

RULES, RISK, AND RESPONSIBILITY: ELAN SUDBERG'S FIGHT FOR TRUST IN THE SUPPLEMENT INDUSTRY

BY: RICK POLITO



Five mornings a week, Elan Sudberg leaves his house at 6:30 am and tests the boundary between tussle and trust. He suits up at the Gracie Barra jujitsu studio and faces off with a room full of men who, by his own admission, are both larger and more experienced. Chances of an injury are real. The tape wrap on his pinky—twisted in a grapple a few hours before—proves that.

"It's just part of the deal," he says.

Everybody in the studio knows that another part of the deal is knowing the risks and the rules and they follow the latter with devotion. He wishes everyone in the supplement industry would do the same.

"It would be cool if the rules of engagement in the jujitsu gym extended into business and life. Yeah, because, there's a level of trust that exists there. It's a struggle; it's combat; but I'm not going there to hurt anyone."

Risk and rules are part of the supplement trade as well, but too often, he says, the risks are shrugged off and the rules are ignored.

At Alkemist Labs, Sudberg's team tests botanical and fungi samples for identity and quality. Without testing, substandard and even dangerous ingredients can make it into the market place.

What he does when those tests are complete, however, may be Sudberg's greatest contribution to the supplement industry.

He talks about those risks and rules.

And he does it loudly.

"I sort of set the noise level differently than the rest of the labs," he says.

Sudberg opened the lab with his father, who had worked as a chiropractor selling his own line of herbal tinctures. When they looked closer at the supply chain and labs protecting it, the father and son saw a business opportunity. A year from now will mark 30 years of testing samples and calling out the good and the bad.

Jacqueline Jacques has known Sudberg for most of those years and says he has "never once stopped being a fierce advocate for quality." The world needs fierce advocates and Sudberg's unwillingness to be silent is a gift to the industry, she says.

"When bad products are making it onto the shelves, somebody has to call it out," Jacques says. "Elan is that somebody, over and over again."

As much attention as Elan garners for calling out questionable ingredients, his intention is to highlight the best products. Whenever a perennial critic like Pieter Cohen[ES1.1] points to substandard products, Sudberg wants the answer to Cohen's 10 failed brands to be 10 brands that pass every test. His Alkemist Assured seal connects consumers to certificates of analysis for brands in the program, but very few brands are posting C of A's.

"All these big companies spend millions a year on testing, and many fail to say a goddamn thing about it."

That message, and the way Sudberg beats the drum for it, have made Sudberg a leader in the industry, says Mark Blumenthal, who points to Sudberg supporting the Botanical Adulterants Prevention Program, a project launched by the American Botanical Council Blumenthal founded. "Think about how difficult it is for an independent laboratory to make it and then to make an impact on this industry, and then to have such a high profile," Blumenthal says. That requires a bit of an edge, Blumenthal says, and Sudberg has that edge.

"I won't say 'aggressive.' I'll say 'assertive.'"

Industry advisor Tom Aarts echoes Blumenthal's take, adding that Sudberg isn't afraid to ruffle feathers, but he delivers his criticisms with a purpose in mind. "He doesn't want to blow up the industry with some of the things he finds out. He wants to lead it in the right direction. He walks that fine line."

Sudberg is no mere gadfly, however. His Alkemist Lab team backs up the message with technical credibility, says Roy Upton of the American Herbal Pharmacopeia, noting that Alkemist provides testing to confirm the samples his organization provides as reference materials. He is a particular fan of Alkemist including a focus on microscopic morphology, something not all labs do. "Chemistry is easy to fake, but it's hard to fake a taste of cinnamon."

Upton describes a voice for that testing as a vital contribution to organizations like the American Herbal Products Association, where Sudberg serves on the board. That Sudberg advocated for the launch of committees for both cannabis and psychedelics, neither of which are part of the supplement industry but are very much a part of the herbs and botanicals universe, speaks to Sudberg's role as a leader focused on the future.

"Just as he anticipates criticism of the industry as an opportunity to talk about responsible companies, he expresses an obligation to look for what's coming next so that the industry can be prepared for the potential pitfalls.

That means talking about the risks and the rules, acknowledging the former and following the latter, never pretending that either is not an issue.

Sudberg thinks about that when he steps onto the mat for those crack-of-dawn jujitsu classes. The risks are real, as the wrap on his pinky proves, but the care and responsibility of the rules is just as real.

It's where trust comes from, trust Sudberg wants to build for the supplement industry.