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BevNET Live Day 2 Recap: A Call to Action

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There was no hangover on Day Two of BevNET Live in New York City. Even after the conference's Day One came to a close with a presentation on consumable marijuana – and a two-hour cocktail reception – things went right back to serious business.

Retail data experts Larry Levin of IRI and Kathryn Peters of SPINS set the action-oriented tone for the day in an introductory presentation on how brands accelerate and the process of graduating from the natural channel to some of the bigger retail channels, offering a precursor for Jack Sinclair's discussion later in the afternoon on achieving Walmart-level scale.

Voss Water CEO and beverage industry icon Jack Belsito, who used to run Snapple, followed the IRI/SPINS presentation in a sit-down with BevNET Editor-in-Chief Jeff Klineman, discussing the current competitive climate of the bottled water market and his experiences as the head of both a large company and a small one.

Next up was Susan Klug, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer of Unified Grocers, who explored supermarket trends and pointed at HPP beverages, cold brew coffees, plant based beverages, probiotics, craft soda, and clean energy as categories expected to continue to see growth.

"The most important thing you can show," she said, "is that you'll grow a category, not just your brand."

The New Beverage Showdown returned with its final round of six after a brief intermission, as Rau, Caribe, H2Melon, Sweet'tau, Subtle Tea, and Meta Matcha extended their two minute pitches from Tuesday's first round to longer five minute presentations, padding out their origin stories with their respective business models. The competition was palpably tighter this round, and the judges didn't mince words in offering criticism on packaging, positioning, and the inherent challenges facing these brands' products.

Speaking of challenges, Chris Campbell, Daniel Sullivan, and Jesse Altman (CEOs of Chameleon Cold Brew, Temple Turmeric, and Whynatte, respectively) took the stage for a panel exploring how all three had made significant and necessary changes to their brand and product within the last year.

"You have to constantly pivot, update, and recreate and keep things fresh," said Sullivan. "Especially in beverages it's an incredibly crowded space so you have to be very much aware of what's on trend, what's the market environment and what people are resonating with."

Presenting findings from Coca-Cola's Venturing and Emerging Brands' "Founders Forum" Rebecca Messina, Senior Vice President of Marketing at VEB, spoke on the company's goal of finding brands that hit the "sweet spot of commercial value and emotional value." Max Baumann, CEO of Just Chill relaxation beverage, who participated in that forum, touched on that latter part as well, taking the audience behind the curtains of Just Chill's recent successful social media efforts.

After lunch, Laura McCord of KeHE distributors followed up on Susan Klug's earlier exploration on what's hot in grocery and gave brands a set of guidelines to follow through to achieve distribution within these unique channels. "Tailor your retail strategy," McCord instructed the audience of entrepreneurs, warning of the fate that awaits brands who approach retailers without knowing what they stores are currently seeking.

Louis Barone, Senior Vice President and Division Head of IDB Bank and Greg Wank, Executive Partner at Anchin, Block, & Anchin LLP followed McCord with a look at inside lending in the industry. John Gianuzzi of Sherbrooke Capital furthered the financial discussion by honing in on an existential question: "Are we in a bubble?"

The conference began to wind down with a three-armed panel consisting of Kevita co-founder CEO Bill Moses, Bell Advisory Group Founder David Bell and a return from Baumann to discuss maintaining competitive advantage by defining categories. Discussed within were Moses' recent decision to take a leadership position in the ongoing issues surrounding alcohol content in the kombucha industry, as well as Baumann's flag planting of his own in the relaxation beverage space, one that has suffered due to regulatory concerns about melatonin use.

Finally, riding the momentum of their strong showing in Tuesday's semifinals, San Diego-based high pressure processed cacao beverage Rau was crowned winner of the New Beverage Showdown to bring BevNET Live to an end. Like Tio Gazpacho in December, Rau saw a clean sweep victory, winning both the audience's vote as well as the judges'.



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