

Authentic, old-fashioned and online

Three TikTok herbalists on how they've built large audiences for their small brands

By Rick Polito

Amelia South was mowing her lawn in western Connecticut when a flower turned into a video. The video was short, a quick herbalism lesson on the difference between dandelion and the cat's ear *hypochaeris radicata* she'd seen in the grass. Like all the videos she deploys for her **Black Sun Farm** herbs company, South shot it herself, on her phone, no microphone, no professional lighting. She edited it on her phone, too.

That didn't keep it from being a hit.

"It's got, like, 500,000 views or something, right? Thousands of thousands of comments and shares, people saying, 'Oh my God, I didn't know this. Thank you so much. Thank you for teaching me,'" says South, who now boasts 114,000 followers and 1.6 million likes on TikTok.

South's story and her Black Sun Farm herbal microbrand are typical of an herbalist movement on the video-sharing platform, where stories of people who become passionate about herbs, make tinctures in

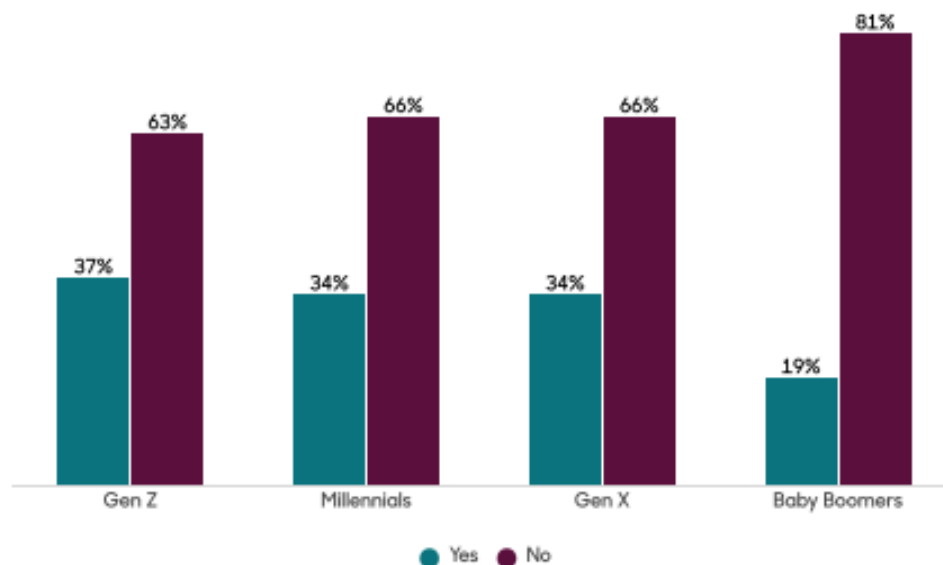
NBJ Takeaways

- TikTok provides a platform that helps microbrand herbalists leapfrog the farmers market stage
- Viewers on TikTok connect with herbalists who present themselves in an authentic way that might be impossible for large brands
- TikTok is home to a large community of herbalists of color

their kitchen and go online to proselytize and create a community might be as much a call back to the roots of herbalism as it is a sign of technology's reach.

For Sean Emery, the videos he uses to promote his **Big Springs Apothecary** products demand 100% of his attention for

Consumers buying dietary supplements on TikTok or TikTok Shop, by generation



Source: Nutrition Business Journal survey targeting average consumers. Completed July 2024; n= 7,532; powered by the Survey online platform.
 Question: "Do you currently buy any dietary supplements (e.g., vitamins, minerals, protein powders, probiotics, herbs and botanicals, etc.) on TikTok or TikTok Shop?"

5% of his day. “When the kid’s asleep and the wife is taking a bath, I have a 90-minute window where I can create videos, and that’s usually it. So, sometimes I can fire off 10, and sometimes it’s one.”

Shay Koloff found TikTok when she was looking for ways to promote her **Broom Circle Holistic Healing and Tea Room** in Colorado Springs and discovered a way to not only get people into the store but also connect with a deep network of other Black herbalists. “I think my biggest draw, my biggest positive, is that I get to cater to that small percentage of people who don’t really get a lot of advice from people who look like them.”

Many of those connections, she says, would likely be impossible without TikTok. “I don’t think I would have had as much reach just doing it the old-fashioned way, when you go out and hand out flyers or you just have events,” Koloff says, describing TikTok as a unique opportunity, even in the age of ubiquitous social media. “This platform gives you that immediate reach to people that could genuinely have the same interest as you.”

Following the herbs

The constellation of herbalists on TikTok is vast, with hundreds of people talking about the power of herbs, sharing recipes and reviews, discussing the finer points of the craft, and railing against the sorry state of Americans’ health. Not all of them sell products, but the ones that do each have their own story of what brought them to herbalism and then to TikTok.

Emery knows his story is very different from the expected herbalist’s arc. Emery graduated from the Naval Academy and spent eight years aboard submarines in a life as diagrammed as it was, literally, confining. He left the Navy in 2011 and “worked in a cubicle for about three seconds” before going on to teach CrossFit and run swimming and jujitsu schools. Those teaching roles tugged him toward wellness, and it was in pursuing a master’s degree in clinical nutrition that he discovered herbalism. “I was blown away,” he recalls. “I went from herbal denier to herbal proselytizer in, literally, one lecture.”

Koloff discovered herbs at a community garden and built a practice to boost

“I don’t have a large company behind me. I don’t have some cool investor. I don’t have any awesome, big, giant warehouse or anything like that. I’m just a regular person who worked really hard to get everything that I’ve got. And I think that a lot of people also can relate to that.”

– Shay Koloff, Zenith Moon Co.

her own health that later blossomed into a community. “It started with teas from my dried herbs in my garden, and then it just grew,” she recalls.

South turned to herbalism when conventional medicine came up short. “I had a colicky 2- or 3-week-old infant in my arms all day long,” she recalls. “I had no idea what to do, and I looked up some remedies.”

Neither of the three knew that their first exposure to herbs was going to change their lives. Neither of them knew about TikTok, either, but it didn’t take long for them to sense the power the medium held.

Apprenticing and working on organic farms in Connecticut weren’t providing a stable income for South, something that inspired the transition from herbalism as a passion to herbalism as a profession. She’d done some farmers market sales, but it was a sideline at best, and when a job search in 2022 produced little more than frustration, she decided to lean into herbalism as a career. TikTok made that passion-to-profession transition easier. “I started making TikTok videos like, ‘Hey, this is what this plant is. This is what I do with this plant. This is how I work with this plant.’ Something went viral, and all of a sudden, I got a crapload of followers. It turned into, ‘Oh, hey, people actually want to listen to me.’”

Selling her knowledge as an herbalist and a forager in books and online classes, as well as a small selection of tinctures and salves, South has turned herbalism from something that was grossing her

“maybe a couple thousand a year” into a modest income, the vast majority of that coming via TikTok. “I would say at least 80%,” she says.

That modest income, however, has not come easily. Part of how South built her following was with daily “live” sessions, talking on camera and responding to comments and questions from viewers. It was rewarding and also exhausting. “I basically went live almost every single day for 18 solid months,” she says, sharing that she is now taking a break.

Mysteries of the algorithm

South recalls days when “the algorithm blessed me,” and, like all creators on TikTok, she is counting that blessing every time she turns on her phone’s camera. Emery found it once and is confident he can crack the code again.

Emery’s viral breakthrough came when he brought some of his topical bitter oil to his mother and posted a video of her reaction. The sentimental and authentic connection scored thousands of views and the best one-day sales he’d ever seen. “I posted that, and it immediately was 10 sales. And so I thought, ‘Oh, let me boost this a little bit.’ And I got about 80 sales from that one video,” he recalls.

He’s on the hunt to do that again and more regularly. Right now, with what he describes as a “sort of unintentional, sort of sporadic investment” of time and effort, he’s garnering \$2,000 to \$3,000 in sales

each month. With a more organized strategy, he is convinced TikTok can give him a breakthrough moment for his bitter topical anti-aging concept. “If I can nail that story down and get that story out there to more and more people, then I think the \$1,000 days could become the norm instead of the exception,” Emery says.

Authenticity matters

For Koloff, TikTok has been as much about making connections as making sales, though she does steer viewers to her **Zenith Moon Co.** site, where they can buy herbal teas, tonics and potions or sign up for the classes she teaches. But whether it’s making sales or creating community, Koloff is convinced that showing up as a real person, and not a marketing pitch, is the most essential component in the TikTok toolkit.

“I don’t have a large company behind me. I don’t have some cool investor. I don’t have any awesome, big, giant warehouse or anything like that. I’m just a regular person who worked really hard to get everything that I’ve got. And I think that a lot of people also can relate to that,” she says.

Koloff will sometimes shoot TikTok videos in her garden, where she grows the ingredients that might go into a tea or a tonic. That ultimate transparency—the producer making the product on camera from ingredients she grew in her backyard—is essential not just to making the connection with her followers but also to opening up herbalism to people who might otherwise be put off by its counter-culture trappings. It’s honest. It’s real. It’s more accessible, she says, than “someone who just kind of shows these really pretty, nicely wrapped bottles, and you don’t really know what’s in them,

“I’m not running hundreds of thousands of dollars of ads. It’s just me. I’ve got the relationship. That’s all I have.”

— Sean Emery, Big Springs Apothecary

and you don’t really know what they do, but they just say they’re good.”

The unpolished authenticity and immediacy that defines TikTok might be the takeaway for large brands, say Koloff, Emery and South. No large brand leader is showing up live on TikTok every day for 18 months the way South did. No supplements CEO is waiting till their kids are in bed to make videos like Emery does.

People are hungry for that real connection, South insists, and they’re not getting it from the supplement industry. “I think people are desperately seeking some kind of community and someone that’s actually going to hear them, because I’ve been the person who goes into the health food store, or maybe Whole Foods or some kind of co-op, and even if there is somebody there that knows what they’re talking about that could maybe point you in the right direction, they don’t *know* you.”

Her followers, she says, do “know” her. “I’m a real person, having real situations. This is my real experience, and I get straight to the point. So that’s why they like watching me.”

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— Amelia South, Black Sun Farm

Emery also believes people respond to his frank and honest demeanor. He doesn’t speak of herbalism as a mystical or mysterious practice but, instead, as something practical. “The value that I bring to the table, and why I have whatever following I have, is because I help people cut through the bullshit,” he says. “You post a comment. You ask me a question. I can reply to you. I can help you. I can serve you.”

Koloff says her followers respond to her from-the-heart teachings, but she also appreciates that people of color can find on TikTok—from her and other minority herbalists—something they are not going to find in the average health food store. “Most holistic fields are pretty white-washed,” Koloff says. “You’re going to see a ton of people in those fields, and most of them are not Brown.”

The videos produced by Koloff, South or Emery would never be described as polished. But polish is rarely a plus on TikTok, they all agree. Emery contends that TikTok communities don’t like polish. They don’t like slick. “I don’t have a million-dollar budget. My label is absolute trash. My Shopify page isn’t spectacular. I’m not running hundreds of thousands of dollars of ads. It’s just me. I’ve got the relationship. That’s all I have.”

South’s appraisal is much the same. She has the relationships and the reality. Sometimes she has spontaneity.

That’s how a flower in the grass turned into a video.

And 500,000 views. 📺