AT WORK WITH
DOWNEY INC.

‘She is the font of all good things,’ says Robert Downey Jr. of his wife and business partner, Susan, who helped sustain his recovery, launch his stunning comeback and produce their first official project (after their son and upcoming daughter, of course): The Judge
JESSICA ALBA’S $1 BILLION BRAND

Roles and paydays for actresses are declining. But she was among the first to market with her own lifestyle extension, The Honest Co., as everyone (Blake, Reese) takes a page from her playbook.

By Kim Masters

SEVEN YEARS AGO, A PREGNANT Jessica Alba tested a popular mild baby detergent and broke out in a rash. Having been plagued with asthma and other issues that required repeated hospitalizations as a child, she may have been especially sensitized to problems that might affect her unborn baby. Alba also had noticed the rise of autism rates and ADHD among children in recent years. To her, chemicals and toxins in everyday products must be partly to blame. “I was like, ‘What is going on? What have we done to the world?’” says Alba. Stylish but understated in a black jacket and pants at the 6,000-square-foot Santa Monica offices that she decorated herself, Alba makes an impression: a serious, hands-on leader at the company that she launched for her three kids.

When her search for safer products left her unsatisfied, Alba, now 35, decided in 2007 to create “a trustworthy lifestyle brand that touched everything in your home, that was nontoxic and affordable and conscious to use,” she says. After a four-year quest, Alba found the right business partner, Spacek, Moms, Slate, Mother & Flea attorney-turned-entrepreneur Brian Lee. Now, slightly more than two years since The Honest Co. launched in 2012, the private company is moving toward IPO with an astonishing valuation at a little less than $1 billion, according to Dow Jones VentureWire.

But with any business that enters the arena of sustainable-lifestyle products (a market worth $60 billion, according to a recent report by research and consulting firm Natural Marketing Institute)—especially one with a name like The Honest Co.—comes scrutiny.

There has been chatter in the media about a supposed rivalry between Alba and Palrow, which began during a March 2013 interview promoting Alba’s best-selling book, The Honest Life, when she compared herself to Palrow: “I didn’t grow up with a bunch of money, so my tips are much more grounded.” Palrow then reportedly was overheard disparaging Alba as a hyped-up starlet and right posted on site on Goop questioning the safety of Honest Co.’s Multi-Surface Cleaner. Alba says the idea that there is friction with Palrow is “craziness.” (Honest Co. partner Christopher Gavigan, a family friend of Palrow’s, says he offered to take down the reference, but he declined. Palrow did not respond to a request for comment.)

Alba, whose father was in the military and whose parents each worked multiple jobs to support her and her younger brother in Los Angeles, among other places, has been a working actress since she was 13. Although she never went to college, she talks with sprinklings of MBA speak and Internet lingo: “The photos of babies on the wall in a meeting room are “little bits of brand identity,” she says.

Although Alba is known in the celebrity weddings and on gossip sites for her style, she found her connections and image little help when launching a company. “I spent a lot of nights crying and being devastated but more determined the next day to make it happen,” she says. Alba adds that she consulted with a lot of business experts, some of whom she knew through her husband, producer Cash Warren: “I pitched my idea to a lot of smart people and businesspeople [and] talked to a bunch of bankers and Internet guys.”

The key to her success, she says, was finding Lee, who started LegalZoom.com with Robert Shapiro (known for representing

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE ROSENTHAL

HARLEY NOUMAN

Newman + Associates

Serving high-profile clients, says Newman, whose 50-employee firm has about 200 artists, the strategy is a personalized approach. “It’s about finding people who can connect with what they’re doing. If the music doesn’t work, I’ll book them for a show, but if the music is good, I’ll try to help them sell records.”

FRED NIGRO

Angelo R. Nigro Appt.

Nigro placed an ad in Craigslist that attracted clients. “We’ve got that artist who wants to go on the road with them,” says Nigro. “‘Hey, Steve McQueen needed someone one day, did something, one thing led to another. Now he’s got eight clients.”

BOB PHILPOIT

Project Mike & Matts

The company focuses on groups but also found it a good way to break into the mainstream.

LAWRENCE RUDOLPH

Cupid Randolph

Randolph specializes in representing the creative class, like Jimmy Kimmel.

NANCY CARANZ AND BERNIE SIMNEROW

“They’re the ones who get all the attention,” says producer Jaime Simnerow. “I’m here to help out and not second-guessing to Randolph.”

STEVE SPACEK

Spacek Lee Partners

Spacek was Alba’s father who introduced her to the business world (whether the Spacek in the name is originators to George or Spacek change) “It was my first project in the industry,” says Alba. Spacek was introduced to Spacek (Spacek) by Tom Lee, who is the founder of Spacek. Alba says she is not sure if she will make Spacek a director in the firm. “Every week I always say my name when clients ask to “invest in restaurants, my family, or if there’s a store food adds up to your livelihood, don’t do it.”

With an array of products from brightly patterned diapers to household cleaners to hand sanitizers, The Honest Co. has more than 200 employees (and sells its wares online and in retail chains including Nordstrom, Target and Whole Foods. Lee declines to discuss profitability but estimates the company’s revenue in 2014 will be more than triple from last year, exceeding $300 million.

In an age when roles and paydays are fewer and farther between, Alba epitomizes the move into personal brand extension. Now the mother of two daughters, Honor, 5, and Haven, 3, with whom she seems to appear in paparazzi shots, she has marketed herself as the ultimate mother: someone with looks and taste but down-to-earth instincts—happy to be seen as a “regular” mom during the day and a glamorous red-carpet presence at night. Unlike Gwyneth Paltrow, with her 8-year-old Goop, and other stars who have put their star into the brand-extension waters (Diane Kruger announced her upcoming line of Southern products, Draper James, this year), Alba isn’t seen as elitist or entitled. (Her profile as an actress in such movies as The Fantastic Four and Sin City franchises arguably is lower-wattage.) She appears unassuming and approachable, calling out to her “tweetpals” on Twitter about what she’s “stuck to be a part of.” Plus, her multi-ethnic background (her dad is Mexican, her mother Danish and French Canadian) gives her a reach not necessarily afforded every actress in Hollywood.

Alba was named 2013’s number one brand to follow by the group that also includes Diane Kruger and Gwyneth Paltrow. The firm has already expanded into areas of interest to Alba’s fans—such as hosting a benefit for the LA Children’s Hospital.}