

Strategic plan for a blossoming brand

INNOVATIVE BEVERAGE IDEAS CAN COME FROM MANY PLACES. FOR Steve Fortuna, the idea for a beverage brand might have been whimsical, but his approach to bringing the idea to fruition certainly was not. Instead, the computer engineer and Wall Street financier has taken a carefully considered, highly strategic approach to every aspect of the process, from product development to market expansion, when founding Blossom Water LLC, Westwood, Mass.

"I do a lot of gardening," the Blossom Water chief executive officer explains. "... The product concept literally came to me while I was gardening. ... I walked into the house one day five years ago and said 'Wouldn't it be amazing if we could develop a water that was infused with the essence of blossoms?' I felt that the water could have tremendous aromas with probably equally distinctive and cool flavors. It was that simple."

After conducting research, he discovered that his idea was viable, he says. "While this [concept] is new in the U.S., it's not new on a global scale," he explains. "It's been done for hundreds of years in various ways. For example, jasmine has been used for centuries throughout Asia, lilac is used throughout France ..., [and] orange blossom water and rose water are used extensively throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. So we realized that ... flowers do have interesting beverage applications, and that got me really excited."

Encouraged by the research, Fortuna set out to find a flavor house to help create the product he envisioned. It wasn't until the middle of 2013, after about 15 months of development work, that the company launched its initial line of four flavors: Lemon Rose, Plum Jasmine, Grapefruit Lilac and Pomegranate Geranium. The waters feature a fruit base with a floral finish, balanced by a proprietary all-natural, low-calorie sweetener system. Blossom Waters are certified non-GMO and free of gluten, caffeine and sodium. They also contain no artificial sweeteners, colors, flavors or preservatives. They are packaged in single-serve, glass bottles, which Fortuna notes typically retail for about \$1.99 each.

When it came to the formulation process, Fortuna said that his product vision was precise and his research helped him to better understand the process and to develop his approach. "I'm a foodie; I cook a lot; I'm a wine guy. I'm a perfectionist in a lot of things that I do, including food and wine, and so when we started talking flavor profiles, I'm not a very easy guy to satisfy," he says. "So, the real challenge was working with countless numbers of florals and fruits, trying to put together just the right combination of flavors, and with just the right balance of sweetness and acidity."

He explains that there were two criteria he used to

develop Blossom Water's four resulting flavors. "It was what I like as a foodie [and] what appeals to me in terms of fragrance, what flowers 'speak' to me," Fortuna says. "Marigolds, for example, don't have any appeal to me in terms of look or smell; roses do, geraniums do, lilac surely does."

Fortuna says that during the process, he realized that the water could not only feature floral botanicals. "I learned that we needed to add fruit essence in there to create balance between the flowers, and to create more dimension and more depth of flavor," he explains.

As with all of the other aspects of development, Fortuna took a strategic path when it came to sweetening the product. Although he wanted the line to be a healthy, flavored water, he also knew that a sweetener was essential to ensure that the flavors were vibrant, he explains. "We needed to achieve a whole host of different objectives with our sweetness system, and one of them was all natural; the other was low calorie; the third was a clean, crisp finish; and the fourth was mouthfeel," he says.

In order to fulfill these objectives, Blossom Water is lightly sweetened with a blend of agave nectar and erythritol.

"The next step was what balance of sweetness ... and what overall level of sweetness do we want to achieve. My view on that was we want the sweetness level as low as possible, consistent to carry all of these flavors, and particularly carrying the floral notes on the finish, and that's what we did," Fortuna says.

All of the strategies have paid off, Fortuna says. All four flavors of Blossom Water perform with nearly equal sales, and the company has not changed the formulations in the slightest, he adds.

Since its launch, the brand has achieved distribution through more than 24 warehouses throughout the United States, including several UNFI, KeHE and DPI warehouses. More are expected in the near future, Fortuna says. As distribution grows, the brand continues to build a following among more and more consumers. "The product resonated from the beginning, and that popularity is only building in concert with the broadening distribution and retail footprint," he says. **BI**

Blossom Water LLC gains distribution throughout United States



(Image courtesy of Blossom Water LLC)