

Bio Engineering and Bacteria Boost Jasmina Aganovic's Entrepreneurship Journey

Bruce Mendelsohn, Principal, [The Hired Pen](#)

At 14 years old, Jasmina Aganovic looked in the mirror and saw her future.

Struggling with a common adolescent skin condition, Jasmina wanted to understand how applying to her face indecipherable and unpronounceable chemicals would help heal her. Twenty years later, Jasmina's insatiable curiosity and indomitable entrepreneurial spirit has carved out a new, previously unthinkable segment in the cosmetics industry: Engineering bacteria (microbiomes) to keep us clean and healthy.

Breakthroughs in the \$675 billion worldwide cosmetics industry are hard to engineer, much less achieve. Up until 2014, bacteria boosters—especially early evangelists like Jasmina—were mocked, maligned, or simply misunderstood.



Jasmina Aganovic
President of Mother
Dirt

So Jasmina traveled a lonely, uncharted entrepreneurship path.

Trusting her personal passion and instincts, her MIT education, her professional experience in various industry roles, her network of prominent bio-engineers and cosmetics industry professionals, she persevered. Now [President of Mother Dirt](#), Jasmina leads a skincare company ranked among the fastest-growing wellness brands.

“Connecting the dots backward, my interest in this industry came from my personal struggles,” she reflects. “As a teen, I was curious about the chemistry of skincare products. When I went to MIT, this curiosity motivated me to major in Chemical and Biological Engineering, where I pursued every chance I could to continue tinkering and learning.”

Before graduating in 2009, Jasmina interned at IncTank. She recalls her first experience analyzing technology from the cosmetics industry as a lightbulb moment: “The IncTank internship tied it together for me. I learned that I could connect my personal passion with my academic pursuits.”

In the decade following her graduation, Jasmina worked in roles that provided her vital industry knowledge, experience, and contacts. At Fresh, she learned about the industry’s complex product development process. At Living Proof, she served on the company’s R&D Team with a complementary role in communications, promoting Living Proof’s products on QVC.

“At Living Proof I learned how to understand what resonates most with consumers,” she recalls. “We had amazing technology but we had to figure out how to share it so consumers would understand and buy our products in this highly competitive market.”

After leaving Living Proof, Jasmina took a slight detour at Hungry Fish Media (now Nutraclick). In hindsight, the detour proved prescient: At Nutraclick, Jasmina developed an understanding of how digital marketing and social media were fundamentally changing how consumers bought products.

“Although I couldn’t—and certainly wouldn’t—say this then, in retrospect I guess I grasped how this would be important knowledge,” she confessed, adding, “I sensed this was the direction in which the world was heading and I knew it would be important knowledge as my career progressed.”

At Nutraclick, Jasmina drew from her technical expertise and entrepreneurial spirit, proposing a cosmetics brand—“Stages of Beauty”—to be sold exclusively online. Jasmina’s first time managing a product development process from soup to nuts, she describes the concept as “let’s see if we can build a successful cosmetics brand online.”

Offering customized cosmetics products for different female age groups, Stages of Beauty was rebranded to Bona Clara. “As Bona Clara evolved, I became an intrapreneur,” Jasmina recalls. “I developed the brand from within. Some of this process was serendipitous; some was borne of necessity.” Although the brand grew, a series of other challenges led Jasmina to close down Bona Clara.

Repeating a well-worn aphorism, Jasmina concedes that every entrepreneur has setbacks. “Failure is a cruel but influential teacher. In my case, failure led me to Mother Dirt.”

“This role is the most comprehensive synergy of my technical background and what I’ve learned about branding, communications, and team management,” she explains. “I understand the technical nature and clinical research around this bacteria. My role was to build a brand and provide a vision. Plus, there’s the appeal of operational innovation: How do we manufacture, produce, ship and sell it? We were the first to figure this out.”

Jasmina also applies her media expertise, simplifying and clarifying the complex science of biomes to media outlets including the New York Times, National Public Radio, and Bloomberg Business Week.

A savvy, self-aware entrepreneur, Jasmina proudly shares: “it’s important for me to do well by doing good. I realize this is a cliché, but it’s also one of my guiding principles. I care a lot about what I do and I’m passionate about our products. If you lead with what fires you up, you’re going to be emotionally charged about it. The key is to harness your emotion constructively and positively.”

Asked to share factors that fueled her success as an entrepreneur and intrapreneur, Jasmina cites three:

- Networking: “I wish I did more. I’m somewhat introverted and this skill has been beyond my comfort zone. But I constantly push myself to do more of it, and I’m getting better.”
- Appreciation for the power of time: “I’m impatient by nature. I’ve always had this sense that I’m not moving fast enough. If you measure your success day-in and day-out, you’ll never have a sense of what you’ve done. If you zoom out, you’ll see what you’ve accomplished and you’ll realize some personal and professional rewards.”
- Perspective: “Entrepreneurship isn’t easy or sexy. It can be a grind. The media likes to promote stories about these unrealistic paths to success, and that’s a disservice to aspiring entrepreneurs. I try to have some perspective on my journey, which is always evolving.”

Jasmina’s advice for entrepreneurs:

- Appreciate time: “Its paucity and its plenty.”
- Practice being direct: “Especially true and important for female entrepreneurs.”
- Metacognition: “Recognize when you’re overthinking versus thinking critically.”
- Be comfortable making decisions in uncertainty: “Decide based on your values and trust your instincts. Learn from the mistakes you make and don’t repeat them.”

While professionally challenged and fulfilled at Mother Dirt, Jasmina optimistically looks at the horizon: "I'll always be attracted to and interested in new technologies—especially ones that need to be chiseled away to fully reveal their impact on the world."