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## Does Unilever hold the key to US sterols success?

by Dale Buss

Unilever executives believe they have finally figured out how to sell plant sterols to American consumers: put them in a yoghurt-based beverage in little, daily dose bottles and name them after a brand that has been associated with a cholesterol-lowering message for 20 years. The nationwide launch of Promise Activ Supershots this summer will be an American reprise of Unilever's Flora Pro.activ brand which, alongside rival Benecol, has been highly influential in winning Europeans over to sterols-based products. In Europe, where the sector is already well advanced, the concept is now being taken to the next level, in a non-dairy form (see related story on page 4).

Promise Activ Supershots will come in 4-packs of 3oz bottles, each containing two grams of sterols, in packaging that boasts "clinically proven to actively remove cholesterol". And in the fall, Unilever plans to rebrand its long-struggling Take Control sterols-based spread as Promise Activ, hoping that consumers will associate that product with its sibling Supershots and give the cholesterol-lowering, margarine-based offering another chance.

For the moment though Unilever is focusing on Promise Activ Supershots, fielding them at a pricey \$3.99 (€2.95) for a 4-pack.

"It's a multimillion-dollar launch and it's

one of our priority innovations for Unilever around the world, and certainly in North America," Eric Berman, director of brand marketing for Promise Activ, told *New Nutrition Business*.



Berman believes the new product may finally turn the trick for sterols in the US market. "We clearly understand the proven efficacy behind plant sterols," Berman said. "What this product brings is a way to make it easy to fit sterols into lifestyles. A mini-drink with a full two grams of sterols, and in a low-calorie format, makes it convenient and easy for people to fit into their lives. And that's the key."

The US market for sterol-based products has so far proven to be one of the biggest failures in the history of functional foods. Most brands have failed, and those that have survived are mostly ultra-niche products. Take Control and rival Benecol, produced in the US by McNeil Nutritionals, survive in their high-priced slots in grocery refrigerator cases only because of the fierce loyalty of a relative handful of American consumers.

As for everyone else in the country, they have little idea that sterols even exist. "American consumers have a really low level of awareness of sterols," Berman says. "Given the fact that there's so much clinical data behind their efficacy in lowering

cholesterol, though, we viewed the gap as an opportunity to educate consumers. And what better way to do that than with a product that makes it very easy to get sterols into your lifestyle?"

### THREE CRUCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

Three developments have encouraged Berman and his colleagues to believe that Promise Activ is indeed the right sterols-based product at the right time.

First, they've observed the success of Flora Pro.activ in Europe over the last couple of months which followed the huge popularisation of little-bottle probiotic products over the previous several years.

Second, it's becoming clear that Americans don't object to the idea of liquid supplements or, specifically, daily dose bottles. Dannon's DanActive, a probiotic drink, was launched recently and has laid down a solid sales track already. "We viewed that as a positive indication that there's potential for these products almost to become their own category, because the [little bottle] format is very popular," says Berman.

Promise Activ Supershots will be positioned quite differently from DanActive, however. "DanActive offers immunity defence, and is filled with live and active yoghurt cultures," he explained. "But while our product has a yoghurt base, and yoghurt taste and texture, it's not cultured. It's got a much milder taste than a cultured dairy product. And it has a lot longer shelf life: about six months."

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### Aristo Health unveils a new kind of functionality



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# Aristo Health unveils a new kind of functionality

It was no coincidence that Gursh Bindra, CEO of New Jersey startup Aristo Health, Inc., chose Valentine's Day this year to publish the press release announcing the launch of the company's first functional food, Aristo Wellness Bars – one of the key benefits of the bars is that they promote good heart health. Nor was the name "Aristo" chosen lightly: it means "The Best" in ancient Greek and that's exactly what this ambitious startup is aiming to be: one of the premier entrepreneurial functional food companies in North America. PAUL VINCENT reports.

Americans have traditionally resorted to pills and capsules for their nutrition supplementation needs, but Gursh Bindra is convinced the winds of change are not far off. He came to the conclusion two years ago that the country was at a watershed moment as far as the public's interest in health and wellness and their willingness to turn to functional foods to help achieve their nutritional goals.

"This phenomenon is clearly more established in other parts of the world such as Japan and Western Europe and I believe it is only a question of time until North Americans truly follow suit," Bindra told *New Nutrition Business*.

With a background in both science and business, Bindra holds a Ph.D. specialising in nutritional biochemistry and has published in various scientific journals including the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Soon after receiving his doctorate he joined Procter & Gamble in Geneva in an international product development role which included frequent visits to the company's US headquarters.

Bindra subsequently gained valuable business experience in sales-marketing and general-management roles with Johnson & Johnson and as a management consultant with Price Waterhouse Coopers, where he advised senior executives of leading companies in the healthcare sector on corporate strategy. From all this experience Bindra believes he has distilled the essence of success in functional foods:

"The key is going to be offering the general public, convenient, great tasting foods and beverages that offer superior nutritional content and also good economic value."

## WHAT MAKES ARISTO DIFFERENT?

A founding principle of the company was that it wouldn't design products that featured

just *one* key benefit such as cholesterol-lowering or calcium fortification. Thus Aristo Wellness Bars are unique in that they are the first such product to offer the combined synergistic effect of key "supernutrients" such as omega-3 from encapsulated fish oil (supportive of a healthy heart and brain), natural plant sterols (proven in numerous studies to help reduce cholesterol) and high levels of superfruit antioxidants (known to help maintain cell health and thus assist in healthy ageing).

Aristo Wellness Bars were launched in three flavours: Pomegranate & Cranberry with Chocolate; Açai Berry & Lemon-Lime with Chocolate; and Goji Berry & Orange with Chocolate.

The retail price for the bars will vary according to retail outlet and ongoing promotional deals but Bindra expects it to range between \$1.79-\$2.09 (€1.33-€1.55), which "is a justifiable premium over other nutrition bars that do not offer the superior health benefits that our wellness bars do".

The formulas are proprietary (with patents pending) and, says Bindra, "provide an overall holistic wellness benefit if taken regularly, since these three classes of supernutrients help potentiate and build on each other's contributory role in overall health".

The bars' framework is highly natural, organic and devoid of trans fats, refined sugars and high fructose corn syrup.

"We call the line 'body + mind' since the functional ingredients in these wellness bars are truly supportive of a healthy body and sound mind!" enthuses Bindra.

Taste of course, is crucial for success in functional foods, and Bindra says the initial feedback has been excellent in that regard.

"Over 18 months of product

development effort and consumer testing have resulted in great tasting, highly organic products with natural flavours and no artificial preservatives.

"One of our strategic partners is a top, internationally recognised flavour house that has helped put together delicious tasting products that are set to establish a new paradigm ... that you can have your wellness and eat it too!"

## A SMALL STARTUP WITH POWERFUL FRIENDS

At present Aristo Health has a handful of employees and taps into affiliated consultants from various fields. Its business plan calls for a core staff of 10-15 within the next year.

"We knew from the outset," Bindra told *NMB*, "that to succeed in building a high growth company in the R&D intensive food industry we had to outsource everything except marketing and business strategy.

"Our value-add proposition from inception has been our insights into consumer and market trends as well as previous expertise in running businesses for major multinationals."

Aristo Health therefore set out to partner with leading functional ingredient companies, flavour houses and co-packers that were



## FEATURES & BENEFITS OF ARISTO WELLNESS BARS

Aristo Health's proprietary recipes for their Wellness Bars contain:

- 100mg ocean omega-3s to support a healthy brain and heart
- Plant sterols to help reduce cholesterol
- High antioxidants to help maintain cell integrity
- 60% organic ingredients all natural flavours and preservatives
- Low calories, no trans fats, low cholesterol, low sodium
- No refined sugars, high fructose corn syrup or artificial sweeteners
- Good source of dietary fibre and natural milk calcium

The stated target consumers are: nutritionally conscious men and women; individuals concerned about heart health; and baby boomers wanting to age healthily.



receptive to backing smaller, innovative food marketers.

"We have been fortunate in collaborating with visionaries such as Robert Orr, CEO of Ocean Nutrition Canada and key individuals at Cognis Nutrition who quickly recognised the power of our ideas and we have built on their expertise," says Bindra

To the best of Bindra's knowledge, this is the first time that these unrelated companies have been brought together to realise a product concept. He sees Aristo Health forging other important strategic alliances in the future:

"In an era where there is heightened interest and greater trust in branded functional ingredients, we can help our ingredient partners get the right quality message out to manufacturers, retailers as well as consumers about their nutritional products."

### THE HEART OF THE MATTER: DISTRIBUTION

"Thin and deep" is how Bindra describes Aristo Health's initial distribution strategy. "We will take on smaller retailers (regional supermarkets and independent natural health stores) if it helps us build a significant presence in a particular area such as the Northeastern US," he explains.

"For example, we just signed up Kings Supermarkets which has 26 upscale grocery stores in northern New Jersey and New York. Our main approach however, given our ambition to be a national brand, will be one of teaming up with larger 'best-in-class' retailers in specific classes of trade.

"Within three months of launch we have distribution in place with key names such as Tree of Life, the Vitamin Shoppe, Meijer

Supermarkets (who have a large Midwestern presence), Price Chopper (large Northeastern presence) and are in the final round of discussions with a major Club warehouse prior to undertaking a series of 'product road shows' with them in Southern California."

The Aristo product message has already begun to resonate with retailers. Jackie DeBruler, a Category Buyer of Health, Fitness and Nutrition products for Meijer Supermarkets, affirmed this, saying:

"As a company we have a strong focus on health and wellness so we are always looking for ways to provide our customers with healthy alternatives. The Aristo Wellness Bars seem to be a logical fit!"

Bindra predicts more and more retailers will see the bars as a great way of offering their customers whole-health solutions.

As far as advertising is concerned, Bindra says that while they eventually intend to use conventional media, "our initial focus is on product sampling, event marketing and trade show attendance to expand retail distribution".

Bindra also said that the company was "seriously examining other avenues of non-

traditional promotion" which he declined to be specific about at this stage.

### THE FUTURE FOR ARISTO

In dogged pursuit of its goal to be one of the best functional foods companies in North America, Aristo is already planning on line-extending its Aristo wellness bars into two other categories, namely weight management and kids' nutrition.

"Both of these market segments have huge potential and we feel that our formulation expertise and powerful partnerships with industry heavyweights will also help us succeed in those areas," Bindra says.

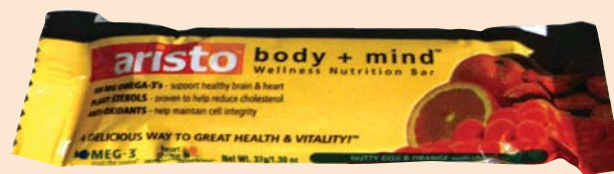
A line of functional beverages have been formulated and are "coming soon", according to the company's website ([www.aristohealth.com](http://www.aristohealth.com)). They were demonstrated at Natural Products Expo West back in March where they received "an enthusiastic response from the retail community," says Bindra.

"Our approach here has been to work around themes such as Energy/Vitality, Immunity and Rejuvenation with appropriate functionals delivering the desired end-benefits.

"Once again, first and foremost is taste! Our collaboration with a top flavour house which has a proven track record with big name brands, has resulted in great tasting drinks in flavours ranging from mango, grape-berry to pineapple-citrus. We expect to launch the beverages in the fall."

The future certainly looks bright for Aristo Health, a company that looks back as much as it looks forward: Bindra says he was inspired early on to enter the realm of functional foods through the teachings of the "Father of Medicine", the Greek physician Hippocrates, who is widely thought to have coined the phrase "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food".

### GOJI BERRY & ORANGE WITH CHOCOLATE



Ingredients: Organic rolled oats, organic brown rice syrup, water, crisp rice (brown rice flour, rice flour), chocolate coating (sugar, fractionate palm kernel, cocoa powder, whey powder, nonfat dry milk, soy lecithin, natural flavour), dry roasted peanuts, Thompson seedless raisins, plant sterol esters, gum arabic, organic evaporated cane juice, fish oil from anchovy & sardine, canola oil, roasted diced almonds, milk mineral complex, natural flavours, goji powder, glycerin, honey, refined sea salt, natural tocopherols added to preserve freshness.