

mini-case 2-945-000

May 6, 2021

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Following the Scent to Success to Grow her Rose Water Business: The Case of Zeina Wazzan

Zeina Wazzan took a break in her busy schedule to stop and smell the roses. Wazzan was in her workshop in Mersin, Turkey, admiring the machine she had just purchased that would allow her to expand her business by increasing production of rose water and other essences. She had also just received an official business permit—a notable accomplishment given that she was a Syrian refugee in a challenging environment.ⁱ Most Syrian refugees in Turkey operated in the informal economy due to factors including a language barrier, bureaucratic hurdles, structural issues in the Turkish labor market, and negative perceptions about refugees.

Before purchasing the high-capacity machine, Wazzan had been producing essences in small batches using a traditional, hand-cranked machine. She had been selling through three channels: directly to friends and acquaintances, through a local café, and in bulk to a wholesaler for export.

The business permit would allow Wazzan to start marketing her products under her own brand name: Gul Suyu Zeina Wazzan (Rose Water by Zeina Wazzan). In Turkey, brand names were allowed only on products produced by a licensed business.

With her increased production capacity and ability to sell under her own brand, Wazzan weighed three distribution options:

- Opening a small shop that would carry her rose water and other essences, along with some natural products produced by other Syrian women.
- Expanding her wholesale business by finding additional bulk buyers who would purchase her rose water and resell it to cosmetics manufacturers.
- Growing her retail business by securing deals with additional shops in Mersin.

ⁱ Only 65,000 Syrian refugees were granted work authorizations through 2018, out of a pool of one million who were eligible, according to the Interior Minister of Turkey. For more information visit: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/07/18/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-need-better-access-to-formal-jobs>.

Among the options and opportunities, Wazzan knew she would have to be strategic about how to expand and realistic about the time it would take. She was mainly on her own. While her husband helped in production and her two teenagers pitched in when needed, she still had no employees. Where, she wondered, did her biggest and best opportunities lie?

Background

Growing up in Latakia, Syria, Wazzan enjoyed working alongside her father, who was an *attar*.ⁱⁱ She was fascinated with how he used traditional methods to produce essences from the rose bushes on their property, and she learned the craft from him. When Wazzan's father died, she continued to make rose essence and shared it with her friends and family. Wazzan saw how much they appreciated the essence—both for its skincare benefits and as a food flavoring—so she decided to sell it at her uncle's shop in Latakia.

Meanwhile, Wazzan studied fine arts at a university in Syria and went on to become an art teacher. A civil war broke out in Syria in 2011. Five years later, with the war still raging, Wazzan, along with her husband and two children, fled to southern Turkey, first to Antakya and then settling in Mersin. Wazzan was delighted to discover the familiar rose bushes of her youth there. She recalled how the wonderful scent of roses attracted the butterflies during the process of creating essence. It brought back happy memories of working alongside her father.

Unable to continue her career as an art teacher and inspired by the rose bushes, Wazzan decided to revive her essence business in Mersin. Known in Turkey as the “Pearl of the Mediterranean,” with a population of nearly 1.8 million and a growing tourism industry, Mersin presented a strong consumer market. Wazzan learned that in Turkey most flower essence was mass-produced using chemical solvents. She saw an opportunity to differentiate her product, which used natural production methods.

Wazzan procured a small extraction machine from Syria, similar to the one her father had used. She initially imported her flowers from Syria, but eventually found local suppliers. In 2018, she launched her business on a small scale. This allowed her to confirm there was sufficient demand for her rose water. Wazzan then scaled up and purchased the larger equipment, allowing her to increase production tenfold.

Product

Wazzan's main product was rose water, which can be used for beauty, culinary, and medicinal purposes (see **Exhibit 1**). She chose to market her rose water as a beauty product to promote healthy skin. Rose water addresses skin problems related to acne, eczema, scars, and aging. It contains antioxidants that protect skin cells from damage and also has anti-inflammatory properties. Wazzan produced her rose water using a steam distillation method. An alternative method used chemical solvents, such as hexane, which extracted about ten times as much oil as the steam distillation method. However, this could pose a health hazard, and Wazzan preferred the natural, chemical-free method of steam distillation. (See **Exhibit 2** for a production description and photos of her new machine.)

Distribution and Pricing

Wazzan marketed her rose water as a skincare product, but it could also be used for culinary purposes. Wazzan's retail customer was Tea 'n' Cake, a cozy café in one of Mersin's largest shopping centers. She

ⁱⁱ In Arabic, *attar* refers to someone who has a comprehensive knowledge of medicinal and healthy herbs and other plants and who uses them to make products, including essences and oils.

supplied the rose water in 50 milliliter (mL) bottles and then the shop branded them with the Tea 'n' Cake name (see **Exhibit 3**). Tea 'n' Cake paid 15 TRY (Turkish lira) for each bottle and sold them to its customers for 30 TRY.ⁱⁱⁱ

Wazzan's bulk sales were to a wholesaler that resold her rose water to a cosmetics company based in the Netherlands. Recently, a Lebanese cosmetics company contacted Wazzan about ordering her product, signaling additional demand. The wholesale business was attractive because it was simple and efficient; one customer bought a large volume of product in a single order. For wholesale customers, Wazzan sold the rose water for 50 TRY per liter, packaged in large glass containers called demijohns.

Costs

Wazzan's largest cost was for the roses. To produce one liter of rose water required one kilogram of roses, at an average cost of 25 TRY per kilogram. She paid approximately 3 TRY per liter for water and gas (see **Table 1**).

Packaging was another key cost. For retail sales, a small glass bottle (50 mL) cost 2 TRY and a one-liter bottle cost 6 TRY. For wholesale orders, a ten-liter bottle cost 10 TRY and an average order was 30 liters (see **Table 1**).

With the purchase of the new machine, she moved production outside her home, renting a facility for 700 TRY per month. This was the only fixed cost she accounted for, as she did not factor in the cost of her labor (see **Table 2**).

Table 1
Wazzan's Variable Costs

Costs to produce one liter of rose water	
Item	Cost per unit (in TRY)
Roses (1 kilogram)	25
Gas and water (per 1 liter of product)	3

Packaging costs	
Item	Cost per unit (in TRY)
50-mL bottle	2
1-liter bottle	6
10-liter demijohn	10

Table 2
Wazzan's Fixed Costs*

Item	Cost per month (in TRY)
Rent	700

*Labor is also a cost, but it is not currently being accounted for.

ⁱⁱⁱ As of the writing of this case, 7.5 TRY equaled approximately US\$1. So a café customer paid US\$4 per bottle.

Revenue from the rose water did not cover costs when factoring in the cost of labor—which included Wazzan working full-time on the business and her husband and two teenagers working as needed. She had no employees on payroll.

Expansion Plans

To grow the business, Wazzan was considering three distribution options:

- **Wholesale bulk distribution:** So far, Wazzan had one steady wholesale customer and one promising prospect. Between the two, demand could grow steadily. Wazzan thought that, within a year, these customers might need as much as she could produce, even with the larger machine she had acquired.
- **Distribution to other retailers:** Wazzan could expand her business by selling through Tea 'n' Cake, as well as by finding additional shops to carry her product. She could sell under her own brand name instead of by private label, as she did with Tea 'n' Cake. The best retail targets would be cafés, gift shops, upscale food shops, and body care shops.
- **Distribution through her own shop:** Wazzan thought about opening a small shop in Mersin where she could sell her products and perhaps those of other Syrian women. Mersin had a large community of Syrian refugees, a source of both suppliers and customers for the new shop. Wazzan thought it would be a valuable service to provide other Syrian refugees with a sales channel for their products. She envisioned selling chocolates, ma'amoul (a filled semolina cookie), and klijah (a spiced cookie). She also saw this as an opportunity to market her business to the Turkish community and introduce them to unique offerings from her culture.

Wazzan wondered how to put together a channel strategy, given these options. Now with a business permit in hand, Wazzan was also wondering if she should invest time in building her own brand. If so, what would a strategic plan look like?

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 Wazzan with her Rose Water Product



Source: Zeina Wazzan.

Exhibits (cont.)**Exhibit 2**
Wazzan's Production Method

Shown below is Wazzan's high-capacity extraction machine. It utilizes gas and water supply lines to generate pressurized steam. The steam then circulates through rose petals contained in the machine and releases the essential oil from tiny sacs on the petals. The essential oil rises with the steam and passes through a tube that goes through a cold condensing chamber. The cold temperature changes the steam back into liquid. The final rose water product drips out of a tube and then collects in a reservoir (the glass demijohn, shown on the left). The process takes 80 minutes to produce one liter of rose water.



Source: Zeina Wazzan.

Exhibits (cont.)

Exhibit 3
The Rose Water as Packaged by Tea 'n' Cake



Source: Zeina Wazzan.



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