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The Daily Telegram

Sunday, February 27, 2011

# Changing with the market helps Blissfield supplement maker grow despite recession

By Bob Wheaton  
Daily Telegram Special Writer

**B**y Uckele Health & Nutrition Inc. standards, 2009 was a bad year. The Blissfield-based company reported an 18 percent increase in sales.

That's less than the average 22 to 23 percent increase in sales in recent years, said Michael Uckele, president and CEO of the thriving Lenawee County business. Sales could rise 30 percent for the fiscal year that ends March 31, Uckele said.

"Fortunately — I knock on wood every day — we never experienced any downturn at all," Uckele said.

As other businesses in the U.S. — particularly in Michigan — struggle to survive, Uckele has continued to expand.

How does the family-owned manufacturer of supplements for humans and animals do it?

Human and pet supplements are a growth industry. But that only partially explains Uckele's success.

Nutrition Business Journal reported in 2010 that 2008 sales of pet and animal companion supplements increased 7 percent to \$1.4 billion, eclipsing the sales of children's supplements. Uckele said the human supplement industry also grew by about 7 percent last year.

But those healthy industry-wide sales hikes are dwarfed by the sales increases at Uckele.

Since Michael Uckele took ownership of the company in 2005, it has aggressively expanded.

His strategy was to make the equine division of the business bigger, focusing more on supplements for horses (dairy, swine and beef cattle had historically been the largest part of the business) because he believed that's where the greatest growth potential was.

When Uckele was a child, "You couldn't drive minutes from here without running into a dozen different farms." But times had changed.

The change in focus paid off.

Within two years, the equine division was the largest part of the business.

Human supplements — which the company began making in the mid-1990s — ranks No. 2, and dog supplements are third.

The company is constantly developing new cutting-edge formulas, Uckele said.

"We create new products every day," he said. "Typically we have somewhere between 120 and 150 products in product development." About 90 percent of those products go to market, Uckele said.

In a given year, the company manufactures 1,200 different formulas, which Uckele said is at least double the number from five years ago. It has 3,00 active formulas on file.

It manufactures supplements for cats, lizards, guinea pigs, ferrets, parrots, camels, llamas and alpacas.

Uckele equine products include various horse feeds and supplements, including calming aids, digestive aids, electrolytes, fatty acids, flavoring, hoof products, joint formulas, immune support, metabolic support, muscle support, vitamin and minerals formulas and performance products for race horses.

Its human products lines include Physio GNX, which are dietary supplements that are also designed to improve athletic performance. Various Physio GNX formulas have been used by pro athletes worldwide.

The company sells Good Dawg nutritional supplements for dogs. Different formulas help canines deal with allergies, bad breath and nerves, among other things.

The company sells some of its products and provides others for clients that sell them. Confidentiality agreements prohibit company officials from identifying most of its clients. "If a company that we manufacture for becomes successful, we're successful," Uckele said. "It doesn't have to be the Uckele brand."

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Telegram photo by Lad Strayer

Michael Uckele is president and CEO of Uckele Health & Nutrition, which has averaged an annual sales increase of 22 to 23 percent in recent years. Uckele has shifted the company's focus since 2005, with profitable results.

# Uckele

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William Uckele Sr., Michael's grandfather, and William Uckele Jr., Michael's uncle, started the company in 1961 at the same Silberhorn Highway location where it is today.

"It started in my grandparents' basement," Michael said.

When William Sr. retired in 1978, Michael's father, James, took over a share of the family business. Michael bought them out in 1995.

"I grew up in the business," he said. "I always loved the business. So from the time I was in high school, and actually before, I spent a lot of time working at the family business."

"It's one of those things. I always knew I would be coming back to the family business." Michael Uckele lives across a field from the business. Other family members live nearby.

Before coming home, Uckele earned a business degree from Michigan State University. He worked a lot with race horses and later became a certified nutritionist.

He's developed professional relationships with athletes in the NHL, NFL, NBA and Major League Baseball by providing them with customized nutritional protocols.

An autographed picture from Red Wings veteran Kris Draper hangs on Uckele's office wall. "To Michael Thanks for all the cutting-edge supplements," Draper wrote. "You have been a big part of prolonging my career."

Uckele estimates he works regularly with 15 to 18 NHL players — including Wings star Tomas Holmstrom — and has provided



Dennis Vore works on bottling capsules at Uckele Health & Nutrition.

Telegram photo by Lad Strayer

supplements to more than 200 over the years.

"When you can take a high-performing athlete and make them better, it's a great feeling," he said.

Uckele directly confronts the sports steroid controversy that has involved illegitimate supplement companies such as BALCO, a lab in California that is alleged to have provided performing-enhancement drugs to athletes such as former baseball star Barry Bonds.

"I always try to emphasize we're the anti-BALCO," Uckele said. "We're all about optimal health."

Uckele Health & Nutrition has increased its annual sales from about \$4.5 million in 2005 to \$14 million this year, Uckele said. The last two years it's landed on the Inc. magazine 5000 list of the fastest-growing companies.

The company has about 70 employees, up from 50 1 1/2 years ago and 25 five years ago.

Company officials plan to add 13,000 to 15,000 square feet to its 34,000-square-foot facilities, with groundbreaking expected this spring. That comes on the heels of an 18,000-square-foot expansion in 2008 and the addition of 3,000 square feet in 2009.

## Uckele Health & Nutrition

**LOCATION:** 5600 Silberhorn Highway, Blissfield.

**FOUNDED:** 1961.

**EMPLOYEES:** About 70.

**PRODUCTS:** Uckele develops, manufactures and sells nutritional supplements for humans and animals.

**ON THE WEB:** [www.uckele.com](http://www.uckele.com).

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