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Match points

UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S consumer is key to realising the future needs and expectations of beauty consumers worldwide, says Leyla Namiranian, vp, director of international research at Decision Analyst. Following ethnographic research the company has come up with a profile of today's consumer to help companies to optimise their brand positioning.

We live in a world dominated by daily stresses, and are no strangers to the accelerating pace of life, lengthening to do lists, and the continuous need to do more, better, faster. While machines are helping us achieve more faster, we are increasingly expected to function at the speed of our PCs. At the same time, complexity is prevalent in our daily lives.

Global trends affect consumers' buying habits and impact greatly upon their choices and needs. In order, therefore, to understand what consumers will need in the future, it is necessary to investigate a few of these trends.

Global approach

First, it is important to note that economics and markets are becoming increasingly globalised, and brands are following suit. Brands such as Neutrogena, Johnson's, Olay, and Nivea are so globally prevalent that it is a surprise when they are not available, regardless of one's travel destination.

Concurrently, growth experienced by China, India, Eastern Europe and some Latin American markets is affecting the global economy and as companies compete to penetrate these markets, their assumptions are challenged. We are seeing the results through the diffusion of product lines with a Chinese or East Asian flavour and the surging interest in ancient Chinese medicine and ayurveda.

It is clear that populations in North America and Western Europe are ageing due to slowing birth rates and increasing life expectancy. This raises questions of macroeconomic proportions – namely, the sustainability of social security – and challenges the entire idea of retirement and the underlying promise of relaxation to be experienced during our golden years. At the same time, people are ageing considerably better than their parents' generation and the lifestyle differences between age cohorts are becoming blurry.

In addition, worldwide economies are becoming progressively more fluid and most job markets are adapting to this trend – albeit at different paces. Jobs change and evolve in scope all the time, raising the bar for those holding them and challenging them to ride the wave of change or become casualties of it. Increasingly, continuous learning and adaptation are what defines most people's careers and loyalty to a company has been replaced by the individual acting as the sole agent within the company. In turn, the stress that is generated by the pace of change and the day to day demands of many jobs often requires athlete-like energy levels and endurance, making success about the survival of the fittest.

Thirst for communication

Meanwhile, communication technology continues to advance and its diffusion is having a global impact. The internet has had a prodigious impact on economies all around the world, not only by challenging assumptions about consumer behaviour and dramatically increasing competition in some markets, but also by allowing people all across the globe to easily find information about any area of interest and communicate with their peers regardless of location.

Internet and broadband connectivity, moreover, have raised consumers' expectations and whetted their appetite for a stream of high-tech devices.

For example, think of high-tech devices such as PDAs, mobile phones that double as a digital camera or video recorder, MP3 players that broadcast music videos or popular television shows and even personal videos and audio programmes (affectionately termed podcasts), mobile phones that function as PDAs and allow access to email, mobile phones with web-browsing functions, and so on.

Most of these devices are about fulfilling communication and information needs, including the needs that pertain to beauty and fitness. Hence, we have workout routines created specifically to be downloaded to an iPod, workout music to accompany fitness sessions for MP3 players, PDAs that track calories consumed and tell you about the composition of most foods, even game devices that project a customised workout created by a virtual trainer especially for you.

As communication spreads everywhere, media messages are also spreading throughout consumers' lives. New
consumer behaviour

media has meant that these messages are not confined to television, radio, billboards, and newspapers. They are also everywhere on the internet [search engine-directed advertising, the dreaded pop-ups on websites, spam email, advertising on subscribed e-zines], in what celebrities are seen wearing or not wearing (as reported by Grazia and InStyle), in the unsolicited mail we receive every day, in the sponsor messages made more or less explicit at some of the activities and events we are involved with and even on the steps we take at the metro station as we head to work. In fact, the barrage of all these messages leaves most consumers overwhelmed with information overload.

The technologies that enable companies to improve targeting of consumer needs and the global reach of the internet have in turn generated the ability to supply consumers with increasingly customised products. In the beauty industry, this is not only exemplified by prestige lines that custom blend foundation to exactly match the user’s complexion, but also in mass brands which now offer larger shade collections than ever before and which claim to match consumers’ skin tone via a technological breakthrough.

**Choices, choices**

Consumers have more choice than ever and are increasingly faced with complex decisions when selecting their daily beauty regimen. Even as brands and sub-brands proliferate on the shelves of supermarkets, the line between face, body and hair products is becoming increasingly blurred. Brands with an established expertise in body and bath products are now producing hair care lines, while others are expanding to organic face care lines, and so on.

While the choice and complexity of decisions is on the up, consumers have less time than ever. Under pressure to choose and simplify these decisions, they increasingly rely on heuristics that facilitate decision making. This means that they are generally more ready to mix and match products across different brands and lines, customising their beauty regimens according to their individual needs.

Brand managers are thus increasingly challenged by the need to generate genuine brand engagement – helping consumers to connect with their brand and to ensure that they absorb the brand message above all the noise that surrounds them. Some would argue that loyalty no longer exists in this category.

Barriers are evaporating into thin air and paradigms are changing. Skin care is no longer female-only territory. Urban men – dubbed metrosexuals – are discovering the need for a beauty and personal care routine. They feel confident taking care of their skin and battling the signs of ageing, just like their partners, but now do so with dedicated lines of skin care instead of borrowing products they see on the bathroom shelf.

These long term lifestyle and attitudinal changes are influencing what consumers are looking for in their beauty products. We merged these larger trends with insights gathered by ethnographic research, following consumer blogs, conducting secondary research, studying consumer diaries (as part of a research project), as well as conducting qualitative research online with heavy users of beauty products in New York, London, and Paris, unifying all these streams of consumer insights. From this synergistic effort, we have identified the major themes which, we believe, will increasingly impact what mainstream consumers are, and will be, looking for in their beauty products.

Our research identified that consumers want a more global and holistic approach to beauty. In this sense, beauty is reached not only via a skin care regime, but also by eating healthy foods, taking supplements, and taking care of themselves in a spa-like sense. Therefore beauty assumes three layers of meaning.

- The beauty sought is internal and spiritual beauty is valued at least as much as external beauty. Consumers want to feel good about themselves, feel at their best, achieve an inner (not only outer) glow, radiate positive energy, feel young at heart regardless of their chronological age, be in harmony with nature and the universe and appear well balanced, with high self esteem.
- Beauty is about being in good physical health. As such it is connected with the concept of healthy eating, healthy living, and the importance of scientific discovery, including high-tech, cutting-edge advances that redefine what is possible to achieve with topical skin care treatments by virtue of unique ingredients and new delivery processes.
- Beauty is still about external appearances and sensuality, but it is more focused on the self. Beauty routines have become more about pampering and being good to oneself – taking the time to take care of oneself rather than simply the means of attracting a partner or projecting our best face to the world.

Because beauty and health are seen to be so connected, medicine (holistic and traditional) and science are naturally associated with beauty. This connection in consumers’ minds has translated into the successful acceptance of doctor-endorsed skin care lines, even when these are sold through less conventional distribution channels.

In fact, the TV shopping channels have helped to reinforce the feeling that these brands come directly from the doctor to the consumer by introducing a...
very important word-of-mouth element to their promotion. Another manifestation of this theme is epitomised by the successful introduction of semi-surgical or soft medical treatments at home, such as microdermabrasion, glycolic peels and the like by major mass brands. These are frequently promoted as giving professional results and mirror treatments that are traditionally carried out by a dermatologist.

**Wising up**

The ageing population has meant that different attitudes to ageing are developing. We found that while maintaining the spark of youth is essential when it comes to ageing, consumers are not averse to feeling that they are growing in experience and maturity. This has been exposed recently through the use of many positive role models - women who look beautiful and vibrant in their 40s, 50s, 60s and who do not seek to conceal that they are no longer 30. The key to ageing as far as consumers are concerned, therefore, lies in maintaining a certain level of satisfaction with themselves. So, they aim to match a beauty regime to their healthy eating, healthy living, and active lifestyle (or at least the aspiration to achieve this synergy). This works well as a way to build confidence. Vibrant health is therefore a key component to ageing beautifully and the emphasis is more on self acceptance, rather than drastic surgical solutions.

Meanwhile life's increasing complexity is reflected in the acceptance of complex beauty routines. As consumers are accustomed to dealing in complexities every day, they seek simplicity even as they generate complex beauty rituals for themselves.

Surrounded by enormous choice and continuous change in supermarkets, drugstores, and department stores, consumers are becoming adept at layering and rotating usage of targeted cleansers, serums, and moisturisers to achieve optimum results for their skin. Often some elements of seasonal variation are evident, which is certainly in part influenced by media messages.

This reaffirms a trend towards individualism in consumers' lives, by making each consumer's routine special and, to a lesser degree, a manifestation of who they are and what they believe.

Experimentation is the norm. In creating their routines, consumers liberally switch between brands, mixing mass, prestige and mastige and yo-yoing between department stores, pharmacies and grocery stores. Today a brand's primary role is to convey a message about the trust consumers can place in a product's promises. Generally, consumers feel very comfortable buying different branded products to target different problems and to layer different brands on their skin every day.

**Divided loyalties**

The heavy users we observed in London, Paris and New York had one clear element in common: they spent their monthly budgets on a number of products by different brands, not on a set routine of a cleanser, toner and moisturiser all by one brand. Many used more than six different brands at the same time (ranging from Boots No7, through Aveeno and RoC, to Lancôme).

Underlying this need to experiment is a desire for experiential and multisensory consumption, which is also manifested in different ways in other industries.

Beauty routines are increasingly a symbol of pampering. People are compensating for life's daily stresses and pressures by spending a few precious minutes in a me-time replenishing ritual. In a world of constant change, consumers seek reassurance and a safe haven, and their beauty routines and rituals give them this space. In the words of a consumer: “Skin care is just something I do for myself and enjoy as me-time and self pampering.”

Increasingly, this is becoming a ritual for both genders, though it varies in the timing and manner of its execution. This desire for a sanctuary, inner peace, serenity, and very importantly, quiet time in their lives, is also reflected in the
renewed interest in zen, yoga, tai chi, and meditation. Some skin care lines have very successfully connected with this trend, such as Coty’s Healing Garden, which also benefits from the trend towards natural and organic products.

**Organic matter**

Consumers increasingly want to reconnect to the environment via natural and organic products. The more life follows artificially fast-paced rhythms and the more that consumers feel detached from nature, the more they pursue it in the products they purchase. Thus the trend towards more holistic beauty products has emerged and the desire to believe in the benefits of natural or organic ingredients, sometimes even above those of more high-tech ingredients, is becoming evident. This renewed connection with nature can also convey the sense of a better quality of life, a deeper connection with the universe, and therefore a deeper fit in the continuum of life.

Our study revealed that line proliferations create cynicism and confusion. While beauty consumers deal with the complexity of life and complexity on supermarket shelves by experimenting and creating their own personalised beauty routines, the proliferation of products with similar claims makes selection even more complex over time and, increasingly, even savvy consumers begin to doubt that any difference exists between the products on the shelf. They then become sceptical of brands and their promises, and increasingly prone to ignore them as “baseless, unfounded claims”. In this context, consumer cynicism becomes a block to the penetration of traditional media messages and the importance of heuristics grows.

So how does a manufacturer achieve brand engagement? With the over-supply of media messages – many of which are merely perceived as noise – our research revealed that consumer engagement is generated principally by recommendation. This means that word of mouth (such as the advice of a friend), expert opinion found in a newspaper or website, endorsement by a trusted celebrity, recommendations from magazine editorial and opinions on TV programmes are all vital. The look of the packaging on the shelf, the role played by a doctor’s endorsement (as in the doctor skin care brands), past experience with a brand and in-store promotions are also very important. These factors need to be taken into account when promoting a new product to ensure that the media campaign cuts through the noise and engages consumers at a level which is meaningful to them.

In summary, beauty consumption trends are based on two critical parameters: time and quality of life. The culture is paradoxical in nature, combining seemingly opposing forces or tendencies. For example, the tendency towards individualism and individual experiences, including a search for the emotional high, as exemplified by the surge of interest in freedom sports like mountain biking, snowboarding, and hiking, contrasts heavily with the rise in obesity and general lack of motivation to exercise regularly.

High stress and anxiety are now commonplace in a world where even riding on public transport and from work is fraught, but there is also a desire for hedonism. Perhaps a “life is short” attitude has been heightened by recent events. Desire for an experiential and multisensory consumption, therefore, signifies a need for an emotional connection during the consumption experience.

There is a focus on health, longevity, and healthy living, but also a culture of indulgence, sensuality and a search for pleasure. Meanwhile the culture of immediacy contrasts with a nostalgia for the past when life was less complicated and this is manifesting itself in the vintage trends.

We live in an individualistic society, with less emphasis on rules and more focus on the individual’s rhythms and desires. However there is also a lack of ability to be and feel comfortable alone. The search for inner peace and serenity, manifested in the interest in Asian arts has come about as a result.

Awareness of these consumer trends can be used to make sense of the changes in the global beauty marketplace and built upon to optimise brand positioning, potentially resulting in increased brand engagement. Ultimately, to achieve breakthrough it is worth considering a less is more approach. Tomorrow’s busy consumers will thank you for it.

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