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H.U.M.A.N. Rights For Snackers



Thanks to a new green business, some vending machines are replacing candy bars and chips with dried fruit and protein shakes

You may be surprised to learn that Sean Kelly, founder of America's first healthy vending machine company, was once a Twinkies-and-SunnyD kind of guy.

"I freaking loved vending machines when I was a kid, because all I ate was crappy junk food," says Kelly, who grew up in the picturesque lakeside town of Traverse City, Michigan. "Even though my parents were health nuts and my dad was a dentist—along with my sister, grandpa, great grandpa, uncle and cousins—I just loved to eat junk."

Today, his company H.U.M.A.N., which stands for Helping Unite Man and Nutrition, builds and distributes vending machines that sell healthier fare, such as granola bars, trail mix and dried apricots—basically, the absolute opposite of the trans-fat-laden, obesity-triggering sodas and candy bars he loved to pillage from vending machines as a kid.

At around age 12, thanks to the constant nagging of his father and grandfather, Kelly finally changed his eating habits and noticed massive, positive shifts in his "attitude, happiness, performance, just about everything." Barely into his teens, Kelly had an aha! moment. "I started to realize that many foods in America, especially refined sugars, fast food and candy, are just like drugs and should be treated as such," he says. He never ate from a standard vending machine again, and today is adamant that school-age kids shouldn't even have access to typical junk food vending machines. "Thank God I was saved," he says, with the zeal of a religious convert, "but many kids don't get that chance. Accessibility is the problem—we need to take [the junk] away."

Embracing his newfound health and energy, Kelly became a two-time freestyle snowboarding national championship medalist. He could have become a pro snowboarder, but quit competitive snowboarding and enrolled at Johns Hopkins University instead, majoring in biomedical engineering (BME) with a concentration in biomechanics. He transferred after his freshman year to Columbia University in New York, where he continued to study BME. That's where he had his eureka revelation, the one that would ultimately lead to the creation of H.U.M.A.N.

While at a gym on 80th and Broadway, Kelly watched a middle-aged woman buy a Coke from a vending machine (the only

food or drink option in the gym), take a massive swig, and jump on the treadmill with the Coke in her cup-holder. “I was like ‘wow, if we have so-called “healthy” people drinking Coke on treadmills, how can we expect an entire population to get healthier? We can’t!’” He saw very clearly how lack of accessibility to healthy food and over-accessibility to junk food lay at the root of the problem. And he wanted to fix it.



Birth of a Green Business

In 2005, Kelly co-founded his first company, Fit Fuel, with a cousin. Then in 2007 he launched H.U.M.A.N. Core products in his vending machines include trail mix, energy bars, protein bars, dried fruit, granola bars, organic cookies, protein shakes, natural energy drinks, pita chips, kettle corn—and not a Coke in sight. “It may sound ridiculous, but we’re trying to do to healthy foods/drinks what Google did to information—make it more accessible. That, at the root, is what we’re all about.”

Health clubs were among the first to embrace the idea, followed by schools and then forward-thinking office buildings. The machines themselves were custom-built as per Kelly’s vision: they come equipped with LCD screens with remote-loading capabilities, credit card readers, remote-monitoring functionality, eco-friendly lighting and power devices, touch-screen displays and internal PCs.

No two machines are the same— H.U.M.A.N. vending machines offer thousands of products, sourced from the largest natural food/drink and sports nutrition distributors in the country. “Basically, if you want it and it’s healthy, we can get it,” says Kelly. The company often sources products locally to minimize their carbon footprint and support local sustainability efforts.

But there’s still a long way to go before bosses, business owners, school kids and even some gym rats take the leap from traditional vending staples like soda and chocolate toward healthier fare. “So many people want to change,” says Kelly, “but they’re scared . . . scared of making someone mad that their Snickers and Doritos were removed from the vending machines.”

Caroline Ryder (CarolineRyder.com) eats only healthy food except for the occasional loaf of Velveeta.



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