-free design, or design for Aging in Place (AIP). I am one of the experts on remodeling homes for AIP in the West.



Regan's focus on accessible design can be seen in this bath's completely barrier-free shower design.

**Q: How have you grown your business so far, and what are your goals for the future?**

**A:** From early on, our growth strategy has been to provide complete solutions. That meant I needed to make good connections with various plumbing showrooms, tile distributors, lighting sources and cabinetry providers. With my background in business development, combined with two years working in a shop where I met all the vendors, this worked out really well. We have consistently made between \$750,000 and \$890,000 in each of the last three years.

Our long-term growth strategy is to introduce an Internet product, BathPacks, which is an online design software program that can be franchised to other k & b contractors. We already have a complete prototype built, a formal business plan, metrics and financial analysis. Right now, we are looking for an early-stage or "angel" investor to complete the project and get it up and running.

I hope winning the Make Mine a Million (M3) \$ Business Award will help us reach the finish line. I found out about Count Me In (a non-profit organization designed to promote economic independence and the growth of women-owned businesses) and this award through Ladies Who Launch, a nationwide group of women, connected through the Internet, who are launching their own businesses. I started attending the Count Me In webinars and met Nell Merlino (the

organization's CEO and founder). She is also the philanthropist who started "Take Our Daughters to Work Day."

Nell absolutely loved my idea for the BathPacks software and understood how difficult it would be fund it. Nell has basically guided my career and gives every M3 award recipient a huge kit of contacts and support (the prize package includes business coaching, financing, PR and support from a national network of experts and successful entrepreneurs). Only 3 percent of women-owned businesses hit the \$1 million mark and the average income for a woman in business is less than \$50,000. Count Me In's goal is to create one million \$1 million businesses owned by women.



Regan's engineering background helps her re-imagine spaces, as she did in these bathroom designs.

**Q: Why did you decide to create the BathPack software? How will it work?**

**A:** Because I worked for so long in technology business, I began looking for a systematic way we could do things in bathroom design that would accelerate and formalize the installation process. We call it "BathPacks: Designed Online, Installed On Time." The idea is so easy to use, even a grandma can do it—I have four grandchildren myself.

Consumers can go online, enter the dimensions of their room, place existing features—tub, toilet, vanity, etc.—and play around with different shapes, adding on space, and choose fittings and fixtures. Unlike existing bath offerings online that only show sample colors and fittings for a quick makeover, BathPacks will involve complete reconstruction, even replacing drywall, and offer high-end fixtures and fittings, such as Grohe, Hansgrohe and TOTO. Because we can get items at distributor-level pricing, we can source things for BathPacks clients at great prices.

Consumers can start down one of three "paths": price, design style or purpose. They can make barrier-free selections, go completely green and add upgrades depending on their budget. BathPack will let them visualize their bath in 3D, and the price includes installation by a local certified BathPack contractor/franchisee and will take less than three weeks to complete.

Once clients have made their decisions online using the BathPacks software and put initial money down, we will send locally certified, licensed contractors to meet with them and work with them on installation. We will only work with contractors who have passed a test on ethics, which are extremely important to us. Sometimes clients are in difficult situations and we want to make sure everyone we affiliate with is socially conscious. So far, we have 75 contractors who are interested in becoming franchisees.

I think BathPacks will simplify the consumer's complex remodeling purchase decisions. According to the 2009 NKBA survey, 85 percent of consumers were dissatisfied with the remodeling results they achieved using products from (big-box home stores) and feel they could have done better if they had better choices. I want the average consumer to have the ability to get a well-designed, well-thought-out bathroom with beautiful materials for the same money they would pay a contractor to do it—and give them more control over the process.