

Supplements eComm Guide: Past, Present, and Future

A deep dive into the supplements category, its history, dynamics, and opportunities for brands

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A note from our CEO

We've spent the last five years helping build some of the most exciting supplements brands on Amazon. The team leading this work are both leaders in E-commerce and respected industry experts within the supplements category.

We had the team share their knowledge and expertise in this guide.

In this report, we'll dive into the history of supplements, explore the market dynamics, and offer insights on launching and growing a successful supplements brand today.

Excited to share this with you! As always, feel free to reach out with any questions or comments.

-Chris Moe, CEO, Cartograph

A brief history of supplements

The best way to understand the modern supplements and nutrition industry is by studying how supplements came to be in the first place. We can trace much of the industry back to the 1930s and 1940s, when stores like Lackzoom (now known as GNC) began selling basic products like vitamins, whole foods powders, and cod liver oil.

In 1935, Lackzoom opened its very first store, and at this point, products of questionable safety, let alone efficacy, were sold and marketed as tonics, elixirs, medicines, and other healthy foods. Products like dehydrated and concentrated whole foods, brewer's yeast, cod liver oil, and other healthy whole foods were sold in Lackzoom stores.

Later on, Joe Weider, the godfather of bodybuilding, opened Weider Nutrition, selling mostly gym equipment and similar health food products.

During World War II, the U.S. government's introduction of Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) increased public awareness of vitamins.



Joe Weider with a young Arnold Schwarzenegger

Over the next few decades, the range of supplements expanded gradually with multivitamins, amino acids, herbal extracts, and more.

But it wasn't until the 1990s that the industry really took off following the passing of the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) in 1994, which clarified regulations and provided significant freedom to the industry.

This sparked an era of innovation but also led to problems with proprietary blends, adulterated products, and unsubstantiated claims.

The 2000s brought increased regulation, with the FDA introducing Good Manufacturing Practices requirements in 2007. Cutting-edge brands like Cellucor raised the bar with advanced formulas and marketing.

The 2010s saw the rise of influencer-driven "lifestyle" supplement brands and legal confusion around ingredients like CBD. In the 2020s, the COVID-19 pandemic drove consumer interest in immunity and wellness supplements. New regulations mandated claims be backed by scientific evidence.

Plant-based proteins, brain health, and gut health products gained mainstream popularity as the industry evolved to meet the needs of everyday consumers looking to improve healthspan over just fitness goals.

Overall, the supplement industry has transformed from its humble origins into a multi-billion dollar market driven by scientific research, marketing innovation, and shifting consumer demands.

Highlights

- The supplement industry began in the 1930s and 1940s with stores like Lackzoom (later GNC) selling essential products like vitamins and whole foods powders.
- Lackzoom opened its first store in 1935, marketing products like dehydrated foods and cod liver oil as tonics and elixirs.
- The introduction of Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) during World War II increased public awareness of vitamins.
- Over the next few decades, the industry expanded to include multivitamins, amino acids, and herbal extracts.
- The 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) clarified regulations, sparking innovation but also issues with unsubstantiated claims.
- The 2000s increased FDA regulation with Good Manufacturing Practices, while brands like Cellucor advanced formulas and marketing.
- The 2020s saw a surge in immunity and wellness supplements due to COVID-19 and new regulations requiring scientific evidence for supplement claims.

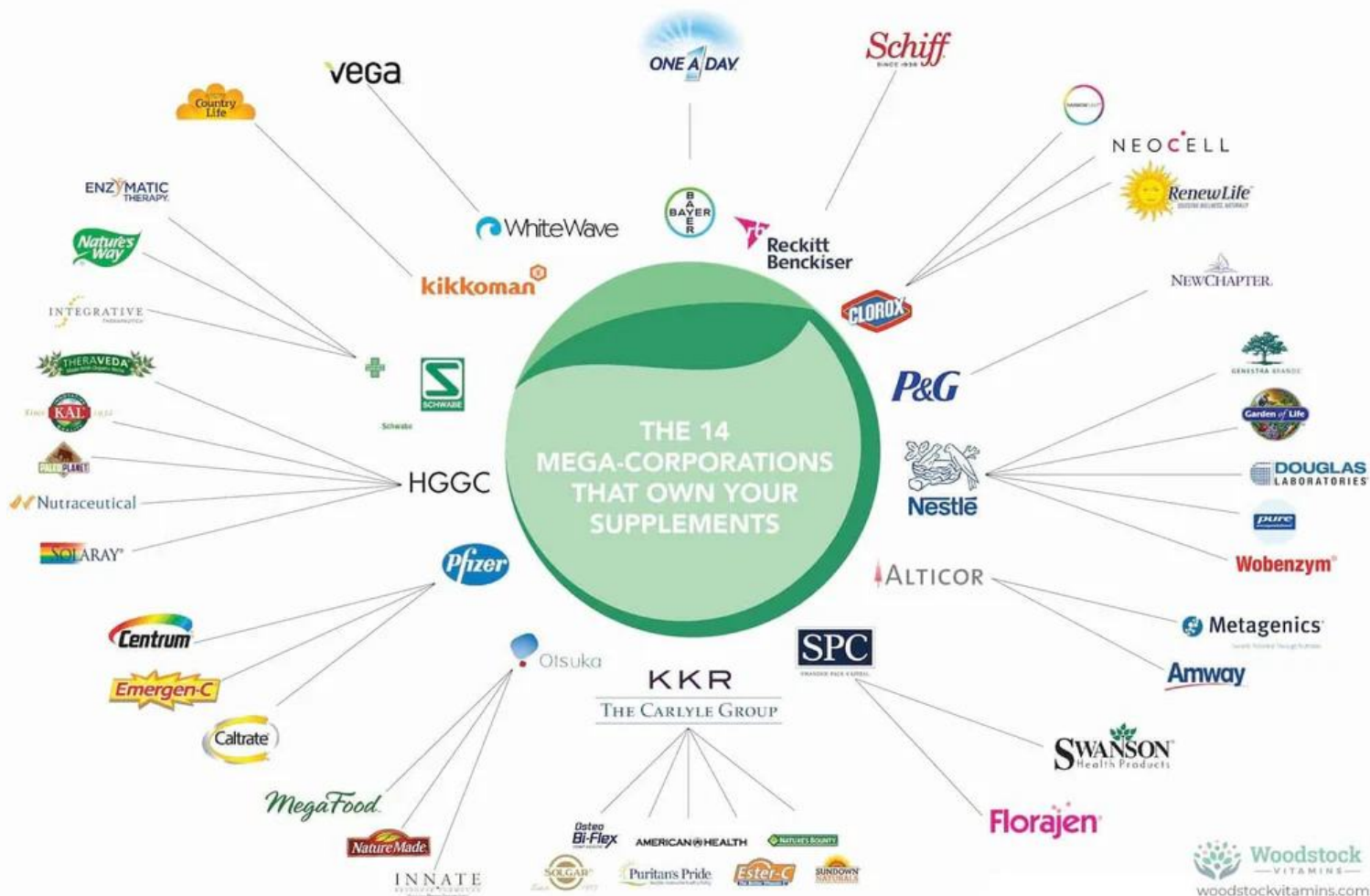


Photo courtesy of Dr Neal Smoller

Key players and their strategies

The supplement industry has become increasingly competitive. And while there are endless niches and sub-categories, supplements are primarily wrapped up by a handful of larger conglomerates in the space.

Here are a key players in the modern supplements space defining how many other brands around them do business.

Key players and their strategies

Optimum Nutrition

Optimum Nutrition is a leading brand known for its high-quality protein powders, supplements, and nutritional products. Their success can be attributed to several factors, including:

- **Product Quality:** ON prioritizes quality ingredients and rigorous testing to ensure the purity and effectiveness of their products.
- **Brand Reputation:** With a long-standing reputation for reliability and trustworthiness, ON has built a loyal customer base.
- **Marketing and Branding:** ON invests in strategic heavily in sponsorships to build brand awareness and credibility within the fitness community.

MuscleTech

MuscleTech is a well-known brand specializing in sports nutrition supplements, particularly in the areas of muscle building and performance enhancement. Their success is driven by:

- **Scientific Research:** MuscleTech invests heavily in research and development to create innovative formulations backed by scientific evidence.
- **Celebrity Endorsements:** Leveraging endorsements from professional athletes and fitness influencers helps MuscleTech build credibility and reach a wider audience.
- **Product Range:** MuscleTech offers a diverse range of supplements targeting various fitness goals, catering to the needs of different consumer segments.

BSN (Bio-Engineered Supplements and Nutrition)

BSN is recognized for its line of pre-workout supplements, protein powders, and other performance-enhancing products. Key factors contributing to their success include:

- **Product Innovation:** BSN continuously introduces new products with innovative formulations to meet evolving consumer demands and preferences.
- **Brand Visibility:** BSN maintains a strong presence in the fitness industry through strategic partnerships, sponsorships, and participation in events and competitions.
- **Community Engagement:** BSN actively engages with its customer base through social media, events, and online communities, fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among consumers.

Garden of Life

Garden of Life is a prominent brand specializing in organic, non-GMO supplements, including protein powders, vitamins, and probiotics. Their success is driven by:

- **Commitment to Organic and Natural Ingredients:** Garden of Life's focus on organic, non-GMO ingredients resonates with health-conscious consumers seeking clean and sustainable products.
- **Transparency and Trust:** The brand prioritizes transparency in sourcing and manufacturing practices, earning the trust of consumers concerned about product quality and integrity.
- **Health and Wellness Advocacy:** Garden of Life actively promotes holistic health and wellness through educational content, partnerships with health experts, and advocacy for sustainable living.



Photo courtesy of Garden of Life

Despite how many brands that already exist in this space, there are still massive opportunities to disrupt and innovate, whether that means starting a new brand or launching compelling products.

Here are some opportunities we see in the industry right now.

Personalization

There's a growing demand for personalized supplements tailored to an individual's health goals, genetic factors, and lifestyle preferences. Brands should be exploring DNA testing to offer personalized nutrition assessments to create boutique supplement regimens for their consumers.

Gainful has a "base" protein with no flavor, along with "boost" packets that offer specific benefits, and they'll even let you add different flavors

Transparency & Traceability

Consumers want transparency in sourcing, manufacturing, and ingredient quality. Brands can differentiate themselves by sharing where everything comes from, how it's made, and what certifications / testing results validate product claims.

Brands doing this well: Jym, Transparent Labs, Kaged, NutraBio Labs, and Ghost

Functional Ingredients

Another movement is consumer interest in functional wellness and a desire to use supplements that follow the functional medicine approach, from adaptogens and nootropics to botanical extracts, known for their immune-boosting, stress-relieving properties.

Parsley Health is a new-wave medical practice where top doctors trained in root-cause resolution medicine to diagnose unexplained symptoms and treat chronic illnesses. Their supplement store is a reflection of their medical approach.

Convenience and Format Innovation

Brands can differentiate themselves by offering supplements in convenient formats such as single-serve packets, chewable gummies, or ready-to-drink formulations, catering to consumers' on-the-go lifestyles and preferences for hassle-free consumption.

Create Creatine format innovation. Entire differentiation pitch here is convenience. Dose is a good example as well, being an RTD supplement.

Sustainability

Seed does a fantastic job of this by detailing their sustainability efforts, taking into account every stage of the customer's journey rather than just saying you "you can recycle our packaging."



Photo courtesy of Seed

Health Tracking and Monitoring

Integrating supplements with health-tracking devices and apps allows brands to offer personalized recommendations based on real-time health data. Brands can innovate by partnering with wearable technology companies or developing their own health monitoring platforms to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of their supplements.

Community Engagement and Education

Brands can differentiate themselves by fostering communities around health and wellness, offering educational resources, and engaging with consumers through social media, blogs, and events. By becoming trusted sources of information and support, brands can cultivate loyal customer followings and advocacy.

Companies like 1st Phorm and Ghost, who both have apps to support their products, are great examples of this.

If **Cartograph** launched its own brand

Here are the key considerations the Cartograph team would think about if we put our heads together to launch and scale our own supplements brand.

If Cartograph launched its own brand



Photo courtesy of MTN OPS

Who would it appeal to?

Finding your audience is crucial. The most successful supplement companies today started out by identifying an underserved niche.

MTN OPS did this by selling to hunters as a niche.

Brands like Create and Dose have accomplished this by selling to customers who'd rather spend \$1+ per serving on a gummy rather than 12 cents per serving on powder that they have to mix with water.

Whether you're selling to endurance athletes, hunters, casual fitness enthusiasts, nerds, biohackers, and so on, find an audience you can speak to in a unique way.

How do you want to appeal to them?

Dan Lourenco, Ghost's founder and CEO, once said wellness brands should 'formulate for the 1% and market to the 99%.'

The idea here is that educated customers know how to find good products, and will probably find you. Especially if you're loud enough like Ghost is. Getting their business requires the product to be high quality.

At the expense of oversimplifying, consumers can generally be divided into two groups:

- Educated
- Uneducated

We're using "educated" to refer to those interested in the technical aspects of supplements or nutrition products, not comparing college degrees to high school dropouts.

You can reach uneducated consumers by focusing on product benefits and outcomes.

Does the product solve a need or a want? Here are a few examples...

- "I want to put on muscle"
- "I want to lose weight"
- "I need to take care of my liver health"
- "I need help focusing"

Vital Proteins captured a largely uneducated consumer market by leveraging peak influencer marketing to position their product as a beauty supplement.

As a downside, the uneducated can be lost almost as quickly as they are gained. These customers are less likely to stick to a routine, and will gladly move on to the next fad.

Educated consumers see product features as benefits. While uneducated consumers may not notice the use of cheaper Magnesium Oxide, educated consumers might demand Magnesium Bisglycinate chelate for maximum bioavailability

These consumers, as a consequence, demand higher-cost products and can be harder to reach. Not only are there fewer of them, but your value proposition is based on details that are not easy to communicate in marketing.

The upside? Educated consumers are very brand loyal, and have a much higher lifetime value.

We've seen this with our own customers like NovaBay, who had 10 times more customers making 10+ orders compared to their competitors. This success is attributed to their high-quality pharmaceutical products, frequently recommended by doctors.

Craft your product line accordingly

The resources you have to start with will determine how the diversity of your initial product line out the gate. You should expect to not pull a profit from the business for awhile.

There are incredible products nobody has heard of because the budget was not there to support it.

- **Tecton** had unique advantages over its competition, but have struggled without strong marketing.
- **Olympus Labs** had a unique proposition with fun artwork on their labels, but they never made it very far.

Determine how to reach your customers

Speaking to everyone is challenging and expensive. The most successful brands first found a core niche, allowing for focused marketing with limited budgets.

Focus first, expand later. This is the way.

If Cartograph launched its own brand

BENEFITS	NO POINTS	5,000 POINTS	12,500 POINTS	25,000 POINTS
Earn GHOST® Loyalty Points	★	★	★	★
Redeem Points For Products	★	★	★	★
Birthday Points	★	★	★	★
Access to Exclusive Merch		★	★	★
Exclusive Offers & Promotions		★	★	★
Earn bonus points on all purchases			★	★
Free Shipping on points purchases			★	★
Free Shipping on all purchases				★
Early Access to Launches				★

Photo courtesy of Ghost

Acquiring customers is expensive.

You can have the best product in the world, but if your customer experience is average, you won't reap the benefits of LTV. Keep your customers engaged, whether that's through a Facebook group, Discord channels, a white label mobile app, an SMS program, or by creating educational, compelling social content.

Give customers a way to engage with your brand. Repost their content and make them feel like they're a part of what you're doing. And find easy value adds to provide them through your content.

Ghost has an epic loyalty program that incentivizes customers to actually invest in the brand long term.

Casual fitness enthusiasts will appreciate an easy 30 minute abs routine, especially if a key influencer is the one communicating it to them.

Here are some evergreen ideas for creating a better experience:

- Try a 90-day transformation challenge with a prize at the end (for the gym heads!)
- Have a supplement for focus? Try a social media campaign where consumers show you what they did while dialed in — best submission wins a prize.
- Gift experiences like a training session with a sponsored athlete or a wellness retreat
- Remember your customers' birthdays and offer them a small, thoughtful gift

Land and expand

While the best place to begin is with a single-SKU or hero product, adding other categories to your product lineup is a natural extension of growth.

Cold weather hunters might appreciate a thermogenic to fight off the chills. A "non-stim" focus supplement appeals to more people than just ones with caffeine.

More specifically, 1st Phorm has grown immensely over the years going from their core offering to adding children's products, RTDs, protein bars, and even selling apparel.

Whatever it is, introduce products that will both appeal to your core audience and offer a wider appeal as well. Your well established reputation will help your new product launches take off.



Helping brands **grow** products that are better for people and our planet.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss your brand approach on Amazon, please feel free to reach out. We're always happy to chat, and offer a free audit of any Amazon strategy.

Get in touch here: contact@gocartograph.com

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