

Supplemental results

From humble beginnings, a nutritional products distributor grows to become Canada's leading online supplier



Daryl Ballentyne and Maggie Anastasiou of Supplement Source. The online business stocks over 1,700 products to supply more than 35,000 customers

WHILE LOCAL BUSINESSES have origins of just about every imaginable sort, Supplement Source just may be the only one to claim creation in conflict.

The business traces its roots to Bosnia in the early 1990s, when a couple of enterprising Canadian soldiers started ordering sports supplements in bulk as a service for fellow soldiers during their tour of duty. One of those soldiers, however, had discovered the value of supplements long before that.

As a skinny 17-year-old who wanted to join the armed forces, Daryl Ballentyne needed to beef up. "I was six-foot-three and only weighed 132 pounds," he recalls. "I used supplements so I could make the minimum weight requirement."

Following his overseas deployment to Bosnia, Ballentyne, then a sergeant in the Canadian Forces, started selling fitness supplements out the trunk of his car to fellow soldiers at CFB Gagetown in New Brunswick. He kept the business going with each posting, transitioning into a home-based mail-order

business, then a retail store. In 2010, Ballentyne and his wife, Maggie Anastasiou, established Supplement Source as a strictly online business operating out of a 4,000-square-foot warehouse on Meadowbrook Drive.

Though Ballentyne has long been retired from the military, he still caters to the troops and ships to Canadian and American soldiers deployed anywhere around the globe. Supplement Source has also captured its fair share of civilian customers looking to buff up, slim down and generally supplement their healthy lifestyle. As well as carrying sports and nutritional supplements, the company offers training gear and clothing, books, videos and other fitness accessories.

"We carry over 1,700 products and have over 35,000 customers, about half of them in rural areas," says Ballentyne. "Our customers are everyone from hard-core bodybuilders who compete to average, everyday people, some who are going to the gym for the first time."

Ballentyne says sales are in the millions annually, but profit

margins are slim. "Our business philosophy is to make a little bit of money off a lot of people."

The high volume keeps three people busy in the warehouse all day every day, with so many packages going out that Canada Post usually sends a truck to pick up shipments every weekday, and two on Mondays. Supplement Source typically turns over stock in as little as two weeks, and suppliers regularly offer deep discounts on product due to expire within three to six months. Those bargains are always advertised on Supplement Source's weekly e-flyer, which reaches thousands of customers. For orders over \$99 shipping is free, and for higher-cost orders volume discounts kick in.

Ballentyne says he follows industry trends closely, and is diligent about getting new products stocked as quickly as possible. If one of his customers asks for a particular item, for instance, he will immediately bring in two dozen. "If one person asks," he reasons, "I wonder how many other people visited the website, didn't see it and looked elsewhere."

Supplement Source also sends out a free t-shirt with all new customer orders. "We have human billboards in gyms all over the country," says Ballentyne.

But above all else, Ballentyne stresses the importance operating an online-only business with a personal touch. "About 75% of our orders have a handwritten note go out with them," he says. "For example, if someone has written in their comments that they are entering a competition, we'll send a few words of encouragement. We might throw in some free samples or upgrades to what people order. It's all about establishing relationships. We have had a lot of regulars ask if they can stop in and meet us in person when they're coming through London." ■ KYM WOLFE

SUPPLEMENT SOURCE

Online nutrition and sports supplement distributor
Established 2010
6 employees
International market
www.supplementsource.ca