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Size does not matter: The allure of beauty samples in China

April 16, 2021



The beauty industry has long relied on samples to hook customers, and China's young consumers want innovative ways to try out new products. Image courtesy of Net-A-Porter

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Halfway through one of her "beauty sample haul" Bilibili videos (870,000 views), beauty influencer @ChenChifan, who is known for giving tips and tricks on finding cool product samples, offered a reason why people fall hard for miniature products.

"I once bought a YSL foundation sample, and at that moment, I thought it was just nice," she said. "Later on, I tried all kinds of different foundations through sampling, and I was able to identify the YSL one as my true fit. Without product sampling, I would not have gained that vast knowledge so fast," adding: "Are you a cash-poor youth who wants to know more of the world? Product sampling is here for you!"

Built upon tactility and sensory pleasure, the beauty industry has long relied on samples to hook customers.

According to a report by research firm Euromonitor, beauty samples are the third-largest driver of full-size product purchases, superseded only by past experiences and recommendations from friends and family.

The global beauty world does not lack innovative ways to make the old sampling format feel relevant to young consumers, who demand novelty in everything they buy.

In the West, sample subscription services such as Birchbox and the fragrance-focused Scentbird deliver personalized, curated sampling boxes to subscribers.

For brands, launching beauty advent calendars during Christmas also became a clever way to capitalize on young consumers' thirst for new, affordable and feel-good treats.

But in China, beauty-obsessed Gen Zers are bringing the sampling business to the **next level of retailtainment**. What distinguishes their quest for beauty samples is a relentless focus on the **phygital experience**. Just having the sample products will no longer suffice they now demand sample shopping to be a worthwhile ritual in itself.

For the past few years, beauty-sampling concept stores have been booming across the country's most premium

shopping districts.

Harmay, a retail chain specializing in selling samples from diverse ranges of beauty brands, hit a market value that surpassed \$76.4 million (500 million RMB) in January after just four years of operation.

The chain successfully captured a growing number of Gen Zers who enjoy both the thrill of treasure hunting and the joy of creating social-worthy photos while browsing the store's sleekly designed, mile-long sample aisles.



Harmay stores feature a long display belt of product samples. Image credit: Chinaventure

Besides Harmay, a wave of similar concept stores, such as Haydon, Wow Colour and The Colorist, have also flooded China's hottest retail neighborhoods and scored millions in investment dollars for offline expansions.

In January, Alibaba-owned ecommerce giant Tmall opened a sampling pop-up in Hangzhou as a part of its long-term initiative to connect brands with more consumers through samples.

In these "sample havens" a term coined by social media users to refer to trendy sampling stores young consumers get to explore, discover, compare and score a bag of big-name brand samples by paying just a fraction of what the full-size products cost.



Tmall's sampling pop-up in Hangzhou, January 2021. Image credit: Tmall's Weibo

Gregoire Grandchamp, co-founder of the Shanghai-based beauty consultancy Next Beauty, said that Chinese consumers' pragmatism makes the sampling retail formula particularly effective.

"In China, consumers are young and very practical," he said. "They like to try before they buy, [so] you can see customers queuing up outside the Harmay Stores."

But sampling has proven to be a powerful sales tactic online, as well.

"On Tmall, there is a good recruitment tool called Trial Center, which helps us distribute samples to targeted clients," Mr. Grandchamp said. "The platform also has many other ways to use samples for recruitment."

With a convenient size and lower price tag, samples provide an appealing alternative for China's young beauty audience, whose purchase decisions are now heavily influenced by fast-evolving social trends and the philosophy of believing that what is next is always better.

The Gen Z desire for novelty and thriftiness has not gone unnoticed by international brands.

So far, brands have mainly employed sampling as a recruitment tool.

In 2019 a big year for social selling in China brands from **Lancme** and Dior to **Este Lauder** set up beauty sample machines across the country's urban malls and encouraged users to register in Wechat CRM programs in exchange for free samples.

Kiehl's omnichannel marketing manager, Wang Chenyi, once said during a **conference** that "from the backend data, we found out that 80 percent of the people who took samples from our machines were potential new customers who have not purchased Kiehl's products in the last three years."

Other brands such as L'Oral are stretching the recruitment concept even further by turning sampling into a customer-paid premium model.

In 2018, L'Oral launched a Tmall store called My Beauty Box, which is dedicated to themed sample boxes and allows consumers to choose from the group's various labels, ranging from Lancme and Biotherm to Helena Rubinstein.



L'Oral launched the Tmall store My Beauty Box, letting consumers pay for themed sample boxes. Image credit: L'Oral's Weibo

As the Gen Z beauty market in China continues to expand, we will likely see more brands adjust their retail approaches to court younger consumers who want fun, low-commitment miniatures.

To find an extra edge in this hyper-competitive market, beauty brands should experiment more with product sampling, looking at it not just as a marketing tool, but also as a creative experience that should be thoughtfully created.

After all, the searching journey is what lies at the center of Gen Z China's sampling obsession. What they ultimately want might not be a brand's big hero product it could just be a sense of discovery.

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