

# Executive Profile: Bena Burda President, Maggie's Organics, Ypsilanti

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Bena Burda

Bena Burda launched the nation's oldest organic cotton clothing company on her way to researching corn chips. Burda, owner and president of Ypsilanti-based [Maggie's Organics](#), was working in the organic food industry when she learned the merits of rotating corn with cotton in the field as a way to improve the corn crop.

It worked, but she was left with a yield of cotton.

Along with a partner, Burda started making socks, because they were small and bought on impulse, and T-shirts because organic food companies were looking for a supplier of organic T-shirts to carry their company logos. Eventually behemoths such as Ben & Jerry's along with rock bands were turning to Maggie's organics for their T-shirts. At one point in Maggie's history, Ben & Jerry's accounted for 40 percent of the company's revenue, Burda said.

Burda was a pioneer, entering the market in 1992 before fair trade and organic became hot selling tools. But times have changed: Even the big players such as Target have entered the fray.

Burda, who bought her partner out, responded by focusing on her original mission: In this crowded field, Maggie's sticks to its original mission, making only fair trade, organic products.

The company is pursuing third-party certification with TransFair to be Fair Trade Certified and Scientific Certification Systems, which certify environmental standards.

Maggie's has backed away from T-shirt sales, where the market is flooded. The company offers a line of basic clothing such as socks and tights, shirts, scarves, camisoles, baby clothes and a new line of stuffed animals made from Maggie's irregular socks. While Maggie's offers sock monkeys and penguins, Burda is launching a line of barnyard animals on June 1.

Maggie's Organics are sold in national chains such as Whole Foods Market and by individual retailers. Burda said Maggie's is sold in more than 2,000 locations around the U.S. and Canada.

And who is Maggie? As Burda and her partner were going to market, they hadn't settled on a name. They didn't want a moniker about saving the earth but also didn't want to name it after themselves. So they settled on Maggie, an earthy sounding woman's name. Instead of naming the company after her, the company has renamed Burda, she said.

"Everyone calls me Maggie."

## **BACKGROUND**

- Education: University of Michigan.
- Family: Married to Doug, the vice president of sales; and two cats.
- Residence: Hamburg Township.

## **INSIGHTS**

- Best way to keep competitive edge: Read lots, listen carefully and take advantage of good friends to brainstorm with.
- Personal hero: Both of my parents, for teaching me to question virtually everything before concluding anything.

- How do you motivate people: I tell stories - what a customer said, or how a supplier handled something.
- How do you motivate yourself: I'm lucky that it comes naturally.
- Unique office decor: Hatch show print of a Bonnie Raitt concert.
- Favorite hobby: Right now running (more like jogging) and always kayaking, Performance Network shows and Ark concerts.

#### **JUDGMENT CALLS**

- Best business or career decision: Staying true to my ideals, and tuning out the experts who said: "That is no way to run a business, Bena."
- Worst business or career decision: Listening to those same experts.
- Biggest management myth: The more you pay for advice, the better advice you receive.
- What advice would you give to yourself 10 years ago? Have confidence, even when you don't.
- Word that best describes you: Idealistic, passionate.

#### **CONFESSIONS**

- What keeps you up at night? Finances, the idea of cutting employee benefits, contemplating worst-case scenarios.
- Pet peeve: When I fail to recognize an accomplishment in others.
- Guilty pleasure: Ordering a beer on a long flight.
- First job: Office work for a brilliant inventor who was a friend of my folks.
- First choice for a new career: Traveling the world helping start-up industrial cooperatives.

#### **TREASURES**

- Favorite cause: Social-justice issues.
- Favorite book: Lately, "Dreams From My Father," by Barack Obama. Overall, "Nigger: An Autobiography," by Dick Gregory.
- Favorite movie: This year, "The Reader."
- Favorite restaurant: This month: Tali in Frankfort, Mich. Historically: Cafe Felix, Cafe Habana, Blue Nile and Earthen Jar.
- Favorite way to spend free time: Being on or in water.
- Favorite vacation spot: River's Edge campground in the Upper Peninsula.
- What's on your iPod/car radio dial? Brian Weiss' meditation session, and the new Steve Earle.
- What do you do to recharge your batteries? Drive up north, spend four hours of hard kayaking on a river, and have a fabulous dinner with friends.
- Wheels: 2004 Prius - it has 90,000 miles and is going strong.

*Janet Miller is a freelance writer.*