

Three things you need to shake up your industry: Interview with Alma Ramirez-Acosta of Vibio

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There are many variables out of your control so if you don't maintain your focus and direction, you can easily get demotivated by everyday uncertainty. Meet Female Disruptor: Alma Ramirez-Acosta of Vibio.

Passionate about sex-positive education and recognizing the importance of sexuality on our overall wellbeing, Alma Ramirez-Acosta co-founded the leading sex-tech startup, Vibio, at the age of 23 with her childhood friend, Patricia Cervantes. With a vision to destigmatize pleasure, Vibio is disrupting the sextech industry by producing inclusive and untraditional sex toys that combine innovative design and app technology to encourage sexual exploration, all the while presenting sex in a natural and fun way that is crucial to our overall wellbeing. Vibio has already pre-sold 450 units of their first product, Ella, an anatomically designed wearable and app-controlled vibrator, allowing users to play even across long distances, while its anatomical design makes it discreet, lightweight and breaks the stereotypes of traditional sex toys; Vibio is currently in the process of setting up mass production.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

I've always considered myself a sex-positive feminist, and so does my co-founder Patricia. We've known each other since we were three years old; we grew up together and became best friends. I first came across the sextech industry around five years ago and found it extremely interesting. Up until then, I had thought of the sex industry as a male-dominated space, and mostly tacky and unrealistic. That's why I was surprised to discover how the industry trends were shifting rapidly towards a more female-friendly environment and knew I wanted to be part of it.

There is still a lot of social change that needs to happen to create a widespread accepting attitude of sex and pleasure. Despite how common it is to think about or have sex, no one wants to talk about it. This is a problem because sex and pleasure can play a huge part in our overall wellbeing. Even the World Health Organization recognizes sex and pleasure as a human right, and defines sexuality as “a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.” The evidence is out there, but we also need brands that represent these values and make us feel comfortable with our sexual selves in order to shift the culture around sex, which is what Patricia and I want to tackle with Vibio.

Can you tell our readers what it is about the

work you're doing that's disruptive?

Vibio is a sex-positive sex toy brand that encourages sexual exploration and destigmatizes pleasure and sexual fantasies. We're building a range of inclusive and anatomically designed sex toys that can be controlled either in the same room or over long distances via our app. Given the lack of sexual education in our own upbringing, the app is also designed to educate people on sex. We do this by suggesting challenges, like new sexual experiences that our community may want to try out, and guiding users through their journeys. With the advancement of technology, we want to see sex toys evolve from just a play object to a more complete solution that helps users discover and learn about their sexuality.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

In a business like ours, it's easy to make funny mistakes. During the first few months of our journey, while I was still working for another company, I ran some intensive competitor analysis and product research that had me ordering sex toys to the office every week. I often ended up carrying them to places like the theatre or international train stations. In the beginning, I was a bit embarrassed when I was caught by security staff during searches, but in the end, I realised that this was (hopefully) going to be my life for the next 10 years and that, if my mission was to get people talking about sex more openly and naturally, I was almost certainly contributing to conversations already by not letting others shame me for carrying sex toys around.

We all need a little help along the journey. Who have been some of your mentors? Can you share a story about how they made an impact?

We've been extremely lucky to build Vibio in London where there's a lot of support for tech startups and female-led businesses. We are part of Google Campus for Startups, an initiative by Google that provides free office space, mentorship and workshops for early-stage founders. Joining helped us massively in the beginning. The campus practically taught me how to pitch there and even helped us grow our team, as we hired another member from the community.

The campus is a very diverse space where we've not only learned a lot, but also made very good friends that, prior to the pandemic, made our everyday brighter. The community is now online through a Slack channel where we can post any questions, updates and events. I would highly recommend any future entrepreneurs to consider finding a similar community for support, mentorship and camaraderie.

In today's parlance, being disruptive is usually a positive adjective. But is disrupting always good? When do we say the converse, that a system or structure has 'withstood the test of time'? Can you articulate to our readers when disrupting an industry is positive, and when disrupting an industry is

‘not so positive’? Can you share some examples of what you mean?

In my opinion, disruption can be classified as good or bad depending on whether the businesses behind it are putting their own benefit before that of the world or their consumers. The objective of disruptive innovation is to spot inefficiencies in an industry and create long-term value by tackling them, in the same way that we spotted how gamifying sex toys through an app could bring value beyond physical play. Positive innovation should make our lives easier and better, like when we went from desktop computers to laptops or from mobile phones to smartphones. These new technologies allow us to have more access to information in different situations and stay more connected to family and friends amongst other benefits. Even though there are pros and cons to this new lifestyle, overall, I'd say it has brought more value than harm. On the other hand, there have been innovations throughout history that have been widely adopted globally and brought no value other than creating profit for the businesses involved and polluting the environment. A clear example of this is programmed obsolescence for electronics. Many of the electronics that we use, including our fancy Macs and iPhones, are designed to deteriorate within a calculated lifespan so that we keep buying and upgrading our products.

Can you share 3 of the best words of advice you've gotten along your journey? Please give a story or example for each.

1. Building a startup is a marathon, not a sprint. I remind myself of this every day. Every founder that I've met on my journey has big plans and a great vision for their company, but startups are unfinished products and works in progress, which take time, trial and error and

input from others to succeed. There are many variables out of your control so if you don't maintain your focus and direction, you can easily get demotivated by everyday uncertainty. In our case, finding the right suppliers and nailing our design took over a year, a year of desperately wanting to launch a product to the market and not being able to. Because our product is physical, it takes time to build, package, and ship. Coordinating all of the parties involved is also a skill that we've had to develop on-the-go. Now that we're ready for mass production, it feels like taking a weight off our shoulders to finally be able to celebrate this first important milestone.

2. Build community. Not only because your community may turn into paying customers over time, but because seeing people excited about what you're building can be what keeps you going during tough days. In the business world, people are too busy with their own projects so being a small business owner can sometimes feel lonely. That's where having a community to lean on becomes a life-saver. Our community has been crucial for my mental health during lockdown. When the pandemic hit, it brought chaos with it. We experienced high levels of uncertainty, delays in operations, changes in the supply chain, shortages, our office closed indefinitely and, for a couple of weeks, we saw our dream dissipate in front of us. At the same time, we knew that we had to keep going and start running user testing sessions for our app. This was honestly our life vest, an energy booster to ditch all the negativity and pursue our mission against all odds.
3. Don't be afraid to get it wrong. Every mistake is a lesson learned and it's healthy to question your decisions and reassess strategy along the way. When we first came up with Vibio, we thought of building a voice controlled sex toy (like an Alexa of vibrators) to get people to talk more about sex with the premise that, the more users talked to the

toy, the more natural it would become over time. To us, it sounded like a fun, playful idea, but the feedback we got was that there were many situations where it would just not be possible to speak out loud in a play session such as in a flatshare. We were also told that voice technology wasn't ready yet — no one wants to hear "sorry, I didn't get that" while getting down and dirty! After a couple of weeks hearing similar feedback, we went back to the drawing board and started to think of alternatives that would allow us to tackle the same mission in a different way, and we've had to do this a couple of times to get to where we are now. Bottom line, none of those discarded ideas were a waste of time. They gave us huge insight into what our consumers were looking for and how we could make our product better.



We are sure you aren't done. How are you going to shake things up next?

Apart from continuing to build Vibio, I want to encourage more female founders to enter the sexual wellness space. Female intimate health and wellness is way behind because, up until the last decade, it wasn't

recognized as a worthy investment or considered a priority. There are outrageous examples of how female sexual health has been tackled in the past. Maya Dusenbery reports some of them in her 2018 book *Doing Harm: The Truth About How Bad Medicine and Lazy Science Leave Women Dismissed, Misdiagnosed and Sick*, explaining how, in the early 60s: “Observing that women tended to have lower rates of heart disease until their oestrogen levels dropped after menopause, researchers conducted the first trial to look at whether supplementation with the hormone was an effective preventive treatment. The study enrolled 8,341 men and no women ... And a National Institutes of Health-supported pilot study from Rockefeller University that looked at how obesity affected breast and uterine cancer didn’t enroll a single woman.” This shows how even industries that should be trusted like medicine and health are sometimes biased and deeply flawed. Luckily, we now have the power and opportunity to turn things around, but we need more sexual wellness warriors to make the change happen.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by ‘women disruptors’ that aren’t typically faced by their male counterparts?

From my experience, access to funding is one of the main challenges. We hear it everywhere; female founders receive less than 3% of VC money. Women disruptors also tend to be the only people building solutions to solve women’s problems and needs, which makes it hard to get the majority of investors to relate and garner their support because the majority of investors are male.

Do you have a book, podcast, or talk that's had a deep impact on your thinking? Can you share a story with us? Can you explain why it was so resonant with you?

One of my previous managers gave me a book called *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* before I went full-time with Vibio. It's a tale about the fundamentals of essentialism and how to stop measuring success in materialistic ways like money, possessions or popularity, and instead focus on what will keep you happy long term: health and wellness, real connections and knowledge. When building a business, it's easy to get stuck on venture validation systems, as I like to call them. These are variables that supposedly prove that your business is successful such as investment raised, media mentions and awards, but ignore that what really matters is whether people are using and loving your product and how you're making it better over time. This book reminds me to think in essential terms and ignore the fluff that society has created around success.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

"You'll never be successful at something if you don't try." As a kid, I was a real perfectionist and constantly felt a strong fear of failure. This led me to drop out of several extracurricular activities because I thought I wasn't good enough or talented enough to pursue them. Over time, I realised that no one is born knowing everything and that in order to excel at something, you have to persevere, practice and learn. Over time I realised that, by avoiding what I wasn't good at, I was becoming my own enemy. Change didn't happen overnight, it was a process of learning how

to see value in making mistakes, enjoying witnessing progress and self-acceptance.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. □

I would encourage all parents to talk more about sex with their children, especially when they are entering adolescence, but also earlier on. Many of us grow up with stigma around sex and initiate our sexual lives not knowing what to do, how to treat our partners and what to expect. Now more than ever, we need to start having The Talk at a younger age, and it needs to be much more open and extensive. The average age at which children are first exposed to pornography is currently at seven years old. This can potentially lead to a very unhealthy relationship with sex if there's no educational support from parents or school teachers. Children need to learn consent, acceptance of different sexualities and identities, and understand what happens to the human body during sex. There's no point in trying to avoid this conversation when youngsters can freely navigate the dark areas of the internet, especially because the new generations shape the future.

This article was originally published on [ParlayMe](#).



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