

# Jackie Atkinson

## *Making Business Fun*

Jackie Atkinson is renowned among national pharmaceutical companies as one of the best researchers in the business. She has carved her professional niche so successfully that she has never had to market her clinical trial research firm, Nautical Clinical Research. When asked the key to her success, she says “hard work” but then adds with a laugh, “and I never take myself too seriously.”

### **On Growing Up**

Jackie was born in Eastern Oregon but raised in Fairbanks, Alaska and she has no shortage of great stories to tell about it. When asked about her childhood she says, “You know, growing up in Alaska there were almost ten men for every woman. So as a female, we used to say “that your odds are good, but the goods are odd.”

She jokes about her isolated upbringing, but she is quick to credit her community and childhood experiences for equipping her to handle almost anything she faced later in life.

Growing up Jackie spent her summers at a family gold mine. “My stepdad was a gold miner as his second career in life, so I spent every summer at a mine. There was no electricity or running water at our isolated

cabin. We had to go to the creek and pack our water back to the cabin every day for all chores, like cooking and using the solar shower. It was so off the grid; we had a solar panel that allowed us to run the radio for about an hour every night. Every night we listened to a radio show called ‘Trapline Chatter’ from a Fairbanks radio station. It was the only way we could get messages from friends and family. We’d all sit around the radio listening to the announcer read all the messages in this perfect monotone voice. We’d hear ‘And this is going out to the Beemon family on Squaw Creek. The message is from Granny Gardner in Idaho. Just wanted you to know that so-and-so graduated from college.’ We would get so excited. Those messages on Trapline Chatter were the highlight of our day”

Living so far off the grid forced Jackie to become adaptable, flexible and calm in a crisis. “We worked all day, every day, but there was also constant problem-solving. Everything was always breaking down, we were always freezing, even in the summer, and so we were constantly thinking on our feet. How could we keep the equipment running? How could we put pieces and parts together to come out with a solution? There was never a set plan because it was impossible to plan. Disasters were completely routine. Equipment would overheat and catch on fire, and you would grab a fire extinguisher. A car would go floating down the river with people in it, and you would yell ‘just hit the gas and you’ll hit ground eventually.’ It was not a big deal

at all; it was just a way of life.”

When crises did hit, Jackie learned to remain calm. She recalls one extreme situation: “We had a child get severely hurt at the gold mine. We all had to hold it together for hours till a family member could make the long drive out of the mine to a tiny encampment to alert help who sent helicopter. At the time we didn’t know a helicopter would be coming, but it was the best sound to hear it fly over the hill to rescue her. It really affected me. After seeing that, I knew I could work through anything.”

The resourcefulness she learned at the mine prepared Jackie for launching her own business in 2004. “I wouldn’t say I ever aspired to own a business. I was working for a company exactly like mine and the partnership dissolved, and so I opened my own company. I had some steady research projects that I could do with existing clients, and I started with those projects and transitioned into my own company.”

The day-to-day work did not look that different, but the transition from employee to the business owner provided plenty of challenges. One of the biggest was the initial financial transition. For nearly twelve months, the newly formed Nautical

Clinical Research had expenses to pay, but no funds were coming in. She says, “The hardest part was that I did not have a steady paycheck. I knew the end goal, and I knew that the money would come, but it was difficult not to have a paycheck for a year.” Fortunately, I had an amazing partner, now husband, to help me financially.

Beyond the early cash-flow hurdles, Jackie says sometimes the hardest part of a business launch can be all the little things. “Getting your Tax ID number, renting office space, reassuring my physicians that nothing was going to change. Figuring all of it out is not all that hard, but you have to figure it out. You have to be willing to step up to the plate.”

Fortunately, Jackie is not afraid of rolling up her sleeves.

### **On Hard Work**

Coming from a family of miners and ranchers, Jackie knows hard work. Her stepfather was always a small business owner, and her namesake father, Jack, is an Idaho farmer and rancher. Both are incredibly hard workers. The family ranch has been recognized as being an Idaho Centurion Ranch as it has been owned and operated by the same family for over 100 years.

Their work ethic influenced Jackie as she labored at various mines during summers to pay her way through college. As a college-aged woman at a mine, hard work was a matter of survival. “I can tell you some stories about being a woman at

the construction site. The contempt was awful. There was one male who refused to work on a job site with a woman and quit. I came out of that experience saying I always want to be the hardest worker wherever I am because I don’t want anybody to think I’m not carrying my weight.”

While she has not experienced the same gender discrimination in the clinical research industry, she works just as hard. Her work ethic has been the cornerstone of her approach to building her business. “You have to be motivated to be a small business owner. On my Facebook page, I say I’m the owner/janitor because I’m the owner, but I am the one who sweeps the floor

and cleans up every day. That is what I expect from myself. I expect I will be the hardest working person on any project or any place I go.”

Jackie patterns her leadership philosophy off of one of her mentors, Jim Trounson, Founder and CEO of the Boise-based physician practice management company, Medical Management (MedMan). “Jim had a great philosophy, and a lot of the large corporations have it too: always put your employees first. Your employees should have the best of everything, and as the owner, you should probably have the worst. Your employee should have the most amazing office or perk, and as the owner, you should take the office in the closet. It’s a philosophy I’ve tried to bring to the culture of my organization.” She explains that in her business, there are a lot of tedious

administrative tasks. In preparation for a clinical trial, they will receive endless supplies from the pharmaceutical company and Jackie takes the time to manage the supplies, sort through the materials and put the clinical packets together. She commits to those tasks so she can shelter her employees from the drudgery.

That kind of work ethic is time-consuming and Jackie acknowledges there are tradeoffs to spending so much time building her business.

“When I was working so hard to build my business, I lost out on a lot of bonding time with my siblings. My relationship with them still suffers because of it.” Her two sisters started their own families about the time

Jackie was launching Nautical Clinical Research. “They invited me, but I was too busy. I always thought there would be time later. I could catch up with them. When I started my own family, I thought it would bring us closer together. Unfortunately, too much time has passed. Things would be different if I invested more time.”

The experience is painful but has taught Jackie a valuable lesson about the importance of quality time. Today, she is intentional about spending time with her husband and their two sons. “My greatest personal achievement is my relationship with my husband, Ian, and my two sons, Jack and Garrett. We always tell our

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boys that they'll never remember a great day of watching TV. We are an active family. We downhill ski at Brundage almost every weekend its open. We boat in the summer, and camp in our RV. And we love to travel, our kids have been to many countries and are amazing travelers. As older parents, we want to be as active in their lives as we can."

We give back to the community by being a Host family for the Boise Hawks. The first summer we had one player, then, as a family, we decided in for a penny in for a pound, so the following summers we've hosted two players in our home during their baseball season. This is so rewarding to help the upcoming players, but we know that our hearts will break in the fall when they return home post season as we always miss them so much when they leave.

### On Success

Jackie humbly credits some of her success to lucky timing. "When I started this company, it was such a novel idea. Back then pharmaceutical companies conducted studies at universities and teaching hospitals, so they weren't learning about real life patients in real situations. The studies failed because they failed to take into account common patient behaviors outside of the controlled institutions. When I got into the business, it was a novel idea to turn these drug trials over to independent physi-

cians and have them run by companies like mine." She says being in the perfect place at the perfect time was a big contributor to her success. "I think that anybody with my knowledge at the time or place could have done what I could have done."

Even if being in the right place at the right time, helped her successfully launch her business, Jackie's leadership and effort have helped her sustain it. "I have been so fortunate--I have never had to market my company. All of the major pharmaceutical companies, Johnson & Johnson, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Pfizer, all of them will call me if they have a study they will be a good fit for me.

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Rely on your own  
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She believes her selectivity is a significant driver of her demand. "I've been wise not trying to become too big. We only take on projects that are a good fit." Unlike many of her competitors who have taken on too many projects or projects they weren't suited for, Nautical Clinical Research is willing to turn down the wrong opportunities. "Boise has an amazing patient population, but it is also a limited patient population. Before I take on a new study, I talk with a physician, and I talk with the pharmaceutical companies to make sure we are a good fit. If we have low enrollment in a study, then I am not doing a good job for the company. I won't put myself and the company in that position."

Beyond making sure the study is a good fit, Jackie agrees to take on the projects she thinks will be a challenge. "I do a lot of the hard studies nobody else wants to do. I love challenging work." She has no shortage of opportunities. Jackie has strong relationships with St. Luke's and recently signed a new contract with the

new Idaho College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Jackie takes her business success in stride. She has a very grounded approach to finances. "I grew up in a very wealthy family. I mean, I drove a Corvette Stingray my senior year of high school in Fairbanks, Alaska. Who does that? After high school, my parents wanted me to stay in Fairbanks, but I wanted to try someplace new. I moved to Idaho a 17-year-old and went to Boise State for school. I had family here, but my parents were not happy about my decision. They stopped supporting me financially, so I was homeless for a little while, living out of my truck until I got an apartment with roommates. I had to get two jobs right away and start paying my bills while going to college. It was an amazing and valuable experience for me because I know it can be done."

The experience shaped the way she approaches finances today. "After my parents stopped providing financial support, I got a credit card. I probably racked up five thousand dollars, and I remember thinking 'Who is going to pay for this?' I calculated how long it would take me to pay it off. That was the moment I recognized the value of a dollar. It was the last time I carried any debt."

Today, Jackie and her husband have the same debt-avoidance philosophy. "My husband and I had very different backgrounds when it came to childhood finances, but somehow our financial thoughts are the same.

We never fight about money, and we make the perfect team." Jackie and her husband, Ian, have a side business in commercial and residential real estate. She explains that for them, it is less like a business, and more like a fun hobby. "We never buy anything if we cannot suffer a financial loss. Since we're not mortgaged or leveraged, we don't fear the risk of a downturn or housing bubble. It helps us have fun and keep our sense of humor."

Jackie is the first to acknowledge she has her share of luck, but her advice to other aspiring leaders is self-reliance. She tells a story about mentoring a young woman who was a student at Idaho Youth Challenge Academy (IDYCA), a military school in Idaho for at-risk youth. The young cadet Jackie mentored endured a childhood vastly different from hers. Her mentee's mother was single and struggle to provide a stable home. It was a childhood of struggle and loneliness. The cadet thrived in the structure and stability of the IDYCA. When asked how Jackie helped, she replies "Well, I don't know if I helped her all that much, but I was able to listen. I was able to validate that anybody would have struggled after going through what she has been through, what she's seen and heard and experienced."

Although her childhood looked nothing like her mentee's, Jackie was able to inspire her mentee with validation and motivation. "Everyone has struggled. Everybody has had hard times in life. You cannot base your future all the stumbling you've had in the past. You cannot use your past as a crutch. You absolutely have to move on and look forward. You are strong. Rely on your own strength."