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Beauty brands and celebrity: The new paradigm

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Beauty ads used to follow a simple formula. Find a well-known and liked celebrity prepared to endorse the product, add a generous fee and a little airbrushing and place the result in a glossy magazine. And why not? It worked.

But while that technique is still used by and is no doubt somewhat effective for the mass-market beauty brands, those at the top end of the market have moved on.

Skin in the game

Take Crme de la Mer, a brand that can command \$150 for a tiny 30ml tube of moisturiser. Its success is not founded on paid-for celebrity endorsement, but on a convincing backstory and an exotic list of ingredients.

Visitors to the Crme de la Mer site can read about Dr. Max Huber's obsessive search for a cure for the burns he suffered in a laboratory accident and how his 12-year quest led him to the sea for the ingredients for his Miracle Broth.

The visitors can then go on to purchase products infused with exotic ingredients such as malachite, bio-ceramic white algae and tourmaline, with their role in the quest for youthful skin meticulously explained.

La Prairie is another brand that has combined science with exotic ingredients to convince consumers its products deliver on the promise of radiant skin.

Founded on the principles of Clinique La Prairie, an exclusive clinic in the lakeside town of Montreux, Switzerland dedicated to age-defying treatments, La Prairie was the pioneer of cellular skin treatments in the 1970s.

Now ingredients such as gold, platinum and caviar have been added to its reputation for bio-technological innovation to create a range of creams, serums and treatments for which discerning clients are willing to pay handsomely.

If there is one thing that the success of both Crme de la Mer and La Prairie underlines, it is the growing desire for authenticity in luxury beauty products.

Luxury consumers are motivated to look much deeper into brands what is the formula, what benefits do those elements bring in the quest for the perfect product for their particular skin type.

The endorsements that carry weight are those from scientists, dermatologists and other real women not from celebrities paid to promote the products.

That final point the influence of "real" women is one to dwell on because it highlights how celebrity endorsement still has power for luxury beauty brands, but not in the same way as in the past.

Luxury consumers are less interested in which products celebrities endorse but are still interested in those they use not because of their celebrity but because of their ability, as real women, to look good and defy aging by using those products.

But the balance of power has changed.

Beauty of it

It is no longer the beauty brand with the open checkbook that commands the celebrity/beauty brand relationship. Luxury consumers are too skeptical of relationships based on money.

Instead, the celebrities and an emerging group of lesser-known but highly credible trendsetters are leading consumers to the beauty brands.

So part of the success of La Prairie can be put down to the fact that actress and UN ambassador Angelina Jolie is known to use it, rather than the fact she has been paid to endorse it.

And although Ms. Jolie is much admired for her Hollywood career and humanitarian campaigning, it is her ability to look much younger than her 40 years, despite the stresses of raising a large family, which is the key.

The same can be said for entertainers Mariah Carey and Jennifer Lopez both celebrities who appear to have conquered the aging process, at least partly due to their reported use of Creme de la Mer.

This ability to find the product through the celebrity has been fuelled by the likes of Twitter, which enables consumers to get a direct insight into the habits and routines of celebrities, and the millions of words of celebrity gossip content created every day.

With very little effort a finance-based celebrity endorsement can be uncovered and the true preferences of the celebrity involved revealed. And this trend is not unique to the beauty industry. We are seeing it spread more widely into other luxury categories.

Take a phenomenon such as Semaine, an online lifestyle magazine that adds a video or podcast featuring a single tastemaker every week of the year, including style icons as diverse as Dita Von Teese, Miranda and Elektra Kilbey of pop duo Say Lu Lu.

Each video gives an insight into the celebrity's personal aesthetic, and an insight that is shoppable via "Add to Wishlist" links embedded in the video.

Or online retailer Net-A-Porter, whose approach has always been celebrity content-led. Its current edition of The Edit is a prime example of how insights into the real fashion habits and tips of celebrities and trendsetters can be used to sell premium fashion.

THE WORLDS OF luxury and fashion are still intimately entwined but the relationship is changing.

Consumers are discovering brands through celebrities, putting the onus on luxury brands to create products which celebrities are enthusiastic to use without the need for the brand to open its wallet.

But that, ipso facto, is not enough.

The Internet-empowered consumer is looking for more than celebrity-endorsement, specifically concrete evidence that the product works.

Aligning celebrity with credibility is the key to propelling luxury consumers from interest to purchase.

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