



I TAKE & HINT

HOW **KARA GOLDIN** QUIT SODA AND SHOOK THE BEVERAGE INDUSTRY IN THE PROCESS.

THE
TRANSFORMING
ECOSYSTEMS
ISSUE

TASTEMAKER

According to Goldin—a self-described “accidental entrepreneur”—curiosity and passion have fueled her success.

COURTESY KARA GOLDIN/HINT

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“Big soda and beverage companies didn’t believe that consumers were interested in buying an unsweetened flavored water.” —Kara Goldin



A REFRESHING NEW BRAND

HINT

Founded:

2005

Number of employees:

approx. 300

Annual revenue (ttm)

(2021): \$220M (up from \$150M in 2020)

Headquarters:

San Francisco, CA

Vertical:

Non-Alcoholic Beverages

Tagline:

It's Water—Just Tastier

In 2005, Kara Goldin just wanted to break her soft drink addiction. Fast forward to today and Goldin is founder and CEO of Hint, a \$220M (USD) beverage producer of fruit-infused waters and lifestyle goods that offers a healthy alternative to sodas and artificially sweetened drinks.

IQ sat down with the former AOL executive and current “accidental entrepreneur” to get her insight on what it takes to start a successful business from scratch, and her advice for other dynamic female executives and would-be entrepreneurs.

IQ: *You call yourself an “accidental entrepreneur.” When you began laying the groundwork for Hint, what did that process look like?*

Goldin: The short answer is that I just started. I think being an accidental entrepreneur and accessing diverse points of view go hand in hand in founding any company. Coming from the tech industry, I didn’t have the network in the beverage industry to help me figure out how to launch a beverage. I was an outsider, but I didn’t let that stop me.

I talked to anyone who would speak to me about my idea. I found that many people would open up their networks to me as well, especially ones that were in the food and beverage industry.

I also realized early that while people had opinions about what I was doing, they were only opinions. If I wanted to make Hint happen, I needed to focus and not let the doubters get in my way.

IQ: *You made a huge splash with Hint despite, as you said, not having a background in the beverage industry. How did you rely on diverse points of view to inform your marketization strategy?*

Goldin: We were creating a new category within the beverage industry, so in fact the established brands were the ones with the blind spot. Big soda and beverage companies didn’t believe that consumers wanted an unsweetened flavored water. And the seasoned

executives in the industry mostly dismissed my idea because they were used to drinking their own Kool-Aid so to speak. I once had an encounter with a major executive in the soda industry who shared his thoughts about “the” consumer. It was then that I realized just how different “the” consumer that I was in contact with was, and who was purchasing Hint.

My commitment and Hint’s commitment to getting consumers healthy was the goal. And the people who joined me to build Hint from the beginning were mostly from outside the industry who could also see how badly the industry needed a healthy change. I don’t believe this company could have been built any other way.

IQ: *I’ve read that you’ve said, “Large companies aren’t great at innovating—they’re good at continuing what they do.” How do you catalyze innovation at Hint?*

Goldin: When you are launching a product in the beverage industry focused on real health versus healthy perception, that’s innovation. I realized early on that the goal in the industry to date was primarily to get the consumer to believe that something was healthier than it was. Our competitive advantage has always been our product, our delivery to the consumer and our supply chain.

IQ: *How impactful was it to have access to direct customer feedback in your early days at Hint, especially coming from AOL’s B2B environment?*

Goldin: First off, I was “customer service” at Hint. We printed an email and phone number on every bottle—still do. Customers reached out from day one of being on the shelf to share their story and thank us for developing a product that they appreciated.

Every one of those inquiries and “thank-you’s” connected me to the problems that the consumer claimed were being solved for them by enjoying a product like Hint. Challenges like type 2 diabetes or chemo treatments. Each of those communications and conversations helped me and shaped my understanding of the Hint consumer. And it still does today.

IQ: What advice would you share with other emerging female leaders who seek the same level of success?

Goldin: Starting a business is really difficult, no matter your gender. Same with leading a company. Expect that many people (even your closest friends and family) will resist your idea because they don't want to see you take risks. You will likely face skepticism along the way, but either way, your ability to start and keep moving forward is up to you. Remember that their thoughts are just their opinion. And often an opinion starts with their own fears. If you believe in what you are setting out to do, figure out the steps to go and try. And be willing to pivot along the way, so pay attention.

There's a saying about mindfulness: "You can't control the waves, but you can learn to surf." When you're in charge of a business, there will be difficult times when those waves will get real choppy. Criticism and bad news will crash down on you hard. So my advice is: Learn to surf.

IQ: What are the qualities you see in the strongest leaders, and how do they translate to success when it comes to creating dynamic and diverse teams to achieve success?

Goldin: Two qualities I see over and over: curiosity and passion. When I came into the beverage industry, I had so many questions. I realized that leading with curiosity, and being able to ask questions versus being afraid to show others what you didn't know was the way to build confidence. By letting my curiosity guide me, I also found myself understanding what I enjoyed doing, which better defined my passions. When you are clearer about what drives you, you can help others understand that about themselves too.

I have always been one to say that once you understand what you not only enjoy, but also what you are good at, you can hire people to fill those gaps. Always understanding the roles that you don't choose to do, allows you to hire people that do too. And when you understand someone's role, and have an appreciation for their work, that allows you to lead toward success. **IQ**

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