

How He Built a \$230 Million Sports Nutrition Brand 'Without Spending a Dollar on Ads'

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Key Takeaways

- Giving Chris Bumstead (CBum) equity turned an endorsement into ownership.
- Patience in retail ultimately gave RAW leverage.
- Learning to say no kept the brand focused.

RAW Nutrition happened by accident. In 2019, Dom Iacovone and his partner, Matt Jansen, were running Revive MD, a small vitamin company built on ingredient transparency.

When fans of his product kept asking for pre-workouts and protein powders, Iacovone had to decide whether to stay in the vitamin lane or cross over into the cutthroat sports nutrition space. "If we were going to do it, we were going to do it right," he says.

The turning point came when Iacovone partnered with burgeoning bodybuilder Chris Bumstead (known as CBum). At the time, Bumstead wasn't yet a six-time Mr. Olympia champion, but he had that rare mix of authenticity and social media savvy.

Iacovone saw an opportunity to collaborate with CBum that others missed. "Chris was getting paid well by other

companies, but he didn't own anything," Iacovone says. "I didn't want to build a brand on someone who'd leave a year later. I wanted to build one together." So he gave Bumstead equity in the company, making him a true partner instead of a paid muscle.

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The investment delivered results. RAW Nutrition brought in about \$300,000 in its first few months, then jumped to \$7 million in year two.

But the success didn't come via traditional marketing. "We didn't spend a dollar on Facebook ads," Iacovone says. "Everything was word of mouth" and funny social media clips. Within months, RAW was pulling in \$2 million a month in direct-to-consumer sales, landing "Brand of the Year" honors at Vitamin Shoppe, then GNC, and soon after launching into Walmart and Sam's Club.

Iacovone credits the rapid success to four things:

Patience

In an industry where most founders chase quick deals, he took the opposite approach. "Most companies rush into retail and give away their margins," Iacovone says. "We waited until the retailers came to us, and when they did, we named our price." That patience gave RAW leverage and helped the team grow on their own terms.

In fact, the one time they rushed into a deal, they paid the price.

Early on, a major retailer asked for an exclusive product. "We said yes too fast," Iacovone recalls. "It ended up hurting our margins and confusing our customers." The experience reinforced what he already suspected: saying no can be just as

powerful as saying yes.

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Strategy

While many brands chase shelf space at big box stores like Walmart, Sam's Club, and Vitamin Shoppe, Iacovone sees retail as a testing ground, not the finish line. "When we first got into Vitamin Shoppe, it was actually taking customers away from our direct-to-consumer business," he said. "Now we use it to test innovation. If something hits there, then we roll it out to Walmart or Costco."

He's seen too many brands fail by saying yes to every retailer. "You can't fit your brand into every store," he said. "Your Walmart customer isn't your Target customer. You have to know which products belong where."

Perspective

Despite the success, Iacovone admits the journey took a toll. "For three years, I was mentally unhealthy," he said. The cutthroat work schedule took a toll on his marriage and personal life. Now, at 35, with a one-year-old son toddling around the house, he's focused on balance. Says Iavacone, "You want to win by any means necessary, but at some point you realize it's not just about the company. It's about your family, your peace of mind, your life."

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Purpose

After years of operating at full throttle, Iacovone has

shifted some of his focus to mentorship. “I only do it a few days a month, but I love helping people avoid the mistakes I made,” he said. “At some point, giving back is part of the job.” That drive to teach, rather than just build, is one decision that’s definitely not an accident.

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