

ZICO Coconut Water Founder Thinks Business Should Aspire Higher

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Denise Lee Yohn

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Mark Rampolla, Founder of ZICO Coconut Water, Promotes Reaching for Higher Hanging Fruit (Credit: Mark Rampolla)

A few thousand years of capitalism has trained business leaders to aim for maximum profits, says [ZICO Coconut Water](#) founder [Mark Rampolla](#), but he thinks people should aspire higher. His book, [High-Hanging Fruit: Build Something Great by Going Where No One Else Will](#), recounts how Rampolla reached for a higher purpose and built ZICO into a multi-million dollar business that was eventually acquired by Coke.

“Business people are groomed to believe that financial return is the ultimate measure of success, Rampolla told me, “and the other stuff like employee engagement is just nice to have.” He, however, chose to build a business that was about more than profit maximization.

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Back in 2004, when Rampolla started up Zico, he had seen too many entrepreneurs start companies that ended up making it by conventional measures, but ruined consumers’ health, profited off the backs of employees, left a wake of environmental devastation, and most damaging of all, betrayed their own personal values. He didn’t want to sacrifice his marriage, family, passions, health, or values for business success. So he set out to run a business that

contributed to larger social goals, minimized its environmental impact, and enabled him and his employees to find deeper meaning through business by pursuing their highest and best use and helping others do the same.

He started by asking himself, “What problem in the world do we want to address? What impact do we want to make? What do I have to uniquely offer to the world?” Coconut water, it turned out, was the answer. He had experienced the refreshment and health benefits of coconut water during his work and travels in developing countries, and became convinced that it could become a mainstream beverage and a viable business in the U.S. He believed if the brand could tell a compelling story, it could change people’s behavior. So, in place of high-sugar, artificial beverages, ZICO would be a well-balanced beverage that stood for healthy, natural, active living.

It wasn’t easy getting from an inspiring brand idea to being acquired by The Coca-Cola Company. In the decade between, Rampolla slugged through many difficult periods of staging 4:00 a.m. pep rallies for hostile distributors, going door to door to get orders from bodegas and yoga studios, packing up pallets of product in his garage into the wee hours of the night, and having to lay off employees when the cash flow dried up.

Eventually ZICO caught the attention of Coke which had been struggling with its own challenges of declining sales and pressure from health advocates. After initially making an investment in ZICO, Coke acquired the company in 2013 for an undisclosed amount. Rampolla viewed the deal as a means to achieving his goals. “Upstart brands,” he writes, “can change capitalism not only by competing with the old guard but also by joining forces with them.”

Throughout the journey, Rampolla was driven to produce the numbers — growth rate, market share, market capitalization — that every entrepreneur wants, but he knew, “no number is high enough.” He writes, “Money is our culture’s most common metric for success. But it’s too simple a scorecard.” Instead, he measured his success by a broader range of achievements — ZICO:

- was one of the first to market in what is becoming a multibillion-dollar new global category
- disrupted the beverage industry
- made a positive contribution to the health of millions
- provided “massive and sustainable” economic development in numerous poor countries
- gave the opportunity for himself and his employees to learn, contribute, and grow
- became a brand that stood “for something good in the world and delivered authentic value.”

Rampolla believes — and ultimately proved with ZICO— that people’s chances of “winning” by conventional measures are far more likely if they reach higher from day one. His book closes with an inspiring challenge to entrepreneurs:

“If you reach higher and pursue a venture that is deeply personal, bigger than just you, and is close to your highest and best self, you cannot lose, and the world will be better for your having done so.”

Denise Lee Yohn is a brand-building expert, speaker and author of [What Great Brands Do](#) and [Extraordinary Experiences](#).

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