

The Benefits of Having a Consumer Brand for Hard Science

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In the very early days of The Supplant Company, back when we were just sketching out the details of the “sugars from fiber” concept, it really wasn’t clear what the right route to market might be.

Bringing new food ingredients to market isn’t SaaS, and there is no set playbook. And although there have been a few success stories now, there still isn’t close to a consensus in the industry. There also isn’t consensus from investors either. Over the years, we’ve received a lot of different and contradictory feedback on the best pathway from the idea to the store shelf.

As an ingredient company, to brand or not to brand was always a major bone of contention. At one extreme, some investors told us: “We don’t care how you go to market, as long as you do it with a brand.” Conversely, others told us: “If you’re going to invest in brand-building, then tell us how much you’re going to spend, because we want to know how much we’re going to waste.”

Divergent indeed! We’ve spent the last few years working out for ourselves what we think makes the most sense. Here are some of the learnings that led us to the position that branding is a huge asset for us in the commercialization of ingredients, not an unnecessary distraction.

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It makes things easier by taking the heavy lifting off the heavy bit

In some ways, the skepticism is understandable. Hard science is hard. Building great brands is also hard. Doing both at the same time is hardest of all. Moreover, the types of people who are good at hard science aren't often the types of people good at, or experienced at, brand-building. So, why make it even harder for yourself? Stick to what you know – right?

The reason I think this logic fails is that, even when you're good at hard science, the hard bits remain very hard. Some problems unavoidably take a lot of time, effort and capital to solve. And even the ones that are, in principle, more easily solvable are often not as malleable as you'd like them to be to fit perceived market orthodoxies. This is particularly the case with hard science problems.

The best way to move ahead is to not to have the business broadly lean heavily on the parts of the business whose challenges are slowest to solve. Having a brand can take the pressure off solving these problems and gives the immediate ability to frame things in the right way to the consumer.

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It means we don't have to slot into the status quo

Fitting into perceived market orthodoxies is a great example of this. New innovations don't typically slot perfectly into the status quo's perceptions of what's good – that is certainly the case for us. Seem strange? I can see how it

might. After all, we're doing exactly what the food industry wants to do: We're replacing cane sugar in food. So, it's a no-brainer, right?

In some ways, yes. But in other ways, we are breaking the mold of what defines success on this issue, at least on a narrow reading of it. One obvious example is that we're replacing sugar – but replacing it with a new blend of sugars. They're lower calorie, lower glycemic and prebiotic, but they still label (at least partly) as sugars.

Being able to communicate how the ingredient is made and why and how it has the nutritional benefits it does is massively helpful to avoid the rest of the company having to conform to the often arbitrary nature of the status quo. Branding is the core tool that enables this.

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It allows us to tell more of our story

Not only do novel innovations often not fit perfectly into the lens of the current status quo, but there's often a lot more to say than a brandless approach might enable. This is true of both what we're doing here at The Supplant Company and *why* we're doing it.

We've got the health story to tell (lower calorie, lower glycemic, prebiotic) but we've got a sustainability story to tell (upcycling agriculture's most abundant and most underused resource) and a food security story to tell (making more food from the same amount of land). But the real magic in what we do is the combination of all those benefits and particularly how each leans on the other: We make sugars from fiber from fiber-rich and hugely abundant agricultural side streams;

they're low-calorie because they're made from fiber, low glycemic because they're made from fiber, prebiotic because they're made from fiber and sustainable because they're made from these (fiber-rich) sources.

The wrong, or at least a lower-impact way, to go to market would have been to simply to say "We're lower in calories" – there's way more to what we're building than that. Again, branding is the core tool to enable this.

Finally, there's the "why," which we believe is important to add even more depth to what we're doing and help people understand our underlying belief systems. We believe a better future for people and the planet is possible, but it will take a radical re-think about how things are currently done, and we know we are well placed to drive this change. Communicating this as part of a brand helps us show up in the world and connect with others who share the same beliefs, whether that's consumers, retailers, investors or employees.

I don't want to downplay the amount of thinking it took to arrive at the consumer narrative we ultimately arrived at – explaining this stuff clearly isn't easy. But from our experience, looking back, the decision to build a consumer brand was a no-brainer and certainly an easier experience than not doing that, and it opened avenues to us that wouldn't exist if we hadn't. To my mind, any company doing something innovative and hard that ends up in food or in the consumer space more broadly, would be crazy not to think carefully about whether a consumer brand could help them.

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