HONEST TO GOODNESS
BUSINESSWOMAN

After making a name for herself in action-packed comic book films, Jessica Alba has transitioned to a new offscreen role: entrepreneur. When she couldn’t find the right laundry detergent for her family, she took action, and the Honest Company was born.

By Nancy Mills
"Those are my drawings."

Jessica Alba says, pointing to sketches of a crib and a playpen displayed on the wall of her company’s conference room. Drawn with a felt-tip marker, they illustrate some design ideas she has for a kids’ furniture line.

In addition to being one of Hollywood’s most glamorous stars, Alba, 31, is the founder of The Honest Company, which makes a line of toxin-free, eco-friendly home and baby products. When she is not starring in films like Little Fockers and Valentine’s Day, she’s probably in the office working on new products.

The company, which attracted $27 million in venture capital when it launched in January, is continually expanding. “We have close to 40 products now, and we will be adding furniture,” Alba says. “Right now we’re working on toothpaste and deodorant. Our customers want us to do that. They asked for bug spray, so we made it.

“We listen to the customers and do what they say,” says Alba. “Huge corporations are making such important decisions for our families, and it’s about time that an actual family makes those decisions.”

Family is important to Alba. Married to producer Cash Warren, she has two daughters, Honor, 4, and Haven, 1. They live close to the company headquarters in Santa Monica, Calif., and Honor’s preschool is just three blocks away. “We set up a playroom at the company so the kids can visit,” Alba says. While she works, her niece helps look after the girls.

Alba never planned to be a corporate executive. Born in Pomona, Calif., a city on the eastern outskirts of Los Angeles, she got interested in acting in elementary school and began taking lessons at 12. A year later, she won her first film role in the teen comedy Camp Nowhere. By the time she was 20, she was famous for her role on the TV series Dark Angel. She went on to star in the Fantastic Four franchise shortly after.

Acting was Alba’s prime focus until she became a mother (daughter Honor was born in June 2008) and discovered a new obsession: “I had an allergic reaction to a baby laundry detergent that my mom told me I had to use,” she recalls. “I wondered, ‘How can this product be safe for babies if I’m a grown-up with an immune system that’s built up antibodies over the years?’”

After Googling the ingredients, she discovered the product billed itself as eco-friendly. “Then I started asking, ‘What is ‘eco’ and what is ‘green?’” Through talking to doctors and scientists, I found that a lot of companies say they’re eco because of the packaging, not what’s inside. It’s great to protect the planet, but I want to have a healthy baby.”

The next Martha Stewart?

Alba started making some of her own basic cleaning products at home. Then she met Christopher Cavigan, author of Healthy Child Healthy World.

“That book scared the bejesus out of me,” Alba says. “It talked about all the toxic chemicals in products and their potentially harmful consequences, but it didn’t give me any answers. Finally I said, ‘Christopher, you have to partner with me. We have to create the answers.’”

They spent a year working on the formulations and then brought in two other partners, Brian Lee and Sean Kane, who were experienced in ecommerce ventures. “We all had the same philosophy,” Alba says. “We decided we could make the world a better place for our families and other people’s families.”

Kane says, “Jessica is a collaborative and driving force in product development and overall company strategy. Her approach is to gather all the information first. She doesn’t make rash decisions.” Alba seems very comfortable in her role as a corporate decision maker. Painting at her drawings, she says, “I have this idea to do acrylic bars on a paper pad so that the baby can see out and you can see in. When it comes to design, I approach it from a practical, mom-friendly and kid-friendly perspective.”

She picks up a bottle of the company’s shampoo and points out the flat cap. “You’ll never have to shake it to death to get the last bit out,” she says, turning the bottle over and standing it on its cap. “That’s really important to me. Also, you can open it with one hand and squat it out with one hand, so you can always have one hand on your wiggly baby.”

Is Alba aiming to become the next Martha Stewart? “I’m inspired by her as a business person,” she says. “The few times I’ve been on her shows, I’ve been in awe of what she’s created. We have a lifestyle brand similar to hers. It’s nice to have things that are practical but beautiful and healthy.”

Healthy is the key word for Alba. As an actress, she has to maintain a certain look and weight. But more important to her is keeping her family as healthy as possible.

Jessica’s Secret to Aging Well

Figure out how to de-stress. My children are my Buddha. The best part [of my day] is storytime and bath time, rocking Haven or singing Honor to sleep. I’m totally present, even if it’s for 20 minutes. It’s a quiet time I never had before kids.

From previous: Alba, seated, with daughter Haven; On this page: playtime with Honor at the family’s home in Santa Monica, Calif.
“Even before starting the business, I eliminated highly processed foods at home,” she says. “As much as humanly possible, everything is organic. For breakfast this morning, we had nitrate-free organic bacon, free-range fried eggs, gluten-free pancakes and almond milk.”

Alba worries about the effects of chemicals and preservatives. “The most popular tearless baby shampoo on the market [was sued for] a chemical in it that actually numbs your kids’ eyes,” she says.

Alba was determined that The Honest Company would create a shampoo that met her standards. “Honor was one of the test babies to see if our shampoo stung her eyes,” she says gleefully. “We had different pH balances and fragrances that we tried out, and [we had] kids choose the one they liked best.”

The Honest Company’s plant-based disposable diapers are 25 to 35 percent more absorbent than other diapers on the market, says Alba.

The products are sold online only (honest.com) to keep the prices down. “We spend a lot of money on our ingredients, so selling through a third party would put us outside of most people’s price point.”

Juggling Act

Now that she has figured out how to juggle motherhood and her business, Alba is focusing a little more on her film career, which has included action stunts. “I took some time off,” she says, “but I’m going to the gun range this weekend. I used to be a good shot back in the day, but I haven’t shot many guns lately.”

She’s also preparing for the sequel to the 2005 film Sin City, in which she played a stripper. She will wear the same costume in the sequel. “Weirdly, I’m thinner than I was at 22. I had that baby-fat thing that you have in your 20s that I hated. I’m realizing that those puffy cheeks were OK. Now I just look really tired. I need to start working out. That’s something I’ve been procrastinating on. I have to go every day.”

Describing her exercise routine, Alba says, “When I was pregnant, I did yoga and tried to be introspective. When I’m training for something, I like to go hard. It’s like I’m in the military. I feel like I’m going to barf the whole time. My heart rate is through the roof. I feel I need to do one more, where I may drop dead. I like to push myself to that level. My father does that.”

She is equally driven at home, making sure that when she is working on a film, the household runs smoothly. “I have lots of lists and charts. Cash takes care of things. I’m [like] a drill sergeant,” she snickers. “Poor guy!”

“Jessica is a hands-on mom,” partner Kane says. “I’ve been at casual events at her house, including a Super Bowl party. When she’s in charge, she’s running all around the house, making food and cleaning up.”

Alba has three films in the works, all releasing in 2013. In the comedy A.C.O.D., she plays “a really bad girl who has tattoos and smokes. She’s a temptress,” she says. “In Machete Kills (an action flick with Lady Gaga), I play an immigration officer who curses and has a gun. In Escape from Planet Earth, I play the nemesis.”

“Do you see a pattern here?” she asks, laughing. “I get to be a sweet mommy at The Honest Company and a baddie when I’m not there.”

As for her “good side,” Alba will be writing it all down for The Honest Life, a lifestyle book scheduled for next year. “It’s practical,” she says. “There are so many things I’ve learned and done for my family—paint and wallpaper I bought; the food I buy; the importance of buying local; DIY things I do with my kids; beauty tips. Did you know that women digest 5 pounds of lipstick in their lifetime? Until recently, the levels of lead were super-high. I found a lipstick that doesn’t have lead in it.”

“I’m crazy,” she says, “but I don’t think crazy is bad. I’m crazy for the greater good. At some point I’ll slow down, but now I have energy.”