



THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION RESEARCH

Natural Force: Third Party Certifications and a Remote Workforce to Drive Creativity and Productivity

Tobias Roberts ¹  | Karen Pendergrass ² 

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¹Department of Community Research, The Paleo Foundation, El Salvador.

²Department of Standards, The Paleo Foundation, Encinitas, CA

CONTACT

¹Email: tobias@paleofoundation.org

²Email: karen@paleofoundation.com

²Twitter: [@5wordsorlesskp](#)

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THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION RESEARCH**Natural Force: Third Party Certifications and a Remote Workforce to Drive Creativity and Productivity**Tobias P. Roberts ¹  | Karen E. E. Pendergrass ² ¹Department of Standards, Paleo Foundation, Encinitas, CA²Department of Standards, Paleo Foundation, New York, NY**Correspondence**Tobias Roberts
Department of Community Research,
Paleo Foundation, El Salvador**Contact**¹Email: karen@paleofoundation.com¹Twitter: @5WordsorlessKP²Email: tobias@paleofoundation.org**Abstract**

Natural Force is a health food brand with a constantly expanding line of health-enhancing supplements. The self-funded, \$10,000 startup company grew by over 400 percent a year with an innovative workforce strategy, employing only remote workers. The brand also relies heavily on its several, independent, third party certifications as a means to attract customers and new retail clients. This Natural Force case study analyzes the role of independent, third-party certifications in building the trust of a customer base in order to generate brand growth.

KEYWORDS

Third party certification, Natural Force, Certified B Corporation, Remote workforce

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that less than one-quarter of the American population is getting the recommended amount of exercise per week never before have America's gyms and fitness/health centers been more visited. [1] There were over 60 million active gym memberships in 2017, up from just 46 million gym membership a decade earlier [2].

Simply put, people want to live healthier lives, and staying fit is high on the priority of list for millions of people across the country. Alongside gym memberships, nutritional or dietary supplements are another essential element that people rely on to help them meet their nutritional and wellness related goals.

According to one recent report, the global dietary supplements market was worth \$123.28 billion dollars in 2019 [3]. Over the next couple of years, this market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 8.2 percent.

Unfortunately, many supplements that are deemed as "healthy" or "nutritious" are often filled with an absurd amount of artificial fillers, preservatives, colorants, and other chemical additives.

In 2009, two gym buddies came together to create Natural Force, a health food and supplement brand focused on helping consumers find nutrition supplements that they can trust [4]. The brand focuses on bringing the "nutritious" aspect back into the supplement industry. Besides rejecting all unnecessary fillers, synthetic colors, and other artificial ingredients, most of the company's products incorporate herbs and superfoods that have been time-tested by ancestral cultures around the world.

Over the past decade, co-founders Joe Rakoski and Justin Quinn have built a thriving health food brand that has revolutionized the supplement industry. The company grew an impressive 1,161 percent from 2014

to 2017. Last year, they ranked in the top 20 percent of Inc.'s annual guide to the 5,000 fastest-growing privately held companies in the U.S., showing over 458 percent annual growth and netting \$4 million in revenue [5].

2 | WHO IS NATURAL FORCE?

Natural Force got its start when Rakoski and Quinn pooled together \$10,000 of their personal savings, sourced natural, raw ingredients to make their own nutritional supplements, and hired a manufacturer to make their products. From those humble beginnings, the company's product catalog today includes a huge variety of natural, health-enhancing supplements, including clean proteins like grass-fed Collagen Peptides, wild-caught Marine Collagen, Bone Broth Protein, Organic Whey Protein, Whey Isolate, and Plant Protein.

Natural Force also makes and markets high quality fats such as their Keto Coffee Creamer and Organic MCT Oil. Other superfood and fitness-related supplements include functional mushroom, and adaptogen powered performance blends like Raw Tea, Organic Pre-Workout, Cordyceps Pro, Alpha Strength, and Tribal Endurance. Most of the company's products have received some sort of certification, including gluten-free, keto, kosher, non-GMO, organic, paleo, and vegan certified products.

On the company's website, consumers can shop for a wide variety of health and nutritional supplements through filtering products by diet and by goal. For example, people can search for Natural Force supplements that respond to the following goals: metabolism, energy, digestion, joints, and beauty. Similarly, the products offered by the brand can be filtered according to popular diets such as Keto, Paleo, vegan, organic, gluten-free, and non-GMO.

2 | THE DECISION TO EMPLOY A REMOTE WORKFORCE

So how does a health food brand focused on transforming the dietary and nutritional supplement industry grow from a self-funded \$10,000 startup to a company growing by over 400 percent a year with \$4 million in revenue?

Interestingly enough, during the early stages of their business, Rakoski and Quinn were invited to participate in Shark Tank, the business reality TV series where entrepreneurs attempt to convince a panel of five investors to invest in their company. After running some numbers, however, both of them decided that their business plan and model didn't require a large sum of money to get started. They actually turned down the invitation to Shark Tank and instead focused on raising money from friends and family who trusted them and believed in the vision and purpose of their brand.

The real growth of Natural Force, however, took off when they began to build a team. Instead of going the "traditional" route of renting space in an office building and hiring local employees, Quinn and Rakoski believed that hiring a remote workforce would make more sense on many different levels. According to Quinn, "there are people in three different states, different countries, and everyone works remotely. Even Joe and I. Joe is in Maryland and I'm in Florida. We lived near each other in Maryland and we had an office above one of my high-school friend's parent's insurance company, but we got to a point where we both wanted to go different places." [6]

Companies of all different sizes that relied either partly or completely on a remote workforce enjoyed an estimated \$5 billion in cost savings in 2018 [7]. According to PGI news, getting rid of burdensome overhead costs such as rent, utilities, building insurance, etc. when working with full-time remote workers adds up to about \$10,000 in savings per employee per year [8].

Saving on overhead costs is certainly one tangible benefit that comes with hiring remote workers. However, other studies have also shown that remote workers tend to drastically increase the productivity levels of the company. Stanford University carried out a two-year study that compared productivity levels between people in traditional office setting and those who worked from home. The study concluded that productivity levels for people who worked from home were much higher than those in office settings, and added a full day of productivity each week [9]. Furthermore, the study found that remote employees working from home had higher levels of concentration, employee attrition rate decreased by half, and fewer sick days were taken. Corroborating the data mentioned above, the study also found that businesses could save up to \$2,000 per employee per year on eliminating rent expenses.

Tony Federico, VP of Marketing at Natural Force added in an interview with The Paleo Foundation that “communication tools like Slack and Zoom are also widely available and easy to use, so we felt confident that we would be able to translate the benefits of a physical office to a digital workspace. A digital workforce would also allow us to recruit the best talent, regardless of where they live, without the need for them to relocate and disrupt their lives. With that calculus in mind, we made the decision to go fully remote and virtual with our team in 2017.

Looking back on this decision, especially in light of the completely unforeseen advent of Covid-19, we are extremely happy that we made that choice.”

Natural Force relies entirely on a remote team of employees. However, they also spend energy and resources to make sure that the team is all on the same page and committed to the same goals. According to Quinn, “we hire remotely, and when we do that, one of the first key steps is we’ll have them come to Florida to meet with us, to indoctrinate them into our culture. We do some work for a couple days and set some objectives, and then they go back home. We still see each other, but the time that we do see each other is either right when they come on or every year at the summit, and then we go to events throughout the year” [10].

The Natural Force team relies on several messaging services such as Slack to maintain constant streams of communication. Freedcamp, a project management platform and cloud-based file storage systems like Dropbox also help the company effectively collaborate on projects and business goals. “This model really forces us to keep solid processes in place and focus on healthy communication,” says Quinn [11]. Without clear goals and consistent workflows, nothing would ever get done.”

While perhaps unconventional, a dedication to a remote workforce is one of the keys to Natural Force’s sustained success. The workplace systems Quinn and Rakoski have put into motion have allowed for extremely efficient workflows, and the flexible schedules that naturally arise with a workforce spread across the globe have also helped individual team members to create rhythms that maximize their productivity levels. Quinn also mentions that hiring remotely has allowed Natural Force to attract tech-

savvy individuals and hire a more diverse team of employees.

Natural Force has also specifically chosen to only work with remote employees because, as a health supplement brand, they believe in the concept of holistic health. Working a monotonous 9 to 5 job in a bland office environment with tedious morning and afternoon commutes can be draining, both physically and mentally. According to Rakoski, “we believe you should begin living your life right now...That means having the flexibility to do so, to travel, and contribute to life-long learning and growth [12].”

Lastly, working with an entirely remote workforce also reduces the company’s carbon footprint. “Our company has always believed in questioning the status quo, so when our team began to grow, we looked at the actual costs versus benefits of a physical office space,” Federico tells us. “On one hand, a physical office allows for direct face-to-face communication between team members, which is obviously a great thing, but it is very inefficient otherwise. In addition to the immediate expense of leasing office space, there are heating/cooling costs that put demands on our natural resources. Employees are also required to drive to and from work which burns more fossil fuels and impacts worker well-being by imposing hours of commute time. By comparison, a digital office space allows employees to utilize their own homes, so there is no additional demand on resources and there is no need to commute.”

4 | BECOMING A B-CORPORATION AS A “FORCE” FOR GOOD

Natural Force has leveraged the advantages of a remote workforce to increase employee satisfaction

and productivity levels in order to grow their brand. Instead of simply focusing on increasing their bottom line of profit, however, the brand is also committed to contributing to wider environmental and social benefits. Recently, the company has received certification as a B Corporation. This certification process allows mission-driven companies to show their customers that they “meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose [13].”

As part of a global movement of people using business as a force for good, Natural Force states that “we believe in using business (and profit) as a force for good. Each year we will publish a public Impact Assessment...that ensures that we are continually meeting the highest standards. [14]” According to their 2018 report, “Natural Force supports its workers by offering medical and dental health benefits, living wages, paid parental leave for both primary and secondary caregivers, and annual bonuses to all full-time employees. Our culture also encourages a positive work-life balance by allowing all employees to enjoy the benefits of working in a virtual office environment with flexible hours.”

The company also scored high on their 2018 B-Corporation assessment due to their commitment to sustainable sourcing of organic, non-GMO ingredients and a pledge to only packaging their supplements in fully recyclable packaging. The business model exemplified by Natural Force proves that health food brands and entrepreneurial endeavors can be extremely successful while maintaining a focus on fair workforce practices and environmental ethics.

5 | THE ROLE OF THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATIONS IN BUILDING THE TRUST OF A CONSUMER BASE

From the outset, Natural Force chose to use several independent third-party certifications for their products. Tony Federico, VP of Marketing at Natural Force, comments that “our goal is to provide our customers nutrition they can trust, but we don’t expect them to simply take our word for it! That’s why in 2018 we opened up our business to B Lab and went through the process of becoming a certified B Corp (Benefit Corporation) as this puts the values of environmental sustainability, public transparency, and legal accountability right into our corporate charter.”

Becoming a B Corporation fit into the company’s sustainability-focused business model, and also allowed for a greater sense of transparency. “We send all of our products to third-party laboratories for testing, the results of which we share freely with our customers right on our website, so customers can see exactly what is, and what is not, in our products in full detail,” Federico mentions.

A recent study titled “A Meta-Analysis of Food Labeling Effects on Consumer Diet Behaviors and Industry Practices” published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found that food labeling practices did have some effects on consumer choices [15]. Specifically, the study determined that increased consumer interest in nutrition labels and nutrition claims reduced the intake of “generally unhealthy choices” by 13 percent.

However, with half of Americans claiming to find food labels misleading, companies like Natural Force understand and take advantage of the need for Third Party certification programs in building the trust of

their customer base. “That’s why we work with trusted, third-party certifiers such as The Paleo Foundation, Project Non-GMO, and American Humane, as this confirms our dedication to sourcing the cleanest, best-quality ingredients possible,” Federico affirms.

But which third party certifications should health food brands prioritize? “Today’s consumers are looking for nutrition products that fit their specific values, which is why each certification is valuable in its own way,” he explains. “For people following very low carbohydrate ketogenic diets, seeing a Keto Certified seal is very impactful. For those who “eat like a caveman” and want to avoid Neolithic foods like grains, legumes, and industrial seed oils, Paleo Certified is key. And even if a consumer does not follow a specific diet, seeing a variety of certifications like Paleo and Keto may inspire them to learn more about these dietary approaches, so there is still value there!”

When initially when starting out as a brand, Natural Force was inherently attracted to the Paleo Diet as an inherent part of their brand identity. “Our founders Joe and Justin were following a Paleo diet when they started Natural Force, so we have been Paleo-minded from the very beginning,” Federico says. “From a marketing perspective, this led to us attending events like Paleo f(x) where we were able to get direct product feedback from enthusiastic and highly informed Paleo consumers. Our Certified Paleo products have also been featured in Paleo Magazine numerous times and have even won Paleo Magazine reader’s choice awards, accolades that 100 percent boosted our brand awareness and consumer interest,” he says.

Not only did Natural Force's Paleo certification help to cement their brand identity and create a greater transparency with customers, but it also was fundamental in helping them conquer retail spaces early on in their formation. "Being early adopters of both Paleo and Keto Certification also gave us an advantage in the brick-and-mortar retail space as well as online," Federico says. "Instead of 'jumping on the bandwagon' when these trends took off, we were already buckled-up and ready to go!"

Federico believes that buyers for medium to large retailers are continuously analyzing market trends, consumer preferences, and other relevant data related to what people are purchasing for their dinner tables. "Retail buyers are no different than any other customer, so when they are seeing *Keto Diet* everywhere, and you can present them with an opportunity to carry something that is Keto Certified, it is very compelling," he says.

The company's Keto and Paleo certifications have also played an important role in helping Natural Force to determine which retail spaces to prioritize for their products, based on the coherency of the fit. "(Our third party certification) help us to identify which retailers we even want to work with, as we are very selective with our wholesale partnerships," Federico mentions. "When a retailer is interested in Paleo and Keto, it is usually a sign that we will have a strong values match with them, so it is a great indicator of potential in the partnership."

For startup health food brands, picking and choosing which retailers to work with might seem like a luxury. However, Federico believes that using your third party certifications as a cornerstone of your brand identity can help to orient and direct your marketing strategy, your product formulation, and other important aspects of growing the brand.

"Even before a product launches, knowing what certification you are targeting can help guide the formulation process. For example, if a new brand owner wants to make a low-carb chocolate bar, going into the process with a Keto certification in mind can help guide the formulation process and will make it more efficient," Federico says.

"They could, for example, reference The Paleo Foundation's Keto resources and see which sweeteners are appropriate for a Keto diet. After formulation is complete, the brand could then reach out to Keto influencers and thought leaders to get direct feedback and input on their concept. And finally, when the product is ready to launch, creative assets focused on the products Keto Certified status can be activated with PPC advertising campaigns that directly target consumers interested in Keto snacks and desserts."

Market trends and consumer demand are in a state of constant fluctuation, as any brand knows. Whereas some third party certifications languish in stagnant policies and standards, Natural Force appreciates the effort of The Paleo Foundation to remain at the forefront of these evolving issues. "Dietary trends are constantly evolving, so we appreciate how The Paleo Foundation regularly updates certifications like Paleo and Keto to match the latest science and emerging trends," Federico says.

6 | NATURAL FORCE CERTIFICATIONS

- Certified Paleo
- Keto Certified
- Non-GMO Project Certified
- USDA Organic
- Certified B Corporation

7 | CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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