



## How Rebecca Alvarez Story Built a Sexual Wellness Brand

The Founder and CEO of Bloomi, a wellness brand focused on clean intimate care essentials, shares how her experience as a single mom inspired her entrepreneurship, the creative approaches she utilized to close a one million dollar funding gap, and the crossroads she finds herself at today.

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- Alicia Menendez: I've been wanting to talk with Rebecca Alvarez Story for a while. She is an award-winning entrepreneur, sexologist and intimate product developer. Three titles that do not often go together, but I'm glad we waited for this moment. Like many of my very favorite conversations, we find Rebecca and her company Bloomi, a wellness brand focused on clean, intimate care essentials at an inflection point. Asking the very familiar question, will what got us here, get us to where we want to go next? Rebecca, finally, thank you so much for being here.
- Rebecca Alvarez Story: Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad it worked.
- Menendez: I'm so happy to have this conversation. Rebecca, among the things you say about intimacy is that so much of the root of intimacy is unlearning bad sex ed. What was the bad sex ed that you grew up with?
- Alvarez Story: My bad sex ed was actually no sex ed to start with. I definitely saw love and my parents modeled that so well, but in terms of my in community, in my school, did we have sex education? Not really, because it was abstinence only education in high school.
- Menendez: It's wild that someone goes from growing up in an environment that is abstinence only to... By the time you are in college, you're very clear that you want to study sex and sexuality.
- Alvarez Story: I sit at the intersection of so many things, being Latina, a woman, I was a single mom at that time. I just felt like I could relate to so many people's intimacy journeys and I wanted to create the spaces where we could talk about it. I didn't know exactly what it was going to look like, but yes, in college I tell this story. I was apprehensive about sexuality because my first year in college I was actually assaulted and I ended up transferring home, I ended up at Cal. A very liberal, very progressive school where I could take so many wonderful classes that were holistic and I share with people that it was very healing for me. I had great therapy, I had great all of that, but the education, it just transformed my life.
- Menendez: When did it become clear to you that you were an entrepreneur?
- Alvarez Story: To be honest, I feel like I've always known this since I was little. I had that spirit of, "Oh, that should be a business and why don't we have a solution?" I would just see things differently than the cousins I grew up with, I think. They would joke and say, why do you always have so many ideas? Why are you always so bossy? But it was just little, I was little and I was taking initiative to create things.
- Menendez: Talk me through the evolution of Bloomi, because as I understand it, the original idea was a multi-brand marketplace. How did it morph from that concept to a place for education advice on intimacy with a line of sexual wellness products?

Alvarez Story: I had been in the industry for 10 years. I was working as a consultant for startups, helping them with their product development, and I was coaching, both singles and couples. Learning so much about intimacy challenges, intimacy goals, and really helping people in a lot of different ways, where at the end of so many of my sessions, my clients wanted solutions. They wanted the book, the product, the toy, the whatever it was, and so I would manually send this to them. I started creating a list, but it was a little bit... It was a lot of work on my end to always curate. And so what I did is I said, I'm just going to put these products that I recommend that are clean because it's very important that these products be healthy, especially for these areas of the body. Put them all on a page, and that was the beginning of Bloomi, where I had multiple brands. They were my favorite clean brands that I would recommend in the category. And then when I developed our first product with our team, it was called Bloomi Arousal Oil. We still sell it. It's a bestseller. That was just the beginning of a pivot for us and that's why we fundraise and why we ended up really focusing on Bloomi's products, making solutions for products that I wish I had 10 years ago.

Menendez: The question I'm about to ask you seems particularly relevant given the timing of your and my conversation, but I want to take us back to April 2022. Your line is set to debut a target and your funding falls short. How does that happen?

Alvarez Story: Funding for women of color entrepreneurs is severely lower than what it should be. There is less than 1% of funding that is going to entrepreneurs of color, Latina founders. So I never used that as an excuse, but when I went out and I fundraised, I did everything by the book. I trained, I did accelerators, I did bootcamps, I had a cis white male co-founder. I had everything you're supposed to and I'm using quotes to have, and we fell short. We wanted to raise \$2 million, we raised \$1 million. So what did I do? I ended up seeing that there is no standard for my industry. This is new. Intimacy companies were not being venture backed at that time, and I just realized I'm going to have to do things differently. So we crowd raised, we basically opened up part of our round to the community where they could invest \$100 or \$200 minimum. We raised almost a million dollars that way, two different times. And then we also... I took out personal loans. We had a few angels give us personal loans. I took out a line of credit. I did everything to make sure that we could have sufficient capital to meet the demands of going into retail. And even with that, I'll say, when founders ask me what does it take to go into retail? It's so big of a question. I want to sit down and go through things with people, but you have to estimate how much you're going to need to be on shelf, stay on shelf--that's even harder--market, and to not plan to be profitable right away.

Menendez: For those of us who have not been through the process of bringing a product to store shelves, it's hard to understand how you have \$2 million. You spend it on making sure that you get product to the shelf, you spend it on auxiliary things, as you said, marketing. To make sure that you are actually driving consumers to the shelf, but then the product starts moving. How as the product starts moving, is the product moving, but the line is not profitable?

Alvarez Story: Basically, from the time you are manufacturing a product to the time you are paid for that product is much longer than people realize. It takes anywhere from four to six months to manufacture a product. So you're paying for product way in advance. You need the influx of capital upfront, and then you ship it to Target or you're a retailer or you're 3PL. And then...

Menendez: What's a 3PL?

Alvarez Story: A third-party logistics partner, so it's your operations' warehouse partner. Then from there, they send it to distribution centers at Target, then it goes to shelf. Then 60 days later you're paid. So it's not, I gave them a product and I got paid. So what happens a lot of times is I've seen founders run out of capital because maybe they estimated for going on shelf, but they didn't estimate how long it was going to take to get paid, or they didn't estimate how much they needed to spend on marketing. So it's a long cashflow process, and at the same time, this isn't the only thing that needs capital in the business. You have a team, you have other retailers, you have dotcom, you have event activations. There's just a lot of initial capital that is needed to have a successful brand if you're going into mass retail.

Menendez: You talk about Bloomi being an inclusive brand, but it strikes me the fact that you are a Latina founder and I think you've been given a decent amount of platforming on Latina platforms. That there is some acknowledgement that this is a part of your core audience, your core market. I wonder what the market research has shown you about the unique challenges of connecting your product with a Latina consumer. Because Latinas exists at very interesting intersection of we have traditionally been both hypersexualized. There was a point at which before Google cleaned up its algorithms. If you Google Latina, the first thing that came up was Latina porn. And growing up very often in cultures, communities, households where we were supposed to be the Virgin Mary. And contending with those competing ideas and competing demands has become central to many of our senses of self and sexuality. So for you trying to connect your brand with that consumer, what is the chasm you were trying to cross?

Alvarez Story: The company over-indexes in Latinos. So we have more than the average amount compared to other brands. We also have more Black people in our community and more queer people in our community than other brands do. So our team, our community, our customers, leadership team included, we're all diverse. So for me, when I think of the Latina consumer who has a lot of the experiences where religion has impact, lack of sex education has impact, but also hypersexualizing, like you mentioned, is at the forefront of our media. There's a disconnect, and I think what I'm trying to do with anything I create including Bloomi, is show people that it is okay to love your body. It is okay to talk about sex and what you see in 99% of porn is not real. It's not common. And I'm trying to basically create spaces where people can read about that part of the body, whether it's your intimate skin, penis, vagina, vulva. And I'm trying to create the products that make you not shy to buy and not embarrassed to be using them. I am trying to strike a balance between not being a salesperson because I am not, but I also know that what we're creating is changing people's lives. We've tracked our progress so far, and I think we're up to like 22 million moments of pleasure have been created by the products that we've put out into the world.

Menendez: I've spoken with so many founders who are people of color and they explain the challenges of going into rooms where they're explaining a need that very often the cis white hetero men in the room. It's not their lived experience, and so they're not drawing from that, and so they have trouble understanding what the need is. I have to imagine that just magnifies when you're talking about sex and sexuality, which already is challenging in a lot of rooms. What is the wildest thing that has happened to you as you have fundraised in those rooms?

Alvarez Story: A lot of investors think I was joking. They would kind of just laugh through the pitch like, are you serious? It's like, what part of the pitch didn't look serious, right? I've had investors do the traditional really annoying thing of saying, "Okay, I'm going to ask my wife what they think about these products first." As if, I've already said, these products are not just for women, this is for all bodies, just intimate skin or intimacy. But I would say in general too, just as a sexologist, not even fundraising, before all of this. There were a lot of cis white men that I feel like hit on me and I didn't appreciate that.

And there is an assumption, I feel like, especially if you think back five, 10 years. Where here I am this young single person and I'm talking about sex, I must be very open to your invitations of sex. That line would get crossed a lot.

Menendez: You mentioned something in passing that I need to go back to, which is you being a young solo mom. Because I think that there are a lot of women who are young solo moms, who also feel deeply entrepreneurial, but think to themselves, well, that opportunity has passed or that opportunity is not for me now that I am locked in the mom hustle. And so I want to know both how you made it work, but almost more importantly how you said to yourself, why not me? Why not do this? How did you flip that sense of, I'm a mom, I'm already the CEO of an enterprise. Let me become the CEO of one that has a tax status and is codified.

Alvarez Story: Being a single mom I say, has been the hardest thing I've ever had to do. So I was pregnant my last semester at Cal, and I was so excited to start my career and I was excited to be a mom. But I actually made the decision that I was going to be a single mom during my pregnancy, and one of the things that I thought I was not going to have time for was going to be really going into a sexology career. I thought I was going to have to focus more on high paying jobs and things like that. So I would be registered in these MBA programs. And there was a master's program going on with human sexuality across the hall.

And I went over, and mind you, I would actually bring my daughter to some of my classes because I had to and I would talk with the professors in advance. Grad school I think is a little more lenient than undergrad. And so I took a class and I was like, I have to be here. So registered, decided I was going to go that route. And just having that space where it's a professor who's supportive, a community that's passionate about the work that I'm passionate with. And I have my little two or three year old watching Dora with her little iPad to the right, I felt safe and I felt like I could pursue my passion.

And the more that I continue to just find those spaces, the more that I felt like I can create this, I can do this.

Menendez: We are connecting at a pretty special moment for you. Tell me about the moment I find you in right now.

Alvarez Story: A few things. I feel a shift happening for me personally, for the company, we're on this verge for Bloomi of incredibly high growth. We're in 1500 Target stores, but now that I'm inside of the retailer, understand the challenges of staying on shelf. And I do feel it's an important few months for us, for our buyer team there to see that the community wants these products there. And it's not that sales are bad, it's more the comparison. We are compared to billion dollar brands, there is no difference. You can literally see who's sitting on the shelf right next to us. So what we need to do is we need to almost do more with less, which is something I am used to, but Bloomi is bigger than what I can handle now. I can't put a thousand dollars, \$10,000 or take out a loan on my house. I can't do that anymore. We are now talking about millions of dollars, and so it's a sensitive time for the

company where every purchase is more critical than before. But also I feel like I'm incredibly happy being the CEO, but what I really miss is fully being in content and fully being on the sexology side. So you've seen this throughout the life of the company, but I sprinkle that in as being a CEO. It's not a traditional CEO role though.

So I'm also evaluating how I want to move forward in terms of the team and the growth and where I'm going to be the best asset for the team and the company that we're building. It's reflection time, it's hardcore. Let's get as much visibility on the brand time and try to plan ahead as much as possible for these big opportunities.

Menendez: I meant that to be my last question, but now I have more questions, which is one, I generally tear up when someone shares the personal elements of their story. Of course, in this conversation I'm tearing up because I so hear the frustration of being compared to products and to companies that are simply better resourced and the legacy of exclusion and discrimination that leads to that place. And this idea that we're constantly competing on uneven playing fields. And where I want to just tip my hat to you, Rebecca, is I'm not sure that I in your position, am not throwing my hands up in the air and saying, well, then screw it. Right?

I'm never going to be able to compete because this is not even, and the metrics you're asking me to hit are not fair. And so the whole game is rigged and I'm done.

Alvarez Story: And I'm actually tearing up now watching you.

Menendez: I'm sorry.

Alvarez Story: No, I had a really good friend, Ana [Flores], from #WeAllGrow.

Menendez: She's everyone's madrina.

Alvarez Story: She is. She's a fairy godmother for Latinas. She just asked this question, wait a minute. I walked her through everything and she said, "Then how do you succeed?" And I was like, it's just not going to be fair. I just have to do my best. And so that's what I feel kind of grounds me. As long as I'm being intentional and I'm doing my best, I feel like I will always be satisfied with that. Do I want this company to be a multi-hundred million-dollar company? Yes, but for the reasons people may not know, I have the same aspirations as so many of us that are first gen or have immigrants in our families.

The way that I structured this company, I have never seen a company like this. I created what I did not see, and that's really hard in so many ways, but it's so beautiful too because we have almost a thousand investors from our community. I want to be successful, but I also...

Menendez: For everyone, you want to be successful for all of us.

Alvarez Story: For all of us.

Menendez: And that's just a different weight than wanting to be successful for yourself.

Alvarez Story: And the weight is great in so many ways, and I want to make it light. And I also want to say I know the category I'm in, it's very playful and it can be very fun. But just like sex, I feel like business is complicated and there's things people don't see that I very easily, my mental health could have taken a toll but I feel like I'm protecting myself along the way and asking for guidance and reaching out for help. And so I am proud of where we are, and I feel like this is a really pivotal time where you're going to see Bloomi really take off. And in some ways I feel like things just have to change to make sure that I continue to feel very good and energized.

Menendez: I love you. Thank you for this, Rebecca.

Alvarez Story: Thank you, Alicia.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at [latinatolatina.com/shop](https://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Rebecca Alvarez Story Built a Sexual Wellness Brand." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. October 2, 2023. [LatinatoLatina.com](https://LatinatoLatina.com).

Produced by:

