

UNDAUNTED

Overcoming Doubts and Doubters

KARA GOLDIN

KARA GOLDIN is the founder and CEO of Hint, Inc., the company best known for its award-winning Hint water. She is active as a speaker and writer, and hosts the podcast *Unstoppable with Kara Goldin*. She has been named as one of Fast Company's Most Creative People in Business, Fortune's Most Powerful Women Entrepreneurs, Huffington Post's Six Business Disruptors, and EY Entrepreneur of the Year for Northern California. Prior to founding Hint, Kara Goldin worked as VP, Electronic Commerce and Shopping for America Online, in the sales department of CNN, and as circulation sales manager for Time Magazine. She is a graduate of Arizona State University.

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Kara Goldin started Hint, Inc. in 2005 with her husband, Theo Goldin. This was right around the time consumers were starting to move away from diet-sweetened drinks and sugary drinks towards something which was healthier, like bottled water. A few companies were trying to pick up on this trend by incorporating the word "water" into the names of their new offerings. A few entrepreneurial brands were also coming along, although in practice those scrappy brands were really just giving consumers more of the same kind of products but using different language.

In 2004, Kara Goldin had just gone through the rigors of three pregnancies in three years. Although she had built a successful career working at America Online, Time, Inc. and CNN, she was worried that her weight was up by 50 pounds, and that her skin didn't look as youthful as it used to. She also developed a severe case of adult acne.

When she went to doctors her friends recommended, they consistently told her the combination of working in stressful jobs and three pregnancies had thrown her system out of whack. They all diagnosed her as having a "metabolism slow-down", that her hormones were out of balance, and that she needed medication. It wasn't until some time later that Kara realized none of these doctors had even asked about her overall lifestyle choices, especially her diet and exercise. They had all just assumed her work habits, combined with the pregnancies, were the underlying cause of her current state of health – which she found kind of curious.

"Pills? Really? I wasn't convinced that was the answer. And so instead of going to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription, I went home to examine my fridge. What was I putting in my body? There had to be a link between my diet and my health. I started paying closer attention to my diet. At that time, I was drinking 8 - 10 cans of diet sodas a day, and had done so for years. I looked up the labels, and learned diet soda had thirty ingredients. Maybe, I thought, I should try giving up my diet soda addiction for a while. I cut out diet soda completely and set an ambitious goal: eight glasses of water a day."

– Kara Goldin

After drinking nothing but water for a couple of weeks, she began to think this was a form of self-torture. Plain water's lack of any taste at all started getting to her. It was so bland, but she forced herself to keep going for the sake of her health. Besides, she knew she was on to something good here – in just two-and-a-half-weeks of drinking water rather than diet soda, Kara had lost 24 pounds.

"One day, I looked at the bowl of fruit on the counter and found my answer. I grabbed a lemon, sliced it up, and put a few slices in a pitcher of water. Over the next week, I rotated through various fruits, putting a few slices in water or smashing up a berry and letting it sit in the fridge overnight. I also started boiling fruit skins in my kitchen and mixing the oils with water. The infusion of fruit flavor made it much easier to drink my eight glasses of water a day."

– Kara Goldin

She started keeping pitchers of fruit-infused water in her fridge. Her kids loved it. Kara also did her own "market research" by offering her fruit-infused water to any guests who happened to come into her home – adults, kids, anyone. They all said they liked the taste of her home-made fruit-infused water. One mom even called her to ask where she could buy the raspberry-water her daughter had really liked at her house.

Kara Goldin insisted on making her infused-fruit water without any sugar, diet sweeteners, or preservatives. She found that drinking it solved a health problem for herself. Kara had more energy, her mood improved, her acne problem went away, and she was able to lose 50 pounds over the course of three months. Even better, she actually liked the taste of her home-made water a lot, and she knew others did too.

While she was shopping at Whole Foods, she took a detour down the water aisle to see what alternatives were available. She was surprised to find none of the big beverage companies then offered anything remotely like her home-made, sweetener-free, fruit-infused water. That got Kara thinking:

- Could this be an idea for a new product?
- Would people actually buy unsweetened water if it were available?

- Might this be an opportunity to make the world a little bit better, by helping people get healthier and feel better?

"That kind of feeling doesn't come along very often. When it does, I decided, you should not ignore it. You may be looking at a new path forward. I wasn't thinking about founding a company or building a business. Nor did I picture myself as a national advocate for health or dream of being recognized as a leading entrepreneur. And I certainly had no vision of becoming a major player in the beverage industry"

– Kara Goldin

Instead, Kara Goldin simply wanted to show people what she had discovered for herself – that water can taste good without all the sugar and artificial sweeteners. Kara decided that she would take some baby-steps towards creating something meaningful to her.

Kara didn't have a product that was ready to start selling in a store yet, just her home-made recipes for fruit-infused water. She started tinkering to see how she could ramp up her production capacity.

First, Kara learned there were companies which sold fruit essences to the food and beverage industries. She ordered samples of those essences, but was disappointed to find they did not really taste like fresh fruit when they were added to water. Kara figured that she would either have to work with some of these manufacturers to come up with more robust fruit essences, or find another way forward.

Next up, Kara Goldin learned about "co-packers" who are for-hire manufacturers. Co-packers work with all kinds of client companies to create branded products. She concluded that using a co-packer might be a way to scale her production, but wasn't yet sure. She also worked hard to get to understand how the beverage industry worked.

"At AOL, everybody was asking questions of me and expecting me to supply the answers. Now I was asking the questions. Which meant I was learning. Every day. That is how you stay fresh and motivated. Always be learning. An important lesson, for sure. The more questions I asked, the more convinced I became that the industry was ripe for a shake-up. At AOL, we knew