

Suds and Philosophy Lather Up Business For Odd Dr. Bronner

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Hippies' Soap Maker of Choice Finds New Agers Swooning Over Decades-Old Formula

By Wendy Bounds
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

ESCONDIDO, Calif.-All-One-God-Faith Inc. is not your typical company. And Emanuel Bronner, its founder and chairman, is not your typical CEO.

He makes and sells concentrated peppermint soap. He unabashedly peddles this stuff, at \$8 a quart, to New Agers and old hippies, health junkies and Hell's Angels. On his plastic soap bottles, he prints thousands of words of arcane, dense philosophy. You can visit him - but only if you have read, and are prepared to discuss his fine-print for saving the world.

Some consider him a guru, albeit sometimes a grumpy one. Once Mr. Bronner hung up on a phone caller, growling; "Call me back when I've united spaceship earth."

Bubbles That Last

To say the Mr. Bronner is eccentric is like saying Dr. Emanuel Bronner's Peppermint Pure Castile Soap - his mainstay product - makes bubbles. But the 85-year-old Mr. Bronner ("Dr." is self-bestowed) claims to sell \$4 million worth of soap a year. His loyal, almost cult following and an intuitive sense of niche marketing prove that unconventional entrepreneurs still have a place in America increasingly dominated by homogenized chains

Though Mr. Bronner invented his soap more than 50 years ago, it languished in relative obscurity until the longhaired, peace-signing hippies of the 60's adopted it as the official soap of the counterculture. Hippies have faded but counter-cultural trends still roll across the landscape. These days, outdoor lovers, health-conscious consumers - and even a few yuppies - keep the demand for Mr. Bronner's mild, double-distilled soap brisk.

Ragnars Veilands, a 50-year-old Dallas photographer and former hippie, explains part of the appeal: "Sure, Dr. Bronner might be from Mars the way he throws stuff together, but his basic idea of peace was why people became hippies in the first place. Dr. Bronner puts what we thought on the bottle."



EMANUEL BRONNER*

The story of what goes in the bottle is pretty interesting, too. Mr. Bronner left Germany in 1929, leaving behind two generations of soap-maker masters (the German equivalent of a Ph.D. in chemistry, he says), and arrived homeless in the U.S. At first, he bounced

between consulting jobs for soap companies. By the late 1940's, after making his own soap for friends, he says he found himself in a dilapidated Los Angeles hotel. There, using a broom handle, he began mixing up commercial amounts of his recipe in tubs. When he wasn't mixing, he was thinking, and arrived at a philosophy - a bit of Zen and a lot of moralizing - he calls the "Moral ABC's."

He decided philosophy and soap lathered up quite well together and began printing rambling essays in tiny print on his containers. Eventually, word spread about the strange soap maker with the

"hip" lingo on his bottled and environmentally safe soap inside. Soon the yellowish, minty solution was winning fans in the oddest of places. Dirt Rider Magazine, a biker's bible, would hail the soap as a fabulous grease cutter: "At the end of a dusty day all you bikies can hit the swimming hole and take turns scrubbing one another (with Mr. Bronner's)."

These days, if Mr. Bronner is feeling particularly generous, he will let visitors drive to his soapworks, a fenced-in factory, near his modest home here. Don't expect to get inside - fearful that other soap makers may try to steal his formula, he typically limits tours to the perimeter. But from there, you can get a glimpse of gigantic drums, looking like primitive paint cans, which feed a production line where work-

* Dr. Bronner has been blind for over 25 years.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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NAPERVILLE, ILLINOIS

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1993

MIDWEST EDITION



ers package Dr. Bronner's at the rate of about 12 bottles a minute.

Though peppermint soap remains his staple, Mr. Bronner, over the years, has added almond, eucalyptus, and lavender brands to his line. Innovations largely stop there: He doesn't advertise, sells only to health-food stores and runs his entire business from home with the help of his two sons, Jim and Ralph, his wife, Gladys, and a few loyal secretaries.

Devotees make regular pilgrimages to Escondido to meet Mr. Bronner. He is easy to find because his home address and telephone number are printed on every Dr. Bronner's bottle. Visitors sleep in small bunk houses on his roof. They find that conversation with Mr. Bronner can easily shift from rain forests to free speech, all sprinkled with allusions to Stalin, Jesus, and Hitler.

Like most gurus, Mr. Bronner can ramble for hours about his philosophy. Change the subject, and as he is apt to become sullen, as he did recently when he declared: "You must not be so shortsighted. This is complex stuff. Small minds decay! Great minds teach All-One today."

"Did you get that on tape?" he asks one visitor.

Missing a Bronner homily is not necessarily a tragedy, since his Moral ABC's are printed densely - about 2,000 words per quart - onto the label of every soap bottle. Along with free-floating directions for use ("Dilute!" - for example) the labels detail Mr. Bronner's plans for everything from keeping peace to destroying evil.

"Oh, the words are the best part of the bottle," says Judy Erkitz, who sells the soap at her Michigan Nature's Better Way store. Her mother-in-law, June, has visited Mr. Bronner personally several times and remarks: "It's just amazing how the words come off the top of his head."

The words are certainly amazing. Consider Mr. Bronner's 7th maxim: "Each swallow works hard to be perfect pilot-provider-builder-trainer-teacher-lover-mate So, each day, like a bird, perfect thyself first! Then teach friend & enemy the Moral ABC that unites all mankind free."

If the company has a salesman, it is 57-year-old Ralph Bronner, the elder of Mr. Bronner's two sons. From his Wisconsin home, Mr. Bronner, who once scoffed at his father's product, has become its biggest advocate. "I'd come home from college and see dad recording his Moral ABC's into five or six tape recorders at once. I never thought it'd work. I thought it should be called Mint Glow, or something more commercial."

Now he travels the country virtually full-time, dropping in unexpectedly on health-food stores to chat and check soap supplies. He finds he has only one marketing problem: Folks usually think his father is dead or fictional.

"Like Dr. Pepper", he says.

UPDATE 1998

Dr. Bronner passed away peacefully from Parkinson's March 7th, 1997. The business is being run by James Bronner, President and Ralph Bronner, Vice President. The soap continues to get raves in: *Marabella, Vogue, The San Diego Union, Backpacker, Glamour, The Milwaukee Journal, Natural Health* and other publications.

DR. BRONNER'S ALL-ONE-GOD-FAITH!

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