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An App for That



Rodan & Fields utilizes a retractable brush from Anisa as a branding opportunity.

An increasingly sophisticated beauty customer warrants equally sophisticated applicators.

By Leah Genuario, Contributing Editor

As a makeup artist and brand owner, Eve Pearl understands the importance of a good applicator. That's why her cosmetic products don't always include one.

"I find the small applicators [often included with cosmetics] are not very useful and don't do the actual products they represent justice," she says. "I'd rather have people purchase the correct brushes and tools necessary to get the most out of their beauty products."

Her reasoning is shared by a growing number of brands, who are offering high-quality applicators in stand-alone sets.



Urban Decay's Surreal Skin Mineral Makeup caused a stir among consumers for its innovative applicator.

A different, but equally strong sentiment, involves highlighting accompanying applicators to help sell cosmetic products. When executed well, an applicator can play a big role in generating consumer buzz.

For example, beauty blogger Jennifer Sesta comments in a recent post about Urban Decay's Surreal Skin Mineral Make-up. "I really must stress this point," she declares on her Raging Rouge blog, "the mess-free application method is quite amazing. Each canister has a twist open/shut top to ensure you don't lose any precious product in your purse or spray it all over your countertops."

Nice Apps

How do brands engage consumers via an applicator? Applicators connect on two levels, explains Pilar Gonzalez Gomez, marketing director for Geka. The first connection is creating desire at the point of sale, while the second occurs during product use and proves the claim.

"In our point of view, [the second connection] is the most important. If the consumer likes the applicator and the result of the application, she will definitively repurchase the product. If she is not satisfied, she will not buy again," says Gonzalez Gomez.

"The experience is key," agrees Julie Scudder Feldman, vice president of sales and marketing, Anisa. "Companies have only one shot to introduce that product to a customer. If the product falls short due to the application—too much pick-up/not enough payoff—a disappointed customer remains."

Innovative applicator design is both a challenge and opportunity for brands seeking to stand out. Choices abound. A search on the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office database revealed that 397 patents have been issued since 1976 fitting the search term, "cosmetic applicator." The same search term typed into its patent applications database yielded 265 results.

Partnering with knowledgeable suppliers enables brands to find a stand-out applicator among the crowd.

France-based supplier Cosmogen, for example, works with cosmetic brands “to develop their own and unique applicators,” says Sebastien Williams, vice president sales. “With such a policy, brands can distance themselves from another.” For example, the company worked with Beauty Bank to develop an innovative roll-on applicator for its Sculptinex formula.

Applicators can drive new and repeat sales, especially in maturing markets facing strong competition. “The applicator is used as a point of differentiation within traditional product categories,” says Jan Wilson, vice president of development for Taiki. “Customers’ gratification is determined by the ease of use, distribution of product and overall application.”

Though the task of pinpointing a perfect applicator might seem daunting, context helps narrow the decision-making process. “A product could have 100 different applicators,” says Lou Della Pesca, president, 3C, Inc., Wyckoff, NJ. He suggests deciding first on a container, and then asking, “Which applicator works best to achieve what you want to achieve? The applicator is part of a family. It’s a family of components...that’s going to make the product successful.”

Celebrity makeup artist Anthony DeLeaver, who works closely with supplier Caressa Kahn, offers this advice to brands deciding upon applicators: “I would get some high-end products and some low-end products and I would have a makeup artist test the applicators. Then I’d find out who makes the applicators.” In his experience, “every makeup product should be put on with a brush.”

Bevy of Brushes

Hundreds of applicator shapes and forms fall under the applicator umbrella, and some are experiencing more activity than others. Brushes is one category bursting with creativity.

Buzz revolves around leveraging brushes to champion brand identity. Dolce & Gabbana, for example, turned to Garrett Hewitt International to create a set of makeup artist quality brushes to accompany a new cosmetic line launch. The brushes were utilized by the brand’s department store artists, and sold extremely well as stand-alone items. In addition to the quality, the logo was prominently and meticulously placed on the brush handle to further emphasize the brand’s commitment to luxury and quality.

“We spend a lot of time with our customers in perfecting their brushes. The brush and makeup have to meet the brand message. The applicator has to meet the brand standards,” explains Jason Clerke, president of Garrett Hewitt International.

Skin care brand Rodan & Fields also recognizes the importance of a brush with brand appeal. The company partnered with Anisa to launch a “portable, easy-to-use and handle, retractable mineral powder brush to pair with their powder,” says Scudder Feldman of Anisa. Its main requirements were quality fibers and ease-of-use. The brush can be loaded and locked with powder, enabling reapplication throughout the day. In addition, an anti-bacterial treatment was added, creating “a unique selling point to their customers,” she says.

Many brands are waking up to the benefits of a tool with a handle, which offers increased space for branding. “Applicators are becoming a work of art,” says Clerke. Brush handles are routinely silk screened with multi-colored decorations and brand expressions.



HCT France teamed with brand Une to develop portable brushes constructed using wood and aluminum.

“Synthetics have made great advances in the past few years. There are more options, higher quality fibers available, and they are going head-to-head with natural animal hair,” says Scudder Feldman.

Aveda recently worked with Garrett Hewitt International to launch a brush with an aluminum handle, made from post-consumer recycled aluminum. An animal-friendly brand, it tapped into synthetic fibers for the brush head to create a high-performance, true-to-brand experience.



Garrett Hewitt International sees increased demand for brushes with bamboo handles.

Materials also make statements. Along with the growing movement toward eco-responsibility, earth-friendly brushes are on the rise. Clerke reports an increase in bamboo handles, and brush ferrules made out of post-consumer recycled aluminum.

Supplier HCT offers a number of sustainable materials for its brushes, recently adding cork to the list. “Cork is a natural material. It is sourced from the outer bark of the cork oak tree, making it a renewable resource in steady supply and managed in healthy forests,” says Cindy Lim, vice president of the global cosmetic brush division.

HCT France also recently teamed with natural French beauty brand Une to develop three makeup brushes for its organic Ecocert range. The portable brushes, sold separately, were constructed using a combination of wood and aluminum handles. “We developed these three brushes with practicality and space in mind while still ensuring that the finished product was as natural as possible,” comments Cecile Lajoinie, project manager HCT France.

Another material trend—synthetic fibers—is growing in popularity, fueled by technological advances that enable close replication of animal hair and the lowering of cost constraints.

Other Innovations

For a hands-free brush solution, Cosmogen offers Squeeze'N Tint, an integrated synthetic brush on a tube. The company supplies a number of other integrated applicators, all with a patented on-off rotary head, including Squeeze'N Puff, a removable puff on a tube. "All these innovations enable a uniform, controlled, hands-free and hygienic application," says Williams.

Della Pesca of 3C, Inc. also says applicators integrated with packaging are popular. The supplier's bestseller is an automatic pen that currently comes with a choice of eight applicators, with three more in development. The pen can be used for numerous applications, including lip glosses and eyeliners.

Sponge technology has advanced as well. Taiki offers a lamination of a thin layer of premium sponge material paired with a less expensive sponge material for superior, yet cost-effective, application.

Garrett-Hewitt International launched a ridged sponge, with waves. "It works on the same theory as multi-blade razors," Clerke explains. "It spreads out the friction across the face and requires fewer strokes to produce a smooth and even application."

Geka has noticed demand for unusual, eye-catching applicators. "This is why we developed the Lip Definer Max," says Gonzalez Gomez. Geka and makeup artist Michele Burke teamed together to create the Lip Definer Max, a power lipgloss loader designed to create even lips and precise contours. Burke's "pinky" finger was the muse behind the shape, and the soft, flocked applicator is a patented creation.



Garrett Hewitt International has launched a ridged sponge to aid application.

All Eyes on Applicators

Multiple innovations have also been reported in the eye category. "The applicator can often be as big a part of the launch as the product itself. The same product with a different applicator can perform very differently. We are really seeing this with the eye [makeup] industry, as well as the pressed and loose powder business," says Clerke.

Among its projects, Garrett Hewitt International has worked with brands to offer double-ended eyeshadow brushes; one for the lid and one for use as eyeliner.

"We are seeing a trend in unique eye brushes," says Scudder Feldman of Anisa. "It never ceases to amaze me how many brushes have been created for the eye area and that each performs a unique function."

Roller applicators are also springing up. Taiki was tapped for P&G's Olay Regenerist Anti-Aging Eye Roller. It's "a perfect example of how an applicator can be showcased and used to create an innovative delivery system and new product benefit for the consumer," says Wilson.

The mascara category is particularly active. "The field of mascara is very restricted by patents. That's why everybody is getting even more creative. The brands try to differentiate themselves with different shapes, different materials in different colors, different fibers, brush cuts, etc.," says Gonzalez Gomez of Geka. Geka launched the first molded, bi-injected mascara brush in 2004, and followed by introducing brushes with patented Moltrusion technology.

Of particular importance, applicators do not act alone. Gonzalez Gomez adds, "When it comes to mascara, the most important thing to consider is the combination of the delivery system, applicator and the formulation."

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