



The Sports Drink Industry Grows Up

Jul 1, 2005 12:00 PM

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Athletes and exercisers used to take a gulp from the water fountain rather than downing a sports drink after they finished a workout. But times have changed. The sports and health drink business is now one of the fastest growing segments of the consumer beverage industry and is so popular that Coca-Cola is now offering sports beverages as part of its brand.

When Gatorade invented a drink that helped replace electrolytes for athletes after an intense workout, many imitators offered similar products. Today the market has evolved, and companies now sell pre-, during and post-exercise systems to meet the needs of exercisers of all types. These "performance systems" start with pre-exercise beverages and end with recovery drinks that contain vitamin/mineral-enhanced drinks.

Margins in the sports drink category can range upwards of 40 percent or more, so there is a real benefit to embracing a program that will meet the needs of your members. Selling these products in "systems" to your clients makes the process of training, selling and purchasing simple and efficient. A dramatic increase has occurred in consumer awareness of the category, and opportunities now exist to incorporate them into your club's retail offerings. Essentially, most of the thought leaders in this exploding category offer a plan for exercisers and athletes and support them with science in the case of the most credible companies.

While this article isn't intended to be a scientific treatise comparing the validity of different types of sports drink systems, I thought it might be helpful to provide an example of the genesis of one company offering these systems as a means to understand the category. Hammer Nutrition (www.hammernutrition.com) began providing supplements for elite endurance athletes including professional bicycle racers and long-distance runners 18 years ago. Hammer invented the term "endurance supplements for endurance athletes." The company staked its claim by being purists. Its products don't contain sugar, flavorings or inexpensive industrial additives — sucrose, glucose or refined chemically processed sugars including aspartame or sucralose. Hammer essentially continues to differentiate itself with these basic principles today.

The company offers a full line of sports drinks and supplements that can be purchased directly from the company via the Internet and also through a program available to specialty retailers and health clubs. Hammer is piloting POP promotions for many of its products through outdoor and athletic retailers such as REI and a number of specialty retail outlets.

Hammer provides a complete fueling line including an all-purpose sports drink to be used during exercise, a post-exercise recovery drink, and soy and whey protein drinks (naked proteins without additives). These are promoted as fuels as opposed to supplements. The company also provides multivitamins and supplements that include glucosamine and chondroitin. The company reports repeat sales of 75 percent to exercisers using its Web-based selling system.

In conversations with drink system users, the key to repeat sales is support with training, forums for users to ask questions and professional advice availability. Hammer not only provides clubs and retailers with promotional materials and training for staff but also consumer support and education to help members select the right products. They maintain an 800 number that can be called for advice and feedback from nutritionists and other professional staff. Hammer, as with other flagship companies in this industry, offers additional support including an online quarterly newsletter, a 72-page manual, on-site promotional events, a variety of specialty electronic newspapers and an endurance library that contains hundreds of articles.

Several other companies that are promoting and supporting complete sports drink systems, such as Gatorade (www.gatorade.com), Clifbar (www.clifbar.com), Powerbar (www.powerbar.com), First Endurance (www.FirstEndurance.com) or EAS (www.eas.com), also provide many of the benefits noted above. They generally include good training support and material to health clubs, retailers and consumers.

Club owners are taking advantage of these companies and their programs in much the same way that they have been promoting vitamin supplements, meal replacements and other nutritional products. The best of these programs provide simple and understandable education and direction for your sales and fitness staff and for your members.

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