

Pet project

Sports drink maker is in business to be Altru-istic

By: *Gabrielle Saulsbery*

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Down the street from Eugene Gross' childhood home in Ewing is the independently owned and operated 7-Eleven tied to his earliest memories. He remembers its foray into Blockbuster-style movie rentals in the '80s when *The Goonies* was available. And he remembers buying things here and there.

He's been out of Ewing for years, but the 7-Eleven holds much more than childhood memories now. Of the 80-plus stores his flavored water/sports drink Altru has gotten into, that 7-Eleven was one of the first, and it was the launchpad for his connection to 50 other regional 7-Eleven stores.

"I went into the right place at the right time with the right owner," Gross said.

Gross and Sam Hamid – scientists, gym rats, and longtime friends – had spent the past year-and-a-half developing Altru, a functional beverage and enhanced water with antioxidant glutathione that they as health enthusiasts believed would breathe fresh air into the crowded sports beverage space. Glutathione is produced naturally in the body and known by some experts as the "master antioxidant." According to Yale University's Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center Founder Director Dr. David Katz, most chronic diseases – diabetes, cancer, a serious infection – are associated with low levels of glutathione.



Eugene Gross got Altru into fridges at many regional chains. – AARON HOUSTON



Gross had been taking glutathione supplements for years and one night while he and Hamid were downing sports drinks post-workout that he realized were too high in sugar and lacking this ingredient he found so useful “a lightbulb went off,” he said.

According to data from specialty products analyst SPINS, the enhanced water and functional beverage categories are growing. From April 2018 to April 2019, the business grew 12.8 percent to a \$2.2 billion industry.

And, as it turned out, there wasn't a single beverage with glutathione on the market.

Well-traveled, the two entrepreneurs focused on flavor combinations of well-known fruits and exotic ones. Mango cherimoya. Peach mangosteen. Coconut jackfruit. Tangerine prickly pear. Gross enjoys educating people on the flavors they've never tried before.

“I find it fun. They might think mangosteen is a mango. That's part of our strategy: put the more exotic fruits with familiar fruits. We want to have some familiarity as well,” he said.

A winning strategy

One of the biggest challenges to being a startup is spreading brand awareness, Gross explained.

“You can make a great looking product and a great tasting product. It might take someone five to seven times [that] they see and notice your product before they even try it,” he said. “I live in the grocery stores and convenience stores so I get to observe. A lot of people have tunnel vision, they have their blinders on and might not even have their eyes open to see a new brand. But we've been very committed and dedicated to doing demos in stores, doing conventions, meeting people. We've been very dedicated to getting over that hurdle of brand awareness. I find a lot of people enjoy meeting the co-founder of a company.”

As he did when he placed his creation in 7-Eleven stores, Gross got Altru into fridges at regional chains like Murphy's Marketplace and Foodtown by walking in the door and talking to the right person. Brand awareness spread among industry executives when Altru won emerging company awards at Mazar's Food and Beverage Forum in May and Marcum Food & Beverage Summit in September.

He called the big check on his wall from the Marcum event “a nice reminder” of how hard he's been working to get the brand up and running, and said, “Winning the awards solidified some opportunities and opened some new leads that are still in the works.”

Joining the **New Jersey Food Council** was a game changer for Gross, who said NJFC President Linda Doherty took him under her wing immediately and introduced him to owners and buyers who could (and did) get him in stores. Her invitation for him to speak on food innovation at a panel discussion in October put him front and center of Richard Saker, one of the biggest owners of Wakefern Food Corp's ShopRite stores.

“Just when I was getting off the stage, someone came up to me and said ‘Mr. Saker would like to have your card.’ It was pretty amazing,” Gross said.

Altru was fast-tracked into 10 SakerShopRites, he said, including the South Brunswick location that opened in November.



Altru products shot. - ALTRU

Gross also credits NJFC for the connections that have gotten him into ShopRite in Carteret, Kings Food Markets, and others. They didn't all happen overnight. He connected with the buyer of one chain in February, and when crossing paths with the CEO in May, was asked, "How come you aren't in my stores yet?"

"Buyers have a thousand things going on, like we all do," he said. The buyer was interested and returned all his calls, but had been caught up in trade shows and other aspects of his job.

"You have to be persistent . . . polite persistent, friendly persistent. Not annoying, but you have to keep tugging on their sleeve," he said. By August, his product was on shelves at that chain.

Altru's name has two meanings: It has "all true" ingredients, explained Gross, and is the first half of the word "altruism"—a value important to both Gross and Hamid. Higher than any cause, their combined passion for animals was, along with seeking an exit from the corporate rat race, the impetus for starting a company in the first place.

"We've always talked about having a pet rescue one day but now we see this as a vehicle to help animals," said Gross. Ten percent of Altru's net profits go to four animal rescue organizations: Save in Skillman, Karma Cat Zen Dog in Milltown, Liberty Humane Society in Jersey City, and Northeast Animal Rescue in Philadelphia.

Their passion is evident in their home lives. Gross has four rescues in his Princeton home. Two are from Northeast Animal Rescue, one is from Karma Cat Zen Dog, and the other is from his old front porch in Philadelphia. Hamid built a "catio" on his deck in Dayton with multiple heated houses for neighborhood strays to warm up on cold nights.

They feature other pet rescues and animal organizations on their social media and volunteer at related events, but to help their four main partners as much as possible, they don't spread the pot too thin.

"We want to help everyone. As we grow we'll work with more organizations, but if you divide the pie too much, how much are you helping?" Gross said.



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