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The chia co: offering a superfood or a fad?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Arpita Agnihotri and Saurabh Bhattacharya and wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In 2003, John Foss, a fourth-generation Australian farmer, founded The Chia Co in Australia’s Kimberley region with the vision of providing health and wellness to the global community through chia seeds. These seeds were believed to be a superfood, rich in omega-3 fatty acids, fibre, protein, and antioxidants. Within 12 years, The Chia Co became the world’s largest producer of chia seeds. This gave rise to a new agricultural industry in Australia with unique supply-chain practices and an emphasis on sustainability and fair value for farmers.[[2]](#endnote-2) By 2014, The Chia Co reported 100 per cent annual turnover and had a global distribution system covering 36 countries. In 2010, it received an award for innovation in new and emerging industries from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation in Australia. The Chia Co sold chia seeds not only as raw seeds but also as ingredients to health-food retailers such as General Nutrition Centers, Inc. and Whole Foods Market in the United States. Major bakeries such as COBS Bread and yogourt manufacturers such as Chobani also partnered with The Chia Co to source chia seeds as ingredients for their products.[[3]](#endnote-3) Although the use of chia seeds could be traced back to the 12th century, when it was considered a staple food in Central America, by 2017 it was one of the rare crops for which demand exceeded supply. Despite the popularity of chia seeds, The Chia Co faced severe competition from suppliers of other superfoods, such as quinoa and flax seeds, and had to contend with the perception among some nutrition experts that superfoods were merely fads without guaranteed health benefits.[[4]](#endnote-4) How, then, could The Chia Co become a world-class market leader in chia seeds? How would it overcome supply and demand challenges? Were superfoods really just a fad? If so, what was the future of The Chia Co and its products?

Background and Entrepreneurial Journey

Foss, the chief executive officer of The Chia Co, grew up in the Western Australian wheat belt, where his family had been farming wheat for more than 100 years. Foss disliked the transformation of nutritious grains into processed foods, which contributed to modern-day diseases such as diabetes and obesity. He decided to use his agricultural expertise and business education to research food trends. Foss realized that health and wellness were major trends among consumers, who were keen to know about the nutritious components of their food and how these affected their health.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Having completed marketing and business degrees, Foss won a prestigious Nuffield Global Study scholarship in 2000 from the Nuffield Australia Farming Scholars and used this to research future food trends. He travelled the world looking at food production trends and searching for a segment of the market that he could develop as a product rather than just a commodity.[[6]](#endnote-6) During his global research, he found that a group of Mexicans living near the U.S. border reported a low prevalence of both diabetes and high cholesterol, unlike their American neighbours; the only difference in their diet was that they consumed chia seeds with lemon juice in the morning. Further analysis of chia seeds revealed that they were rich in omega‑3 fatty acids, protein, fibre, and minerals. However, the seed was highly erratic in quality and nutritional content, primarily because it was rain-fed, which made production volatile.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Convinced by the nutritional profile of chia seeds, Foss explored the possibility of growing chia in Australia instead of Latin America. Through several trials, he determined that chia grew best 15 degrees north or south of the Equator: chia produced at this latitude had the highest omega-3 fatty acid content and a more consistent quality.[[8]](#endnote-8) Foss first identified places that had the required latitude for growing a chia crop. His team used Google Maps to locate farms within 15 degrees of the Equator that had the right climate and soil and easy access to irrigation facilities. His own farm—32 degrees south of the equator—was unsuitable for producing chia seeds.

Since chia was relatively unknown in Australia, Foss’s vision of providing health and wellness to consumers through a constant supply of chia seeds—which would require building an entire reliable supply chain from scratch—was received with skepticism by his colleagues, friends, and family.[[9]](#endnote-9) Undeterred, Foss convinced local sugar cane farmers in Australia’s Ord Valley, an ideal location, to begin growing chia. He also considered farms from Nicaragua to Kenya in search of potential partnerships.

Despite chia’s origin in Latin America, Foss’s efforts led to Australia becoming the world’s largest chia seed producer. A breakthrough came for The Chia Co in 2009, when Bakers Delight Holdings (Bakers Delight), one of the leading bakeries in Australia, agreed to use chia seeds in one of its breads. As a result, The Chia Co supplied chia seeds to more than 600 Bakers Delight stores on a weekly basis.[[10]](#endnote-10) Foss described his satisfaction with the relationship:

It is very rewarding when you work for years with sophisticated and discerning food and beverage manufacturers to introduce them to chia, provide them with product applications, meet and exceed their demanding quality and traceability requirements, and eventually see a new product on the shelf containing our chia directly from the chia farms in the Kimberley region of [Western Australia].[[11]](#endnote-11)

Another bakery in Australia, Bodhi’s Bakehouse, began using chia seeds to produce soft, gluten-free bread. According to the company website, “The addition of whole Chia and milled linseeds adds a natural softness to the loaf through the release of healthy oils from the seeds. This creates a deliciously soft and moist bread unlike most other gluten free breads on the market.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

In 2010, after years of perfecting the agronomics and producing consistently good nutritional results, The Chia Co started exporting chia seeds to other countries.[[13]](#endnote-13) Foss explained that he was proud of his efforts, which resulted in a brand new industry for Australian farmers—an industry that provided health and nutrition to consumers. He noted, “A good way to crystallize your vision is to imagine lying on your death bed and asking yourself whether you’ve done enough with your life.”[[14]](#endnote-14) He had implemented his strategic vision to develop a global market for chia, and demand soon increased.

Superfoods as A product category

The term “superfood” referred to nutrient-dense food products considered healthy and good for general well-being. Because of their ability to affect bodily functions positively through their vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant contents, superfoods were sometimes referred to as functional foods (see Exhibit 1). According to the Mintel Group Ltd.’s Global New Product Database, there was a 202 per cent increase in the number of new food and drink products containing superfoods between 2011 and 2015.[[15]](#endnote-15) In particular, as consumer preference for a wheat-free diet began to increase, super grains such as quinoa and buckwheat gained importance. However, among health and wellness products, chia seeds reported the greatest rise in consumption. Between 2014 and 2015, there was a 70 per cent increase in food and beverages containing chia seeds or oil as an ingredient.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Overall, the health and wellness food categories consisted of five types of foods, namely “naturally healthy,” with a market size of US$284 billion[[17]](#endnote-17) in 2012; “fortified functional,” with a market size of $246 billion; “better for you,” with a market size of $166 billion; “organic,” with a market size of $30 billion; and “food intolerance,” with a market size of $8 billion.[[18]](#endnote-18) Superfoods such as chia could fit into all of these categories.

The Chia Co and The GLOBAL Chia SEED market

The U.S. market for chia seeds had grown from $21 million in 2011 to $70 million in 2013 to $370 million in 2014. It was estimated that the market for the chia product category would be about $1.1 billion in the United States and around $625 million in Europe by 2020. Globally, the chia seed market was forecast to grow to $2.1 billion by 2022.[[19]](#endnote-19)

By May 2015, The Chia Co—which had offices in Melbourne, London, and New York—was exporting chia seeds to 36 countries across North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, South America, and Africa. Among these segments, the United States, Europe, and Australia reported the highest demand for chia seeds.[[20]](#endnote-20) The Chia Co’s revenues also increased, from $50 million in 2014 to $100 million in 2015. In fact, within 90 days of the launch of its Chia Pods[[21]](#endnote-21) in the United States, The Chia Co sold one million units. Again, working with leading Australian retailers such as Woolworths Limited and Coles Supermarkets Australia Pty Ltd. (Coles), The Chia Co sold 10 million Chia Pods in Australia between May 2014 and April 2015. In describing the U.S. market, Scott Davidson, head of Trading at Woolworths Limited, commented that the trend was “moving less to price and more to health.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Thus, consumers were becoming more health conscious and less price conscious.

In 2014, The Chia Co also increased its focus on the Asian market, which by 2016 encompassed 60 per cent of the world’s population. Although Australia was well known for its quality agricultural produce and was geographically close to Asian markets,[[23]](#endnote-23) The Chia Co faced a major obstacle in these markets: creating awareness about chia. To address this obstacle, The Chia Co participated in trade shows in Asian markets such as Hong Kong to promote and gain acceptance for chia. Consequently, by 2014, sales in the Hong Kong market were reported to be three times higher per store than sales in the United States. While targeting the Asian market, Foss considered all of Asia as a unified, single market with much success. He stated, “Asia is a very diverse region. Our customers in various countries of Asia have particular requirements as part of their cultures, but health and wellness is a global trend and the demand for healthier options from consumers and food manufacturers is universal.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

Growth Strategy

The Chia Co adopted a three-pronged growth strategy. First, it exported raw seeds to companies that repackaged them for sale. Second, it sold raw seeds to brands such as the Kashi Company and the Dole Food Company Inc., which incorporated chia seeds as a component of foods, for example, within breads, crackers, chips, and granola bars (see Exhibit 2). The ingredient business contributed one-third of The Chia Co’s revenue in 2015. Third, The Chia Co launched ready-to-eat breakfast options. Foss realized that a gap existed in the healthy breakfast market for busy consumers, as other ready-to-eat options were often loaded with sugar, preservatives, and artificial flavours.[[25]](#endnote-25) Foss mentioned, “I look at the truly global brands—Champagne brands, beverage brands—but there is no global health-food brand.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Ready-to-eat breakfast options provided by The Chia Co were all natural with no preservatives. Finally, The Chia Co was able to launch its own retail range in 2010, thus building its own brand.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Challenges in Launching the Chia Co’s Retail Brand

The Chia Co’s launch of its own brand was full of challenges. First, Foss was unable to obtain venture funds for The Chia Co in Australia. In 2013, two venture capital firms, VO2 Partners and Arlon Group from the United States, made growth-related equity investments in The Chia Co in exchange for minority ownership.[[28]](#endnote-28) The investments were primarily to support The Chia Co’s global expansion and exponential growth. In the United States, Foss developed Chia Pods as a ready-to-eat breakfast product, taking into consideration five factors: health and wellness, sustainability, convenience, value for money, and premiumization. Foss relied on market research reports, which indicated that the market for non-dairy, healthy products was growing fast. The Chia Co team also spent time in supermarkets observing how and what people ate. For example, while deciding on the design of a spoon, the team took care to ensure that the spoon could be held comfortably and was attractive. The next challenge was to develop a product name. Foss suggested the Chia Pod name and a logo consisting of three leaves—representing economic, social, and environmental sustainability—so that the brand fit with the overall vision of the organization. Packaging was designed in-house following sustainability principles and was 100 per cent recyclable.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As sales of Chia Pods increased, The Chia Co gradually launched additional healthy breakfast variants, such as Chia Pod Oats and Chia Pod Bircher Muesli. As Davidson commented, “‘Dashboard dining’ options such as the Chia Pod [have] moved chia from niche to mainstream.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

The Global Supply Chain for Chia

Supply chain management of chia seeds in Australia was simple, according to Foss. The Chia Co took the seeds from the Ord Valley and cleaned, packed, and distributed them through the networks of retailers such as Coles, at the price of $14.17 for a 500-gram packet.[[31]](#endnote-31) Foss and his team relied on the latest technologies, such as satellites, global positioning systems, and automated steering on tractors, to monitor crops and detect soil moisture content, while at the same time also relying on manual labour. For example, weeding was done by hand by backpackers.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Foss believed in building a sustainable supply chain for chia seeds. Thus, he developed his supply chain under a strict set of environmental management practices, such as crop rotation, to naturally retain the nutrients and health of the soil. He adopted a world-class environmental management system. Farmers were encouraged to combine traditional, natural farming practices such as gravity-fed irrigation with the best agronomical practices and chemical-free harvesting methods. Apart from these sustainability initiatives, Foss also believed in the complete traceability of a supply chain, with every packet of seeds traceable to the pasture in which it was grown. He believed that this increased transparency, and in return, he provided a fair value to farmers and all other stakeholders associated with the supply chain. Foss noted that one reason for his company’s success was its belief in sustainable farming practices that simultaneously created value for farmers as well.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The Chia Co’s Customer Centrism and Marketing Initiatives

To increase its marketing initiatives, The Chia Co hired senior executives from large food-processing companies such as Sabra Dipping Co. LLC (Sabra), a joint venture between PepsiCo, Inc. and Strauss Group. When John McGuckin from Sabra was hired as the chief sales officer for The Chia Co, Foss stated, “We believe there is no better person in the world than McGuckin to further accelerate our more than 100 per cent year-on-year growth, whilst ensuring that our key customers remain the central and absolute focus of our company.”[[34]](#endnote-34) At the same time, Foss maintained his focus on sustainability; in selecting McGuckin, he had hired someone who shared the same economic, social, and environmental sustainability values as Foss and The Chia Co.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Furthermore, Foss sold chia as a key differentiating factor between healthy and unhealthy, processed foods. The presence of chia seeds in products indicated a higher nutritional value compared to other grocery items. However, according to media reports, consumers needed to be educated about the new superfood. The Chia Co in Australia thus targeted naturopaths and food coaches with information about the nutritional benefits of chia seeds. Foss emphasized nutritional benefits only, as claims of health benefits about several superfoods, including chia, had not been scientifically validated. For example, while chia seeds were believed to be good for runners and, in ancient times, for lowering blood pressure, The Chia Co never claimed these benefits since they had no scientific basis.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Promotion and Social Media

In order to increase its visibility in the market, The Chia Co relied on sports and music sponsorships as well as celebrity endorsements. One of its largest deals was a three-year sponsorship of the United States Tennis Association’s U.S. Open, which started in 2014. According to The Chia Co’s chief marketing officer, April Helliwell, sports sponsorships were a natural fit for the company. She explained, “Tennis provides access to health-conscious athletes in need of sustained energy. Several players such as Novak Djokovic adopt gluten-free diets so chia can be a really beneficial source of gluten-free energy for them.”[[37]](#endnote-37) In Australia, The Chia Co partnered with an Australian football team, Collingwood Football Club, to supply chia seeds and other products to the team. Chia thus became part of the club’s kitchen, and chia seeds were incorporated into players’ breakfasts and smoothies. The company also signed a deal to supply its Chia Pods to the Collingwood team.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In 2014, The Chia Co launched a mobile tour in the United States to educate consumers about its Chia Pods product and to raise awareness through its brand ambassadors. The company also launched a national sampling tour for Chia Pods, visiting approximately 150 events held across 30 U.S. states, such as the Afropunk Fest in Brooklyn, New York.[[39]](#endnote-39)

In 2013, The Chia Co signed professional American surfer Kelly Slater as a celebrity endorser. Foss had noticed Slater’s comments on Instagram, where he mentioned that he was a chia consumer and described eating chia seeds with almond milk. Foss wanted an authentic endorser for his company, noting, “We were looking for a potential brand ambassador for our products. We wanted someone who was genuine and authentic. When we saw he [Slater] was already a chia eater, it made great sense for us to show him our products.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Soon, the company launched a television commercial that featured Slater on a visit to an Ord Valley farm in Australia, which helped in promoting the brand. Foss explained his choice of the 40-year-old Slater: “His performances are still as good as many guys who are 20 years younger. He is superbly fit . . . he attributes his longevity and performance to what he eats.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

**The Road Ahead**

The Chia Co was the largest producer and exporter of chia seeds globally. In the coming years, the demand for chia-based products was expected to gain traction in emerging markets such as Brazil, Chile, and India. Demand for chia seeds was expected to achieve a compound annual growth rate of 40.62 per cent not only in Australia, but also globally between 2016 and 2021.[[42]](#endnote-42) Even in the breakfast segment, The Chia Co was a tough competitor to existing players. Australia’s breakfast cereal market shrank by 0.5 per cent every year between 2010 and 2015, after the introduction of The Chia Co’s Chia Pods.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The Chia Co’s competitors were limited to a few consumer-focused, raw-seed chia suppliers, primarily U.S.-based Joseph Enterprises Inc. and Bob’s Red Mill Natural Foods. However, most competition came not from other chia seed producers, but from superfood substitutes such as quinoa, acai berries, flax seeds, and hemp hearts, which shared similar nutritional properties, were less expensive, and were more popular as ingredient brands[[44]](#endnote-44) (see Exhibit 3).

Additionally, experts expressed doubts about the benefits of superfoods. Marion Nestle, a professor in the department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University, Steinhardt, suggested, “superfoods are about marketing, not nutrition. From a nutritionist’s point of view, the idea is totally silly.”[[45]](#endnote-45) In certain regions such as the European Union, chia had had no significant presence prior to 1997. Consequently, it was categorized there as a novel food, which suggested that it was a fad. Due to The Chia Co’s marketing efforts, chia received approval from European regulatory authorities in 2009.[[46]](#endnote-46) Foss, however, believed that chia seeds were not merely a fad, stating, “We set up the business with a long-run strategy and made sure we didn’t promote it as a short-term wonder food.”[[47]](#endnote-47) According to Foss, the major challenge for The Chia Co was to meet the demand for its products: “We have had periods when we have been expanding production quickly and, maybe, the market hasn’t grown quickly. But then, as a new customer or a new opportunity happens, the demand quickly starts to grow faster than our ability to scale supply. It has been a constant challenge to match the two.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Foss further indicated that weather windows were essential for the consistent quality of chia. For example, the weather patterns in Australia and South America were not found in the United Kingdom or other countries, and this limited the production of chia.[[49]](#endnote-49) In the midst of the above challenges, Foss was carving out plans for future growth, explaining, “We will continue to seek opportunities to help us evolve our brand around the world.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Foss aimed to work with additional food companies and retail chains to sell more chia-based products. He declared, “There’s a lot of growth ahead of us, simply because of the size and scale of the customers we are working with.” It remained to be seen whether chia was merely a fad or would have long-term sustainability. Would it successfully compete against other superfood categories? If it succeeded, how would it manage the gap between supply and demand?

**EXHIBIT 1: NUTRITION PROFILE AND BENEFITS OF SUPERFOODS**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Superfood** | **Nutrition Profile** | **Benefits** |
| Chia | Dietary fibre, omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, protein, calcium, phosphorous, zinc, copper | Antioxidant (for skin), regulates cholesterol, lowers blood pressure, reduces diabetes risk |
| Flax | Omega-3 fatty acids, fibre, protein, vitamin B1, manganese, magnesium, phosphorous, selenium | Supports healthier skin and hair, supports weight loss, lowers cholesterol |
| Hemp | Omega-3, omega-6, and omega-9 fatty acids; protein; magnesium; zinc; vitamin E; iron; GLA; gluten free | Soothes muscles, controls inflammation and body temperature, regulates cholesterol, improves immune system |
| Quinoa | Protein, calcium, iron, dietary fibre, protein, vitamin B6 | Antioxidant, reduces cholesterol and blood pressure, supports weight loss, reduces diabetes risk |

Source: Developed by the authors based on “9 Chia Seeds Benefits + Side Effects,” Dr. Axe, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://draxe.com/chia-seeds-benefits-side-effects/>; “10 Flax Seed Benefits and Nutrition Facts,” Dr. Axe, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://draxe.com/10-flax-seed-benefits-nutrition-facts/>; “7 Benefits of Eating Hemp Seeds You Won’t Believe,” Dr. Axe, accessed February 12, 2017, https://draxe.com/7-hemp-seed-benefits-nutrition-profile; “10 Quinoa Nutrition Facts & Benefits,” Dr. Axe, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://draxe.com/10-quinoa-nutrition-facts-benefits/>.

EXHIBIT 2: CATEGORY SALES OF CHIA SEED/CHIA OIL (US$ MILLIONs)

Source: Developed by the authors based on “Ch-ch-ch-chia! Chia Marketers Sprout New Sponsorships,” IEG Sponsorship Report, August 25, 2014, accessed February 20, 2014, [www.sponsorship.com/iegsr/2014/08/25/Ch-ch-ch-chia!-Chia-Marketers-Sprout-New-Sponsorsh.aspx](http://www.sponsorship.com/iegsr/2014/08/25/Ch-ch-ch-chia!-Chia-Marketers-Sprout-New-Sponsorsh.aspx).

EXHIBIT 3: percentage OF PRODUCT CATEGORIES IN U.S. RETAIL STORES WITH SUPERFOOD INGREDIENTS (2016–2017)

Source: Developed by the authors based on “Spring Superpower, Brought to You by Superfoods across the Store,” The Nielsen Company, April 24, 2017, accessed May 14, 2017, www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/spring-superpower-brought-to-you-by-superfoods-across-the-store.html.

ENDNOTES

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