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Beauty & Wellness Briefing: Beauty brands are prioritizing relevancy, differentiation and community

BY EMMA SANDLER • NOV 21, 2023 • 7 MIN READ



This week, I'm recapping the phenomenal Glossy Beauty x Wellness Summit, including insights and recaps of the three-day event's biggest themes.

At Glossy's annual Beauty and Wellness Summit last week, hundreds of brands, retailers and investors met in Santa Barbara, California, to discuss the changing retail, influencer and marketing landscapes.

Dominating the conversations were discussions around the importance of brand relevancy and differentiation, and organic communities. Here's what we learned.

Brand points of view and founder stories are key to differentiation

Throughout the event's speaker sessions and working group discussions, there was a focus on how to differentiate as a brand amid a crowded market and how to leverage that difference to secure brand partnerships and reach consumers.

Having a uniquely science-backed story is one way to construct a brand narrative and purpose while proving products are effective and feeding the desire of customers to learn more. Ron Robinson, cosmetic chemist and founder and CEO of BeautyStat Cosmetics, said customers are most interested in his brand's ability to show performance through testimonials, before-and-after user photos and independent party clinical validation. All help to tell the efficacy story of the brand, which launched in 2019 and is known for its vitamin C serum called the Universal C Skin Refiner. BeautyStat's biggest retail partner is Ulta Beauty, which has over 1,300 doors in the U.S. The brand expanded to all Ulta doors in 2023 after a test in 260 doors in 2022.

"We see a trend of the 'cleanical' space; consumers and brands are looking to third-party results and validation, independent clinical testing and before-and-after photos," said Robinson. "That's key and on-brand for us as a science-backed and cosmetic chemist-founded brand."

Bond-building brand K18 is another brand with a strong scientific point of view on the beauty industry. K18 has a patented K18Peptide system that reverses hair damage on a molecular level with a biology-

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first approach. When K18 first launched in Dec. 2020, it focused on the hairstylist community. A year later, ready to go broader, it launched a large TikTok campaign with the hashtag #K18hairflip, which garnered over 9 billion views.

“When working that deep inside the hair fiber, hair is the same. When we realized this was a giant paradigm shift, we knew education on this would be important,” said Michelle Miller, CMO of K18.

Ultimately, the brand landed at Sephora, where it grew significantly. The 3-year-old hair-care brand is estimating over \$100 million in revenue for 2023. Though Sephora already offers bond-building hair care through brands like Olaplex, Bumble & Bumble and Amika, K18’s unique approach to the subcategory paved the way for it to make sense at the prestige and notoriously picky retailer.

However, strong narratives and stories are not limited to science-focused brands. Ceremonia has made a name for itself by celebrating Latinx heritage through ingredients, products and its focus on hair wellness versus hair care. Ceremonia’s best-sellers include its Guava Leave-In Conditioner, Açai Style Refresher and Papaya Scalp Scrub. The brand recently also expanded into clean fragrances with Perfume De La Tierra. According to Babba Rivera, founder of Ceremonia, hair care is historically rooted in the styling category versus the better-for-you kind of ingredients and products she grew up with in Sweden as a Chilean descendant. Sephora took notice of the hair wellness concept and welcomed the brand as the first Latinx-owned brand in July. About 50% of Ceremonia’s customer base is also Latinx.

“Sephora brings so much to our brand,” said Rivera. “I can’t emphasize enough how challenging it is to be with a big retailer like Sephora, but also how beneficial they can be; I feel like most of the [brand] discovery today happens through Sephora.”

Fostering organic communities

A common refrain throughout the event was that brands need to be where their customers are — though, more often, brands are trying to establish hubs where customers can meet them instead. These communities aren’t limited to the digital sphere, either, with many brands finding ways to bring customers together in real life.

Versed maintains a database of 85,000 consumers with whom it co-creates with daily. Among them are members of a non-branded skin-care social group called the Good Skin Crowd, which it runs on Meta. But IRL events are also a strong part of maintaining the brand's community relationships, said Kerry Sullivan, CEO of Versed skin care. An event in early 2023 brought together editors, influencers and the entire Versed team to meet and chat. In addition, Versed recently opened applications for a new ambassador program, for which it plans to work with 20-30 people annually. They will get access to products, a sneak peek at upcoming products and invitations to Versed charitable events like Baby2Baby.

For its part, Ceremonia opened a storefront in the SoHo neighborhood to foster community. Aside from selling products, the store serves as a hub for events, panel discussions and other in-person programming. Rivera noted that the store operates under the marketing department rather than its sales team.

Rivera said that the product development for Ceremonia is different than the usual process for the beauty industry and underscores the importance of the brand's community. Ceremonia invites 100 people from across its customer base to test out formulations for new products before they are finalized. To achieve that, Ceremonia brought product development in-house with its own chemists and research and development lab.

Customers are not the only members of a brand's community, though. There are also content creators — and embracing them as part of the brand community is central to having strong, authentic influencer relationships that resonate with customers.

Ipsy, for example, has a creator incubator program that accepts new members through an application process. The program has about 3,500 people. To further enhance the Ipsy-influencer relationship, Ipsy plans to re-open its content studio, which closed in 2020, and invite content creators to use it. Creators can use the studio to shoot photos and videos, regardless of whether they're for Ipsy. Brands can also use it for content production.

"The key words are 'integrity' and 'authenticity.' Creators have a ton of brands that they're able to work with. But on the flip side, we also have many options when it comes to the [creators] we work with,"

said Karen Chimal, director of creator partnerships at Ipsy. “We want to make sure the creators we work with genuinely believe in what we’re doing and our mission to inspire everybody to express their unique beauty.”

Brand relevancy = longevity

Being a relevant brand does not simply mean reacting to the culture, but instead leading it. And the pace of culture moves rapidly, meaning that leading cultural influence and conversation becomes increasingly difficult.

Of course, looking to Gen Z as the arbiters of culture makes sense, given this generation grew up with cell phones, Instagram and TikTok, and 24/7 access to the Internet. Andrea Harrison, vp of beauty merchandising at CVS, pointed to how this has influenced the younger generation and their beauty habits.

“Gen Z makes choices based on what they see on TikTok. When they start to make their decisions and decide what they need in their routines, what they want to prioritize and what look they want, it all starts in their social media,” she said.

Looking to TikTok, in particular, has worked for brands who want to quickly capitalize on breakout content creators or viral moments. In October, MAC Cosmetics tapped London’s “Tube Girl,” whose real name is Sabrina Bahsoon. Bahsoon’s content consists of dancing on London’s tube subway, and she quickly ascended to several hundred thousand followers. MAC Cosmetics reached out to Bahsoon to participate in the brand’s Face Show, a runway show held during London Fashion Week at Outernet London. In part, the event was meant to promote MAC’s Studio Radiance Serum-Powered Foundation, the brand’s first liquid formula release in almost a decade. MAC Cosmetics was the first brand to work with Bahsoon.

“[Leading culture] means to be where the consumers are with our trends and to meet them in the moment,” said Aïda Moudachirou-Rébois, MAC’s svp and global CMO of MAC Cosmetics. “Trends include product, people or subcultures.”

Another example included the hit Netflix original show “Wednesday,” which debuted in Nov. 2022. MAC Cosmetics knew the makeup artist Tara McDonald had used the brand’s lip pencil in the shade Nightmoth to create Wednesday Adams’s look for the show. MAC Cosmetics quickly worked to promote “Soft Goth” makeup looks and briefed influencer partners and its own makeup artists. It also partnered with designer Kim Shui to showcase the look during NYFW. When the show finally premiered, Nightmoth sold out in two weeks.

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