

# Dr. Bronner's All-One-God-Faith

A Soap messenger success story and 'the marketing that wasn't.

—By Heather Jenkins—

(A Tribute to James Bronner)

**Editors' Note:** *The following is the second of two articles about Dr. Bronner's Soap. The first article appeared in our last newsletter and told the amazingly unique story of how Dr. Bronner's Soap came to be - as told by son Ralph Bronner. In this article, as promised, younger son and president of the multimillion dollar company Jim Bronner, shares some of his family's business philosophy and insider tips.*

It is with great sadness and regret that we bring you the news of Dr. Bronner's passing. After years of living with Parkinson's Disease, on March 7, 1997, Dr. Emmanuel Bronner passed at the age of 89, out of this world on which he had such great impact.

After all, it was only he who was able to sell his soap not because it is the finest quality pure castile soap made - although it is - and not because he spent any money advertising it - because he didn't. This was the man who thrashed against social norms, and refused to listen to those who thought they knew better than he how to market his soap - including his sons Ralph and Jim. He never worried about offending anyone - for he offended nearly everyone at one point or another. None of this seemed important to him because he had a mission, and it was printed on every label of every bottle of soap he ever sold - and will remain so say Ralph and Jim. We are speaking of Dr. Bronner's Full Truths and his Moral ABC, the ones he was (and probably still is) totally convinced will save our planet (our 'Spaceship Earth') if only we will see what he did: that love, cooperation, mutual respect and hard work are our only hopes for survival. Dr. Bronner gave himself in his entirety to 'the message on his bottle', and his son Jim says, "There won't be any changes to the core message of the soap labels ever, they will be his memorial.

It goes without saying that not everyone who comes into this world will possess a passion for saving it as Dr. Bronner did. Does this mean then, that only those born to passionately hold a torch for a global cause will become successful in ventures such as business? Certainly not. For Dr. Bronner it worked, but he was a unique individual - as we all are. What sons Ralph and Jim Bronner feel is important to lead a happy life and a successful business is integrity. "I'm not my Dad," says Jim, "I obviously don't have the mission he had, but I do share his integrity, and I intend to continue producing a fine product and to do good with our earnings."

After spending the last 30 years of his life supervising the making of Dr. Bronner's famous liquid soaps, Jim has learned much about running a business successfully as well as ethically. Much of this he says he owes to his Dad. Topping the list is persistence. "I share Dad's belief that you must keep at something to succeed, and remain committed to an ideal," says Jim.

Though Dr. Bronner's All-One-God-Faith, Inc. is a giant in comparison to most natural soap companies (they cook their soap base in 100,000 pound kettles), Jim is proud to say that it is probably not the most technologically advanced. "Our ideal is to stay efficient and small," explains Jim, who says that both he and his wife Trudy each work about 8 to 10 hours a day out of their home in Escondido, California, where the Dr. Bronner's business office has been based for years. "We finally got a computer in 1988," says Jim, "but my Father just hated the noises it made. If it were printing while he was within earshot, he would make us shut it off...this is the same Father who used to break a raw egg shell anal egg on our breakfast cereal when we were kids and say despite our disgust, 'Eat it! Calcium!'" says Jim with loving remembrance of a father who was anything but usual, and full of conviction.

"We couldn't do what we do without our 20 employees," says Jim, "They are all spectacular." Jim says he also learned from his Father that employees need to be treated

with respect and valued. Jim says there are many situations in which problems have been avoided by simply allowing employees to take part in troubleshooting. And compensation? Every employee of Dr. Bronner's has the opportunity to take part in a profit sharing plan. All get full family health benefits and generous holiday bonuses. Those who actually pack the bottles of soap get paid by the piece, however all others get paid hourly, and Jim says that their lowest paid employee earns about \$20,000 per year. Efficiency is high in the plant along with morale. According to Jim, three workers fill and label one-and-a-half million bottles of soap each year. Jim says doing things by hand is simply more cost effective. "This has become a proven competitive advantage," says Jim.

As the millions of devoted Dr. Bronner's customers can tell you some other advantages of the liquids soaps include: a low price ( helped by being packaged in the cheapest recycled bottles available with a simple paper label and no advertising overhead ), and the myriad of uses for the soap ( eighteen of which are documented on the label). Jim says their soaps represent the sort of diversified products he feels the world will eventually come back to, " Products are just too specialized today," he says.

Surely, you are getting the picture that Dr. Bronner and his Magic Soap company were and are unique in many ways. According to Jim, some of the company's ways of doing business evolved out of trial and error, some out of his father's stubborn convictions, and some out of pure necessity. "Lots of Dad's policies were done by the seat of his pants, but they have worked," says Jim, who says they do not pay freight when shipping orders. Instead, they give their customers a 10% shipping allowance. "My consultant says we are being too generous, but it saves us a lot of headaches.

We have said before that Dr. Bronner's Soap has never spent a dime on advertising, but relying on word of mouth. According to Ralph Bronner, this gives them a competitive edge because it keeps their cost down, allowing them to buy the finest ingredients such as lots of essential peppermint oil for their most popular Peppermint Soap - which according to one happy customer, "Makes me feel like I put a York Peppermint Patti in my underwear." (Now that's tingly!)

Both brothers agree that their father's focus was always on his world uniting message, and not necessarily on his soap or growing his company. The Dr. saw his soap as a vehicle to get people to read his label, on which was printed his message. If he had any extra time or energy, it went into revising his label or speaking in rented auditoriums to anyone who would listen to his, "ALL-ONE or NONE! ALL ONE!" philosophy (Of course the other thousands of microscopic words printed on his labels did expound on this one basic idea.) Time has proven with Dr. Bronner's Soap that a good product and a good message can sell itself without the help of paid advertising. Jim says he may do small promotionals or new products in the future because word of mouth does tend to be slow, but says they have no plans to change their deliberate lack of marketing. His is a 'if it isn't broken, don't fix it' type attitude.

The ingredient list is another thing for which no changes are planned. It's not broken and doesn't need fixing. Unlike Dr. Bronner's message, it's short and simple: potassium solution, coconut, olive and essential oils: "Some customers call me in disbelief that there aren't any more ingredient in the soap," says Jim, "but we use whole natural oils which need no long list of additives, it's just another advantage of making an all natural product."

Dr. Bronner's company was practicing "green industry" before the concept even existed. Jim says his father's company has always been extremely environmentally conscientious - and will remain this way - largely because

he refers to his father as "the original environmentalist." "Everything was rather precious to him," says Jim of his Dad. "He loved the Earth and hated to waste anything."

"My Dad's ideal plant was never built," says Jim, who explains that Dr. Bronner saw a three level soap plant built in sprawling fashion over a hillside. Raw materials would be delivered to the third level. Manufacturing would take place on the second, and gravity would feed the liquid soaps down the hill from bulk tanks for packing and shipping on the first. All three floors would be accessible from the ground. It would be efficient, non-polluting and require killing less greenery to build it. Instead, what Dr. Bronner left wasn't too far from his ideal factory. For years, his soap has been packed and shipped in a 25,000 square foot, one-story, converted candy factory. True to his vision, the soap is fed by gravity down from six tanks outside the factory.

Jim recounts an amazing, story about his father from when he was placed against his will in an insane asylum in Elgin, Illinois for six months before he escaped, but not before suffering several electric shock treatments. There are documented letters, plans and a check written to Dr. Bronner in payment for designing a settling tank for a manufacturing plant across the river from the asylum during his supposed 'insane' stay there. Jim speaks of "lucid letters" his Father wrote to that company explaining his idea for the tank. What is even more astounding was that Dr. Bronner's motives for designing the tank were not for profit, although he had to convince the company that theirs would be increased by using such a fat-settling tank to pique their interest in his idea. The reason Dr. Bronner went through the trouble according to Jim, is because he was sickened by the stench and sight of the pollution the factory was pumping into the river directly across from his barred window. "He was truly the original environmentalist."

"Today, we have the notion in the world that selling is something less than noble," says Jim. "But this is not the notion we got from Dad." Jim says his father wanted very much to be known as a man who made his living with his hands because he believed this to be a respectable way to live one's life. Also, Dr. Bronner was a third generation master soapmaker from Germany which makes Jim fourth generation and he apparently respected his family's tradition. Jim tells another story about the case of soap his father sold in Germany. "Before Dad identified himself as a soap salesman, he saw that his potential customer needed a hand unloading a car, which Dad gave him. After they were done, Dad asked the man if he wanted to buy some soap, it was already a done deal."

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*It was reprinted as a loving tribute to James Bronner, who passed away June 12th, 1998. The business is now run by: David Bronner - President, Trudy Bronner - CEO, Ralph Bronner - Vice-President, and our wonderful, loyal employees.*

*In memory of Dr. Bronner and James, a thousand acre "Rain Forest" near Mount Palomar, worth over \$1,000,000, was turned over to the Boys and Girls club of Escondido, California.*

*Dr. Bronner and James Bronner's belief in quality, integrity, God, and Spaceship Earth, will live on!*

*Ralph Bronner*

*November, 1998*

"Dad's idea of selling was not of pushing overpriced items on those who neither wanted nor needed them," says Jim. "He taught us to take pride in having full knowledge of a superior, handmade product, and offered at a fair price. It's a good feeling."

Speaking of good feelings, Jim and Ralph both agree that their father's legacy will live on in many ways through his company and through the good things they all have done and will continue to do with its earnings. To date a few of their more outstanding acts of good will include: donating three buses for the Boys' and Girls' Clubs of America; sponsoring four foreign scholarships; funding the digging of a well for clean water in Ganna, Africa; outfitting a chemistry lab in Mexico; and in the process of donating over 1,000 acres of wooded land to North San Diego County to a non profit group. Jim, who owns three patents of his own, including one for a fire-fighting foam which happily doubles as imitation snow, has enjoyed spending entire days making his 'snow' for various children's organizations. "Making snow is like serving ice-cream," says Jim, "You never have anyone frowning at you."

Ralph, who is in charge of "marketing," frequently packs his "All-One" Van with cases of Dr. Bronner's Soap to give away to anyone he meets while touring the country on his famous "soap trips." He has dropped in on hundreds of health food stores to tell the story and give out soap and literature. Ralph says he never forgets to pack his guitar, as he loves to sing folk songs with children everywhere.

To date, two of Jim's children have expressed interest in carrying on the Bronner family tradition. Michael, who graduated from Brown University this May, has expressed an interest in learning the business. Son David, lives in Boston, Massachusetts with his young family. According to Jim, David, whose career is in Social Services presently, is easing into market research and customer relations for Dr. Bronner's. "David has a lot of his grandfather in him," says Jim with obvious pride. "He goes into health food stores which carry Dr. Bronner's Soap and inevitably ends up conversing with someone about the content of the label. He really believes in what my Dad had to say."

The bottom line to running a successful and ethical business, according to Jim, is treating customers as he remembers his father always treating them - like people.