The Substack That Became the Antidote to Food & Bev Puff Pieces

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According to Snaxshot founder Andrea Hernández, the newsletter subscription platform Substack was like handmade sourdough bread in 2020; everyone was doing it.

So when she shouted into the online void, she never expected it would shout back. But her tweets during the pandemic about the new kids in the pantry aisle, such as non-alcoholic beverages, attracted a “cult” of CPG lovers; tens of thousands of subscribers tune into Hernández’s Substack for her candid, straight-shooter take on the food and beverage industry. And although she comes from 10+ years of marketing experience, her growth strategy is everything that would make CPG bigwigs cringe; she has committed to no advertising and no PR pitches while remaining community funded.

The self-titled “cult leader” of Snaxshot sat down with ADWEEK to talk the early beginnings of the now globally recognized Substack; the recipe for success behind her activations, like a séance to revive nostalgic snacks; and the present and future of the food and beverage industry.

Her words have been edited for length and clarity.

Curiosity started the Substack

[Snaxshot] is kind of me trying to undo my whole indoctrination into marketing and advertising. I was sitting in one of my advertising classes and I remember saying, “Wow, this kind of feels a villain origin story.” Like we’re trying to trick people into doing things. Which, in all fairness, that’s what [advertising] is. Even with numbers and data. Everything can be skewed and turned around. I used to work in PR, so I use my experience to become that filter.

The repositioning of non-alcoholic drinks was one of the things that made me go, “Oh. Why?” It was the first thing that I wrote about [for Snaxshot]. There’s nothing new about non-alcoholic drinks; they exist within a spectrum. These brands are starting to pick up on what made the alcohol industry so successful, which is making things sexy to the point where you can literally turn a depressant and associate it with happy hour. That’s all done through marketing. I was fascinated by the commodification of wellness, the “goopification” of all these things that feels like inherent human knowledge. Something that says “ginger is great for your immune system” but being slapped with pretty packaging and resold to you at a premium.

Filtering out the unappetizing jargon

I try to be conversational. I don’t have an editor. And I think that’s what has really made people feel very comfortable learning about something that is so filled with industry talk at times.

There’s no ulterior motive, except that I’m very passionate about helping people unpack and digest. [For example,] how does an average grocery store work? There’s not a lot of

consumer education to tell you how rigged a lot of these grocery stores are. Everything you're buying has already been planned before you even step into the grocery store; the way that they put all the necessary stuff in the back. It's a retail place.

There are so many newsletters and information out there that's basically a regurgitation of the same information. [For me,] it's a whole process of curating. It's like I am a filter; I digest it and I think about it. How does this exist in all these different cultural contexts? Is there any significance? Or is this just a hype piece?

Anti-PR PR club

There are no affiliate links. I don't do advertising. It feels very much just like having a conversation with a friend because they found it interesting. Brands will reach out and ask, "How much for a shout-out? Or, "How do I get a feature?" And then I have to explain that's not how it works. I suggest to them to hang here [on Snaxshot] for a bit. Get to know exactly what we do. I don't really do pitches unless it's something really cool. But rarely have I gotten something that made me say, "Whoa."

I got invited to talk at The Wall Street Journal Food Forum. And I told them I wanted to keep my title when they asked me what my title was. And so, on the website, it was like CEO of General Mills, CEO of Impossible Foods, Jennifer Gartner from Once Upon a Farm, and then Andrea Hernández, founder and cult leader at Snaxshot. I love it because then that just starts to push the boundaries a little bit more. How serious should we be taking these things, honestly?

We hosted a séance to revive the snacks from the '90s. It was just an idea that I came up with, with a good friend of mine who runs this hibiscus beverage brand called Ruby. He said, "We should do something weird." I was like, "Yes, say less,

I’m ready.” And I’m always ready to do some theatrics. We had 100 people and I had them all wear these masks. It was very Eyes Wide Shut. We had the whole Ouija board and we had an altar to go and light some incense to invoke Purple Heinz Ketchup. It was insane.

We [also did a] snack sommelier event with Pop Up Grocer. Everybody was given a white glove and a monocle. They had to do a written quiz and go through this whole taste-test and then at the end, they would graduate with a diploma. I was in a suit with my white gloves, monocle, a top hat, and I was doing my best monopoly man interpretation. Again, it’s kind of just thinking about how to make things fun and not so industry.

For better or for worse, the pendulum always swings back

Everybody tries to pretend that they know how to [predict things that are coming up], but you have to go pull on the thread to see where it’s coming from.

Two years ago, I said we’re about to get into this “anti-goop” movement and stray away from wellness as we know it. And now it’s here. Cigarettes are back, Zyn (nicotine pouches), super toxic diet culture. It was obvious that there was going to be an unnecessary correction to the extremism of “adaptogenic this” and “meditation in a can.”

[I think] non-alcoholic will eventually subside in lieu of moderation, which is already happening. A lot of these NA brands are now being picked up by liquor stores. They’re kind of living with each other, which is always what it should have been, as opposed to these NA bottle shop versus the liquor shop, especially when you’re starting to see brands get picked up by Target. You also have the inclusive six-packs, which I find very fascinating. There’s this brand called System

Seltzers that’s a six-pack, but two of them are 0% alcohol. The other two are 5%, and the third option is 8%, so it kind of gives you options. That is genius. I love that people are thinking that way as opposed to the extremes.

Food and beverage have become external signalers, in the same way that fashion items have, for better or for worse. So those are just a few of my little things that I’ve been picking up, and then for the rest, people can just hire me.

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