



Former middle school science teacher runs a thriving personal care products company

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When Kyle LaFond taught middle school science, he was overwhelmed by the fumes generated by the body spray and other products they used.

"That is some harsh, chemical-laden stuff," LaFond says. "I walked around the hallways at school in a chemical fog, and I kept getting severe headaches."

He thought it might be stress, because he didn't experience it during the summer, but one day, walking by a group of teen boys, he could feel his throat tighten up.

"I thought, what's in these products? I looked at the back panel and could only identify a handful of ingredients," he says. "Kids and parents have no idea what's in this product, and teens are at a fragile stage of human development."

Crafting natural body care products LaFond came up with an idea: He asked his students to bring their cosmetic products to class, and they analyzed the ingredients. Next, they used household ingredients to craft their own products. The project was a hit, and for the next five years, LaFond's six science classes made natural body care products.

"We made tons of products, and we focused on deodorants," LaFond says.

"I wanted to make a really good one."

LaFond shared some of the best products with family and friends, and their response was encouraging.

"This is great stuff, better than what I've been using for years—you might have something really special here," people told him.

Launching on LaFond's fourth-generation family farm "I reached out to my mom and said, if I start this business, would you be open to me renovating one of Grandpa's old machine sheds on the farm and using it as my first manufacturing space?" says LaFond. "She told me to go for it."

He spent the first half of 2015 building out the machine shed himself and handcrafted products on the family farm from 2015-2018.

"I focused on brick and mortar growth first," he says. "Most brands were starting companies and paying for expensive digital marketing campaigns, and I wanted to do it differently—establish my company as a player by doing brick and mortar."

He'd brought products to





local grocery stores and pharmacies, and most of the stores he approached agreed to stock his products, which helped him build the company's foundation. In 2018, LaFond took out his first institutional funding and moved off the farm to American Provenance's current 7,000 square foot location in Blue Mounds, where the company manufactures its products. American Provenance is now on 5,000 shelves nationwide, and the company's biggest customers include Whole Foods, Hy-Vee, and Raley's. Online, American Provenance sells products on its own website, as well as Amazon, Target.com, Thrive.com, and Walmart.com.

Contract manufacturing

The company also does contract manufacturing, producing products for 15 small brands—the result of productive meetings at trade shows and conferences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, larger contract manufacturers upped their minimum order quantities, and because American Provenance does its own manufacturing in Wisconsin, LaFond's contacts reached out to ask if he could handle contract manufacturing for their small businesses.

"We took it on and grew the business," La Fond says. "The goal is, by the end of the year, to cover our fixed costs with contract manufacturing."

American Provenance's twelve employees are a passionate group. LaFond starts every hourly employee at \$15 an hour and has transitioned the company to a four-day work week.

Working with the SBDC

He began working with the Small Business Development Center at the Wisconsin School of Business at UW-



Madison (SBDC) in 2015.

"I had started talking to banks about a loan program, and I needed a business plan," he says. "A banker suggested I work with the SBDC to polish it up. I reached out and was fortunate to be paired with [SBDC center director] Michelle Somes-Booher right away."

LaFond and Somes-Booher scheduled an initial one-hour meeting that turned into 90 minutes.

"She was generous with time, and in an hour and a half, she tore my business plan apart and gave me about 160 hours of work after that first meeting," LaFond recalls, chuckling. "That was just what I needed at that point. She was phenomenal from that moment forward."

Somes-Booher encouraged LaFond to do market research at the business library to find his product-market fit. The two have met monthly for almost three years and continue to do so.

"I still rely on her and ask her questions," he says. "The SBDC has been so good to me, I refer all kinds of founders to them. The whole office is supportive."

LaFond appreciates Somes-Booher's extensive professional network and knowledge of local business resources.

"She knows everybody—attorneys, bankers, insurance folks, other clients she's worked with—and she draws from her experiences to shed light on what I'm doing," LaFond says. "One thing I really value about her is that she's been there and done that, as a former business owner and founder. She gets it."

Trained as a teacher, LaFond didn't know many financial terms and abbreviations, so Somes-Booher got him up to speed.

"A key thing we look at in financials is contribution margin, something I had never thought about that is central to how we operate our business," says LaFond. "Michelle was my entry point into that education about finances—getting a financial picture of the company, how to approach profitability and navigate expenses."

Looking to the future LaFond still brings his teaching experience to work every day.

"Teachers understand and appreciate the acquisition of knowledge, so as a former educator, I'm looking to learn every



day from my team, customers, and network," he says. "I'm always keeping an ear to the ground, talking to people, finding out what's important to them."

LaFond does most of his own public relations, reaching out directly to writers and editors to build relationships. American Provenance has done paid digital advertising but is currently focused on brick and mortar and contract manufacturing.

"Consumer behaviors are shifting faster right now than any time, ever," he says.

LaFond describes his company as unique and Midwestern, because of its consistent focus on responsibility, sustainability, and profitability as a small business, rather than a focus on exponential growth.

"One of our competitors just did a Series B round and raised \$17 million," he says. "How does a deodorant company spend \$17 million? We are profitable, sustainable, and responsible. Michelle and I repeatedly talk about sustainable business models—building a business to the point where it's profitable and can

continue on. Our strategy is not to raise money, sell products, and look for an exit. A long-term sustainable business is what I want, and we're getting closer to that all the time."

