

## Preserving history of the supplement industry

Despite the supplement industry's enormous impact, very little of its early history has been preserved. Any early vitamin bottles, advertisements, packaging designs and retail displays that remain do so by and large in lobby display cases of a handful of legacy brands.

Registered dietitian, international speaker and author David Mainz has taken it upon himself to address this historical shortcoming. His International Museum of Supplement History is the result of this effort. Itself a rare find and a 25-year effort, the Orlando, Florida, museum was recently featured on MeTV's "Collector's Call."

The collection contains rare artifacts that illustrate the first half-century of vitamin marketing and product development, including historic supplement bottles, early advertising campaigns and examples of products that helped define the modern nutrition marketplace.

"Collections like this help tell the story of how our once-niche category grew into a cornerstone of modern wellness," says Loren Israelsen, United Natural Products Alliance founder and president, "and how science, regulation and consumer education evolved together over the decades."

Currently, viewing of the collection is by appointment only. Israelsen issues a call to action to help find a permanent home for the museum which, he says, "would preserve the industry's history while also helping educate the public about the legitimate scientific roots of an industry they interact with every day."

When the *NBJ* team recently met Mainz at Natural Products Expo West, we realized the historical items and stories he's been collecting are of great interest and import to this industry, so we asked him to share his account of this intriguing history.

# The first 50 years, and why it matters

By David L. Mainz

**W**alk into any pharmacy, grocery store or health food retailer today and you'll find aisles filled with dietary supplements. The global supplement industry now generates well over \$200 billion annually and plays a central role in how consumers think about health and wellness.

Yet this enormous industry is surprisingly young. The foundations of the modern supplement market were built during a remarkable 50-year period between roughly 1910 and 1960. In those decades, scientific discovery, entrepreneurial creativity and consumer fascination combined to create something entirely new.

### The discovery

At the start of the 20th century, physicians were still trying to understand several devastating diseases that had plagued

## David L. Mainz

**David L. Mainz** is an international speaker and author of *Ten Bonus Years: How You Can Add Ten Healthy Years to Your Life*. He is also the curator of The International Museum of Supplement History—The Archive of the Dietary Supplement Industry, the only museum documenting the classic advertising and products created during the first half century of the natural foods and dietary supplement industry.



humanity for centuries. Conditions such as scurvy, beriberi, pellagra and rickets were widely recognized, but their causes remained mysterious. The breakthrough came when scientists discovered that these illnesses were not caused by infection but by missing nutrients in the diet. Researchers eventually isolated the compounds responsible—tiny micronutrients that proved essential for life.

In 1912, Polish biochemist Casimir Funk introduced the word "vitamine," helping define the entirely new field of



nutritional science by demonstrating that profound health problems could sometimes be solved by identifying simple nutritional deficiencies.

The discovery of vitamins was widely celebrated as a triumph of modern science and laid the foundation for a completely new category of health products.

### The first supplements

Long before modern vitamin tablets appeared, early forms of supplementation already existed.

One of the earliest and most widely used products was cod-liver oil, a natural source of vitamins A and D. Physicians frequently recommended it to prevent rickets in children, and for many families a daily spoonful became a familiar ritual. Entrepreneurs soon recognized the broader possibilities.

By the 1920s, pharmaceutical companies began producing concentrated vitamin preparations. One early product introduced by Parke-Davis, called Metagen, was a vitamin-mineral supplement marketed primarily to physicians.

At the same time independent innovators experimented with vitamin tonics, powders and tablets. By 1925, researchers were already describing methods for grinding vitamin-rich materials—such as citrus peels—into powders that could be compressed into pills.

The modern vitamin tablet was beginning to take shape, but the vitamin story truly accelerated during the 1920s and 1930s.

Magazines, newspapers and radio programs began explaining the new science of nutrition to the public. Readers learned that specific vitamins prevented specific diseases, and the idea of “protective nutrients” quickly captured the public imagination.

Articles warned that modern food processing might remove essential nutrients from everyday diets. Milling grains into white flour, transporting produce long distances and industrial food storage were all believed to reduce vitamin content.

“Perhaps your diet is too modern,” one advertisement warned Americans bluntly.

Nutrition experts also began discussing subclinical

vitamin deficiencies—situations in which people, while not developing severe diseases like scurvy, might still experience fatigue, poor growth or reduced resistance to illness.

The implication was clear: even well-fed Americans might benefit from additional vitamins.

### The nutrition awakening

Nutrition became a national concern during World War II, when military recruitment revealed that many young men were unfit for service partly because of poor diets. The discovery triggered one of the largest nutrition initiatives in American history. Government agencies promoted improved diets and introduced major food enrichment programs. Bread, flour, cereals, milk and other staple foods were fortified with vitamins. By 1946, vitamin enrichment had become common in flour and bread, breakfast cereals, macaroni and pasta, milk and margarine.

These programs dramatically reduced several deficiency diseases and demonstrated the power of nutritional science to improve public health. At the same time, they increased public awareness of vitamins—and demand for supplements.

Once scientists learned how to synthesize vitamins, production costs fell rapidly. In the early 1930s, some vitamins cost hundreds of dollars per gram. Within a decade, improved manufacturing techniques reduced those costs dramatically, making large-scale production possible.

Manufacturers moved quickly, drug stores filled with vitamin displays, radio programs promoted vitamin brands and retailers created elaborate window displays encouraging consumers to “vitamize” their diets.

Perhaps the most influential product introduced during this period was One-A-Day vitamins, which simplified supplementation by offering a single daily tablet. The idea transformed vitamin supplementation into a daily habit for millions of Americans.

### The first 50 years still matter

The supplement industry continues to evolve rapidly, with new ingredients, technologies and research emerging every year. But the foundation of the industry was built during its first 50 years.

The discovery of vitamins, the development of synthetic production, the emergence of multivitamins and the success

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of food fortification all shaped how consumers think about nutrition today. Preserving that history reminds us that one of the most influential health movements of the modern era began with a simple scientific insight: that tiny nutrients in our food are essential to human health. From that discovery grew an industry that continues to influence the health of millions of people around the world.

Every industry has a history. Preserving that history helps us understand not only where the industry came from but the remarkable story of innovation, science and entrepreneurship that built it. 🌱

## Remarkable stories from the early industry

The first decades of the supplement industry were filled with fascinating innovations and creative marketing. Among the more interesting examples:

- Early vitamin advertisements often resembled scientific research reports, emphasizing laboratory credibility and scientific discovery.
- Some early multivitamin formulas contained more than a dozen ingredients, an impressive technical achievement for the time.
- In the 1940s, some cigarettes were marketed as containing vitamins, especially vitamins A and D, with claims they could help offset throat irritation from smoking.
- Candy companies began adding vitamins to candy and chocolate bars so parents would feel better about giving sweets to children. Some chocolate bars were marketed as “energy and vitamin bars” decades before modern protein bars.
- Radio programs regularly promoted vitamins as tools for increasing energy and vitality.
- Drug stores frequently created elaborate vitamin display windows to attract customers and promote the newest health products. These artifacts reveal how rapidly vitamin science captured the imagination of both consumers and entrepreneurs.