



How Nopalera CEO and Founder Sandra Velasquez's Luxury Bath and Body Care Line is Disrupting Eurocentric Standards

The former Pistolera bandleader launched her business, Nopalera, with a bold mission: celebrate and elevate Latino culture...and disrupt an entire industry in the process. Sandra shares the two year journey from making products by hand in her Brooklyn home to closing out a \$2.7 million oversubscribed seed funding round. Come for the insights on product development and distribution, stay for the real talk on leveling up.

Alicia Menendez: Sandra Velasquez was in her forties and unemployed when she launched Nopalera, a line of luxury bath and body products made with nopal that celebrates and elevates Latino culture. Fast forward to today, Sandra has raised over \$2 million to grow and expand the brand, and Nopalera has now carried a more than 400 national retailers, including Nordstrom and Whole Foods New York City. Sandra offers a lot of real talk about how her early days as the band leader of Pistolera did and did not prepare her for this moment, the success squad that has been critical to redefining her sphere of influence and her hard-earned insights about what the realities of distribution mean for creating a profitable product. Sandra, thank you for doing this.

Sandra Velasquez...: Yes, my pleasure.

Menendez: I have a question for you, which is does Pistolera end?

Velasquez: It didn't technically end. There was no, "Okay, that's it. We're wrapping up." But COVID ended all of my friends' music careers including mine pretty much overnight, and it was actually perfectly timed because I was already working on Nopalera it didn't feel like a death to me. I had been a professional musician for so long and I'm happy to turn the page.

Menendez: I ask because we focus so much on beginnings and we glamorize beginnings, that I think it is worth digging into the fact that your big beginning accompanied a big close. There was a chapter that had to close there. I was watching your 2012 NPR Tiny Desk concert and I was like, oh, this is in some ways a different person and in some ways exactly the same person that I have been following. How do you see it?

Velasquez: I see it like that as well. It's the exact same mission. I used to celebrate my culture and stories in a very bold way in Spanish through music, and now I'm doing it through a brand. There's nothing new about what we call the cultured boldness aspect, but I had to learn a whole new industry. I had to absolutely change my mindset in order to level up and become a business owner.

Menendez: For those who don't know, take me back to how the idea for Nopalera came together.

Velasquez: Summer of 2019, I was visiting my parents. I actually was unemployed for the very first time as an adult, which was very scary because as a musician in New York, I always had a day job for health insurance, never had a savings. It was really scary to be like, wow, I'm 43, I have no savings, I have nothing to fall back on and I have a child. Yeah, let's start a business. But it was one of those moments that is a defining moment of your life where

you're like, okay, if something's going to change, it's because something radically different has got to happen.

Menendez: Did you start with the mission or did you start with the product?

Velasquez: I absolutely started with the mission. I knew what the category was. It's not like I thought I was going to make protein bars. I knew that it was going to be beauty, but I didn't know what the actual products were. The mission was to create a high end Latina brand to disrupt the historically Eurocentric beauty space.

Beauty is, people would think of it like this almost like frivolous category. We don't need beauty products to live on earth, but it's been so historically Eurocentric. I mean all the highest brands are French and Italian. That's why when I was a musician I chose to sing in Spanish because I'm like, I know that most people can't understand me, but that's your problem. It's like the same attitude of we are going to be ourselves and I'm going to make it so beautiful and irresistible that even people that don't know what Nopalera means, that don't know what this reference is for, that don't know what a cactus is and why it's so Mexican and so symbolic, they're going to want it anyway.

And it's the same with music. I made music that people loved because it was dance music. But the lyrics and the content were extremely profound about what you would call serious topics, immigration, women's empowerment. But I presented it. I wrapped it up in this package that made it digestible for people. And so for me, it's like a subversive act and the brand is the same.

Menendez: How did you arrive at what the product would actually be?

Velasquez: I enrolled in formulation school and that required me to learn how to make all sorts of things. I was learning how to make a facial wash and an emulsion. And I thought I was going to make skincare products. And thank God my friend Julie Kosinski, who I consider a brand advisor to us, was like, "You know, you should look at the body category because skincare is really oversaturated, it's really competitive." And that's what steered me into doing products for below the neck.

I wanted products that would work together and I also wanted to create products that were practical. All of us take showers, all of us wash our bodies, all of us wear lotion of some type. Those are basically the three products that we have. We have a soap, we have a scrub, and we have a lotion bar. And I was like, we have to make products that don't pollute but that we need and that once you use them up, they're gone.

Menendez: I think there are a lot of our listeners who will hear that you were more or less broke. It's the middle of the pandemic. You don't have a job and you somehow pay for formulation school.

Velasquez: Everything was done with my credit card. I say that at every opportunity. Don't tell me that you don't have the money because I didn't either. That's not the reason to not start. A lot of us are scared of debt, so let me start there. A lot of people are scared of debt and because I've had student loans my entire life, I was like, what's another debt? You know what I mean? No one's going to come bang down my door. I know that I can pay it off over time. I enrolled in formulation school on my American Express card. I always opted for the payment plan. I even paid for my branding on a payment plan, and even then I did it with my American Express card.

Menendez: You often talk Sandra about the importance of a success squad. I wonder what yours looks like and how you went about putting it together as you moved into this new category.

- Velasquez: My CEO squad is comprised of four women plus myself, so five total all in completely different industries. No one else is a beauty founder, no one else is a product brand. We have Aurora, who is a cultural strategist who works with Fortune 500 companies. She is a personal trainer. Beth is a brand strategist and Wendy is like a conference MC host, former Broadway dancer, all completely in different industries.
- And I met them through the mastermind that I joined. Again, I paid for this mastermind on my credit card. I signed up for the monthly versus the yearly. And I just knew that I needed to be around new people in order to be on this journey successfully. That my old musician friends were just not going to understand. There's no way. How could they possibly help me build an empire when they're playing for a \$100 dollars a gig in New York City?
- I joined this mastermind and since then we formed a bond and now we meet weekly by Zoom. We're on a constant text thread and we meet in person quarterly. And we all live all over the country. It's not like I can hang out with these women every day, but we support each other. We love to see each other win. And that is so important to have people like that around you.
- Menendez: Sandra, there's something you wrote on your website that I want to dig into and you'll help me understand the timeline here. Which is you write, "A year ago, I didn't know any investors. I didn't know how to find them, let alone ask them for money. When I first set out to fundraise, I was scared to ask for more than \$250,000. I had the mentality of only wanting to ask for enough to get by. I recently closed Nopalera's over subscribe seed round of \$2.7 million. The first thing that had to change was me." What about you had to change?
- Velasquez: The mentality of survival of money is this thing that you need to just survive. And somehow that I didn't want to be asked for more than I "needed." It was like, what do I just need right now? What do I need to pay bills and things right now? But instead of saying what do I need for the next year? What do I need for the next year and a half? What do I need to make the products that I want to make? What do I need for the marketing efforts that we really deserve to put behind this brand?
- And so it just goes back to that scarcity survival mentality where people think that money is just this thing that you use to just survive and asking for more feels bad or greedy or it just doesn't feel comfortable. And really switching the mindset that there's just so much money in the world, and this is why I was able to say no on Shark Tank. Because I knew, I'm like, if you're not going to give any money, I'm going to go find it from someone else who gets it.
- Menendez: But what is that? Is that coaching? Is that therapy? Is that just making the ask enough times and being told yes that you know you could ask for more? What did it actually require?
- Velasquez: All of those things. It requires all of those things. It requires coaching, it requires therapy, it requires reading different books, listening to different podcasts, hanging out with different people. Once you switch your mindset, you cannot go back. I cannot go back to the time when I thought that money was hard to get or money is not for me. Once you up-level yourself, you're in a different level of the game and that takes work.
- Menendez: Sandra, you run an entire course on grocery distribution. If there are people who are interested in that, there is an entire course available. But I wonder if for the purposes of this conversation you can give us the TLDR on the biggest mistake that you made seeking

out distribution and the top thing that you want other entrepreneurs to understand about it in this category.

Velasquez: I wouldn't say that we have made mistakes now because I learned from working for other companies what not to do. And it does really depend on the category because beauty is completely different than a protein bar or a water. If you're selling to grocery stores, you're working with distributors, which means that there are two middlemen, there's the distributor and there's the store. Two people need to make money before your product gets into the hand of the consumers, which means your product needs to be made for a lot, lot less than it is sold for. Otherwise you will make no money. That's the first mistake for people that are in that category. If anyone's listening who is like a food and beverage brand, really understanding how margins work and doing the math in advance. Because what I saw and why so many brands fail is that they create their product out of passion. They get it made or they make it themselves and then they go and they try to get into stores and they're like, "Oh my god, I'm making no money." In my category in beauty, it's different. We don't use distributors, we sell direct. There's no one between me and Nordstrom. There's no one between me and Credo or me and my 400 boutiques. We sell direct, but those stores take a higher margin. The beauty category is just a higher margin category, which is why you see every celebrity starting a beauty brand and not a protein bar brand.

Menendez: Indeed, Sandra, you referenced Shark Tank. And I have spoken with so many Latinas who have done one of the reality show cooking competitions as a way to level up their career. And to me the value proposition seems clear when you're doing that. For you as someone who has a business that is fairly well established, that is already in 400 plus retailers that has an over subscribed seed round, what was the value for you of doing something like Shark Tank? And what were the conversations you had with your advisors as you made the decision about whether or not it made sense for you at this point in your journey?

Velasquez: The Shark Tank process is very long. You apply, then you get a call back and then there's video auditions and then there's Zoom after Zoom after Zoom. It's literally the same process of talking to investors. It's a long process. It's not like, oh, you apply now, you're on Shark Tank next month and then it airs. No, I filmed this in July. We are in a completely different business from when I even applied. You don't know at the time what your business is going to look like when and if your episode airs because not every episode that is filmed airs. For me, it was an opportunity to yes, to put my brand in front of these investors and see if there was potentially an opportunity there. By the time I got to the show, that opportunity was still very much real. Okay, one of these people could possibly say yes, and this could be part of my journey.

Menendez: There were two things that stood out to me as I watched it. One is your enormous presence, which goes back to, okay, yes, not every entrepreneur is a performer. But there is such incredible value. I couldn't sense a single nerve on your part. You're like, "I've played stadiums. Five people are not going to freak me out." And then also some of the reflections that you have, having done a lot of fundraising about wealthy people. That wealthy people, they may not be into your product, but they have a universe of connections that might be valuable to you. In this case, you extrapolate that

out to be everyone who's watching is a potential investor in this product. And that at some point money is money and that is not enough to take someone on as an investor.

How has your own analysis thinking algorithm changed for whether or not? At the beginning, I feel like you're selling and I feel as though the process goes on, you begin to question whether or not you want to buy and be in business with somebody else.

Velasquez: Yes, so absolutely. There's lots of money in the world and not all of it is good. And when you are taking on investors, you are getting married and you want to make sure that this person is bringing more to the table than just their checkbook. What is their network? Who do they know? Can they help you with the retailers you want to get into? Do they have manufacturing contacts? Whatever it is that you need for your business, that should be part of the conversation. That should be part of the ask. I was asking investors who do you know? You need them to be a thought partner or resource? That's absolutely part of the conversation.

Menendez: You are so at this. I'm catching you at the point at which it all makes sense. But there is a point somewhere in the process where things are inevitably messy. I wonder what the biggest growing pain was from the moment you are unemployed and putting things on your credit card to where I find you today.

Velasquez: The most difficult parts are when I was making the product myself for the first year. Because again, high class problems, I couldn't keep up with the demand. These are products that are made by hand. And so I outgrew my house in the first month and then I had to find a studio. I'm in Brooklyn, so good luck with that. Luckily, I found one actually in my neighborhood, so that was meant to be. Then I had to hire assistants and train them how to make soap and how to make the products. And so I spent a lot of days like wearing hospital scrubs covered in oils and then walking back to my house just exhausted and just collapsing. And so I'm glad that that phase is over, but that was challenging.

When you are also the manufacturer. A lot of people glorify handmade. I'm like, we don't do that because it's cute. We did that because I had no other choice because I literally was spending a year Googling who are the people that make this product? I fell down so many internet rabbit holes of soap blogs and chat rooms of does anyone know anyone that does this kind of soap? And you'd be surprised there's not that many.

Menendez: When you say that you were selling out, that people wanted to buy the product, how were people finding the product when it was so new?

Velasquez: I did a lot of foundational work and that is why I am where I am today, and I always want to highlight that because people think it looks like it happened so fast. And I'm like, yeah, but what you didn't see is that whole year of when it was just me building. And when I say building, I mean at my desk, writing down a religion, researching, creating spreadsheets of the competitive landscape. What are people's price points? What are their packaging? Do they use scent? Do they use fragrance? Researching the customer, researching like everything and writing down the core values, the mission. Creating a brand deck that I could present to my designer. Working on the branding was nine months. Again, I invested in myself over and over and I want to repeat that. The first thing you should be spending money on is yourself. If you don't know something, if you can't find it for free, go pay for it.

I took a class on Facebook ads. I'm like, I'm going to have to do this myself, just like I'm making the product myself. I took a Facebook ads class. I learned how Business Manager works. And once I had my, the goddess, what we call the cactus goddess logo, I didn't even have the product yet. I just her. I started running targeted ads and I started collecting email addresses on my website, which was just a one page landing page, which was just like "Coming soon. Drop your email address." It said what it was like Mexican botanicals for bath and body. That much I knew. And I collected like 800 email addresses so that when I launched, I launched to my people.

Menendez: I want to underscore this because it takes a certain amount of humility to do it that way. I learned the same lesson, but by making the mistake of not doing this. Which is when I wrote my first book, I didn't tell anybody that I'd written a book. I didn't tell anybody that I had sold the book. And because I had not brought people with me along on the journey, it limited the response.

I do think you make a really great point, which is especially in our community where people want to feel invested and a part of something, and that is part of the brand process, there's value in showing your work and showing the building. Even if that means that then you're like, "Aha, she's here." And the risk you run is that it's crickets and everybody knows all the work that went in and there's not the response that you wanted.

Velasquez: Yes. I think for a product-based business, I mean for books, well, no. I think for books, it's the same thing. It's like you should be creating your product for the customer, for the person that's going to buy your book. Who needs to hear the story? Who cares? You need to be able to answer the who cares first so that you work backwards.

I'm all about working backwards, like beginning with the end in mind. I did not create this product because I like soap. I didn't create this product because I like to make stuff. I created this product because I was like my community, us, people like me, Latinas who spend money in beauty, they want to see themselves reflected on store shelves and we're not, so I'm going to be that person that makes that thing for us.

Menendez: Sandra, thank you for your time and thank you for everything you're doing to make sure that other people in our community have access to all the information you wish you'd had at the beginning of this journey. I appreciate you.

Velasquez: Yes, I love sharing information.

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.

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