



The Biz: Insider's Look at the Sport Nutrition Industry

by *Steve Colescott*

If you don't realize that the entire bodybuilding world is directed, driven and controlled by the sports nutrition industry, then you just might be sleepwalking your way through life. To start with, bodybuilding contests, from the local level all the way up to the Olympia, are funded through supplement company sponsorship. Ticket prices would never even come close to covering the rental fee for the venues.

The top professionals (or professional-level money-earning amateurs) make a large amount of their income, which provides food and pharmaceutical money for them to push the limits of size, through their supplement spokesperson contracts.

The bodybuilding magazines we have been turning to for information and inspiration since we were teenagers would be no more than Xeroxed flyers without the advertising revenue or financial income from in-house supplements or outside supplement company advertisers.

Lastly, and most importantly, the average hardcore lifter in the gym, whether they compete or just train to reach personal size and strength goals, would find it extremely difficult to reach their potential without (at the very least), protein and other basic sports nutrition products.

This column is going to examine all aspects of the bodybuilding sports nutrition industry. To clarify, that includes the products we are familiar with because they are designed for and are marketed to bodybuilders and those attempting to achieve the same basic goals (increased muscle size, improved strength, fat loss, recuperation from intense training) as bodybuilders.

For this reason we will not be looking at products which focus on what I call tree-hugger nutrition, which includes anti-aging, general health or homeopathic remedies or products geared towards endurance athletes (although some of items from either category may have applications to bodybuilding). If it is market-

ed towards bodybuilders, then it falls under this column's purview.

Things we will be featuring include press releases of new products (all companies are welcome to submit these), career shifts within our industry and other industry news, such as product recalls or legislation which may affect us. I may also be doing in-depth discussion with formulators/R & D people about the rationale behind their products.

To kick things off, I just wanted to engage in a casual discussion about which items are currently popular with the average consumer. The handful of insiders I spoke to come from a competitive bodybuilding background or deal with competitive bodybuilders and run independent nutrition stores. As such, they are on the frontlines, interacting with business people, casual trainees and competing strength athletes. Keep in mind that this is not a comprehensive view on the industry and there are some very good brands (many with limited distribution) that are not mentioned here.

EFFECTS OF RECESSION

With the recent recession which, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research, began in December of 2007 and is impacting businesses on a level not seen since the Great Depression, I wanted to first ask how this has affected supplement sales.

According to Matthew Helton (owner of Axioma Fitness), "They are spending less but buying smarter." Some seem to be hit harder than others are. Mary Ellen Jerumbo (owner of Backstreet Gym in El Paso, Texas) adds that in her gym's pro-shop they have whittled the inventory down to just protein powders, with many customers opting for cheaper lines than they would have gone with in the past.

The customers at Pep Wahl's Body Builders Inc., many of them competitive athletes, have had little change in their spending. "Fortunately for us, our customers

consider supplementation essential to achieving their goals. Our customers are actually purchasing in bigger chunks when they can. When guys are getting ready for shows, oftentimes they will start to stock up months in advance, if possible.”

PROTEIN POWDERS AND MRPs

In the protein category, Matt Johnson (of House of Nutrition) reports that the IDS MultiPro Whey in the 5-pound size is his best selling protein with Beverly international’s Ultimate Muscle Protein coming in second. He also finds that the MRP category has died off in sales (perhaps due to the fact that more savvy bodybuilders like to control macronutrient ratios and add extra components (glutamine, waxy maize starch, etc.) into the shakes for a specific effect. He says that Champion Nutrition’s Ultra Met and Ultra Met Low Carb are his top MRPs brand due to quality and taste.

The top selling protein of Jeff Gruskovak’s Nutrition Discounters is Optimum Nutrition’s Whey Gold Standard with an in-house protein (Myolysate) also selling well. Myolysate’s main ingredient is hydrolyzed whey peptides, making it useful for peri-workout intake. Pep Wahl’s top selling proteins are Muscle Provider or Ultimate Muscle Protein by Beverly International, with Universal’s Specialized Protein as a close third. Ultra Met by Champion Nutrition is their top selling MRP. Helton’s customers are fans of Optimum Health Nutrition’s (not to be confused with Optimum Nutrition) Pro 40 Complete, which contains a vitamin/mineral additive, EFAs, fiber and digestive enzymes in a blend of four protein species.

FAT-BURNERS

In the fat-burner category, Gruskovak’s customers report strong feedback from Lipo-6 Black. Wahl’s customers speak highly of Lean Out and 7-Keto MuscLean (both by Beverly International) and VPX’s Meltdown, with Lean Out being the choice for those looking for good results without a big CNS buzz.

Johnson prefers a product containing ephedra and his strongest sellers are Lipodrene with Ephedra, Gaspari’s original Cytolean (strong positive feedback), and Dymatize Viper. Helton is a fan of AM/PM formulas, like Lipolyze/ Somalyze and Adrenalean/Synthrolean. “They work gradually, consistently and without peaks and valleys,” Helton says. “If I want a jolt, I have a double-shot espresso. I want fat-burning and these products do it for me.”



PRE-WORKOUT PRODUCTS

One of the fastest growing new categories is pre-workout products. These vary widely in formulation, as the category is not established enough for user feedback to have set a standard. Products in this category often include nitric oxide boosting agents, stimulants, neuro-transmitters and amino acids to increase workout strength, energy and pumps. Some provide carbs in some form since this has been shown to enhance/preempt recuperation; others are wary to do so since it may lose them customers that are on a carb-restricted intake.

Johnson’s customers are loyal users of Gaspari Super-Pump 250, VPX Shotgun, USP Jacked and Labrada SuperCharge Extreme. “All of these work great!” He adds, “They are a nice way to introduce athletes to a supplement they can FEEL!” Wahl’s customers like Ephedra Tea by Anthracyte, LLC (a strong stimulant drink) and Bang! by VPX (a stabilized liquid creatine with leucine).

“The hottest pre-workout supplements we sell are BSN NO-Xplode and Optimum Nutrition Vassive-NO,” says Gruskovak. “I recommend both. They contain legit amounts of NO boosters and neuro-stimulants. Our customers love both products.”

“BioRhythm’s Arnge Krush and Applied Nutraceutical’s Drive/RPM stack are big sellers for me and my clients,” says Helton. “I don’t necessarily sell what is hot because it is hot. I spend hundreds of hours researching ingredients and trying to get through the ‘proprietary blend’ BS to see what is legit. For my competitors then, it is strictly Carbolyze and Isolyze by Species.”

BRANDS

So which brands are currently highly regarded? This varies widely with some people we spoke to even coming up with conflicting views based on feedback from customers. Johnson reports positive customer feedback on Beverly International, Champion Nutrition, Cytosport, Gaspari Nutrition and IDS products. Optimum Nutrition has not been highly regarded by his customers.

Gruskovak only partly concurs, "Brands with the best reputation are Optimum Nutrition, BSN, Labrada and Cytosport. In the non-sports market, Solgar, Twinlab and NOW Foods are great brands." Perhaps due to the fact they have done too good of a job in their marketing, he hears bad feedback on Muscletech. "Customers are expecting to look like Dexter or Jay and when it does not happen, they are not happy!"

Helton receives positive feedback from customers on their experiences with Applied Nutraceuticals, Bio-Rhythm, Optimum Health Nutrition and Species. "I don't sell Gaspari," he adds (Europa and sites like bodybuilding.com make it difficult for an independent shop to make adequate mark-ups on their line), "but I always hear great things about it." Customer complaints come primarily from MuscleTech, Muscle Asylum Project and some fringe brands.

That gives you a taste of the current landscape of the supplement industry. Next time out, we will take an in-depth look at some products. If there are any products you are curious about, let me know and I can check into taking a detailed look at them.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Now 45 years of age, Jeff Gruskovak first competed as a teenager, placing in the 1983 NPC Teen Illinois. Not wanting to compete against enhanced athletes, he came out of a 26-year retirement to win the Masters division at the 2009 Natural Illinois. Nutrition Discounter was founded in 1992 as a mail order business, grew into an online store, and now also has a retail outlet.

Matthew Helton
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Matt Helton has been a competitive bodybuilder since 1977. He entered and won his first contest at the age of seventeen (the Teenage Mr. Tallahassee). He did not compete again for twenty-six years, placing second in the Masters South Carolina State Championships and second in the open light-heavyweight class. He has also been a competitive triathlete, cyclist and powerlifter (winning the North Georgia State University Collegiate Championship in 1996). He has been in business since 2002 and runs a low-volume business targeting discerning customers.

Matt Johnson
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In the thirty years Matt Johnson has been training he has entered thirty physique contests, garnering heavyweight wins at the ANBC New York and NPC Gold's Classic in New Jersey. He works at the House of Nutrition, which has been in business for 42 years, 18 years with the current ownership. House of Nutrition carries a wide variety of sports nutrition products, is owned by a certified nutritionist, and has three competitive bodybuilders on staff to assist customers.

Pep Wahl
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For thirty years, Pep Wahl has run Body Builders Gym in Akron, Ohio, an independent bodybuilding/powerlifting gym for men that has been the training base for athletes competing at the national and international level. In this capacity, he has served as the local chairman for the NPC, chairman for NABBA and chairman for Region V of the USPF. His powerlifting teams have won ten state championships and he promotes the longest-running bodybuilding contest in this part of the state.