

Is Fame Enough to Sell Beauty?

Hailey Bieber, Scarlett Johansson, Selena Gomez and Lori Harvey are just a few celebrities with beauty lines.

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Lady Gaga in Brandon at the Met Gala 2019 LEXIE MORELAND/WWD

It seems like every week a different celebrity is launching a new **beauty** (<https://wwd.com/tag/beauty-2/>) brand, from **Kim Kardashian** (<https://wwd.com/tag/kim-kardashian/>) to Hailey Bieber to Pharrell Williams to Scarlett Johansson to Harry Styles to Selena Gomez to Gwen Stefani to Machine Gun Kelly to Jennifer Lopez to Lori Harvey, to name just a few.

Due to the celebrities' large social media followings, there is usually much hype around these launches. But while it's difficult to determine how many of these businesses fare after their initial buzzy debuts without hard sales numbers, the general consensus among experts is that [beauty \(https://wwd.com/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/affiliate-marketing-platform-shopmy-raises-8-million-1235405592/\)](https://wwd.com/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/affiliate-marketing-platform-shopmy-raises-8-million-1235405592/) can be a tough market for celebrities to find long-lasting success.

Even stratospheric levels of fame — Lady Gaga, to name just one — is no guarantee that consumers will clamor for what is being peddled. After failing to make a splash, her makeup line has recently switched lanes with a new name and a new partner.

“The fame of celebrity names alone does not have the pull it did in the '80s,” said Lan Vu, chief executive officer of Beauty Streams. “Today's consumers are more savvy and demanding, and want brands with substance. Marketed stardom alone is not enough.”

That's not to say longevity is unattainable, though, and while there tends to be a set model for these brands, there is much trial and error among celebrities and their backers.

Unsurprisingly, many of these celebrity lines begin with a so-called brand builder or incubator such as Beach House Group (Millie Bobbie Brown's Florence by Mills and Tracee Ellis Ross' Pattern), Maesa (Drew Barrymore's Flower Beauty) and Unlisted Brand Lab (Machine Gun Kelly's nail polish line, Un/Dn Laqr) that have the relevant contacts and processes to launch the companies.

In some cases, the brand builder has already devised the outline for the brand before approaching the relevant celebrity.

“Celebrities are not vertical manufacturers. None of these celebrity brands have big factories that produce the product,” Jefferies analyst Steph Wissink said. “It's all outsourced. These platforms are really just aggregators of relevant relationships to activate a brand and the celebrity provides the pathway to driving awareness.”

While it might sound obvious, Wissink stressed that the products need to work, be consistently good and that supply needs to be available alongside the halo effect of awareness to build consumer trust to repeat purchase. “That’s the ideal formula. You have awareness, efficacy and operational prowess and distribution. The incubators bring relationship equity on three of those four places — the celebrity brings awareness.”

For celebrities, the first rule of marketing is a huge social media following that they can parlay into sales. The unrivaled queens of this are sisters **Kim Kardashian** (<https://wwd.com/eye/parties/tiffanys-celebrates-lock-collection-in-l-a-with-hailey-bieber-kim-kardashian-and-more-1235403298/>) and **Kylie Jenner** (<https://wwd.com/tag/kylie-jenner/>), now both affiliated with Coty Inc., which spent a combined \$800 million for a 20 percent stake in Kardashian’s business and a majority ownership position in Kylie Beauty.

“What works well for celebrity beauty brands in terms of marketing is their omnipresence throughout multiple social media channels,” said Vu, “and the more engaged celebrities themselves are, the better.”

But, she cautioned, a huge a social media following is not enough by itself these days with consumers more savvy and educated than ever. “Consumers love to get a human feel for a brand, so sneak peeks, personal storytelling and backstage type of content works well. Also, consumers want transparency, so they prefer brands that stand for values they share such as vegan, clean, sustainability, LGBTQ, inclusivity, etc.,” she said.

Wissink agreed that the consumer now approaches celebrity brands with some degree of skepticism in terms of how engaged the celebrity really is. “One thing we’ve noticed about celebrity brands is that there’s been an evolution to how they use their social following. Early on it was just pure one-directional awareness — the celebrity posting about the brand,” she said. “But now you’re seeing more and more the celebrity really showing their involvement in the process as a way to legitimize that it’s more than just a label — not just Skkn by Kim labeled on a product, it actually is Kim talking about the process in which they curated all of the choices to get to the skus that they ultimately launched with. Whether its window dressing or reality, there’s more of an openness and transparency around the level of involvement.”

Hailey Bieber, for example, made it clear in multiple interviews around the launch of her skin care brand Rhode that she was highly engaged in the process. “During the pandemic, I really dove into the products and ingredients I know and really love, and learning why they work so well,” she told WWD. “It wouldn’t have made sense for me if I said I was launching with 14 eyeliners — it’s not my thing. These are products I use on a daily basis.”

As for how the product actually looks and feels, Lucie Greene, founder and CEO of consultancy Light Years, cautioned against blanding, meaning the aesthetic looking completely interchangeable. She posited that Kardashian nailed it with her nine-step skin care system offering, which is both differentiated and interesting. “It’s not one hero product. The system is the hero,” she said.

To avoid blanding, Kirsty Minns, executive creative director at Mother London, thinks celebrities have to really understand what their audiences want and be true to themselves rather than trying to emulate another celebrity.

“To do any successful branding you need to be distinctive within the marketplace,” she said. “The ones that feel like they’re being the most successful are the ones that are standing out from the rest of the beauty brands.”

Minns cited Rihanna’s Fenty Beauty, owned by LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, as having the winning formula when it comes to branding. “The ones that have created brands aren’t just looking at a quick cash win and actually have invested time in building their brands and have spent time on a brand that exists just without that celebrity endorsement,” she added. “From that point of view, Fenty Beauty is a great example of a celeb that has done it in a way for a brand that could stand the test of time.”

Then there are stockists. When Lady Gaga launched Haus Laboratories in 2018, it was the first beauty brand to partner exclusively with Amazon. Flash forward to 2022 and the newly named Haus Labs has relaunched exclusively at Sephora. The reason? The venture was not as successful as had been hoped and the brand is looking at more traditional routes to get its products in the hands of consumers.

“It’s probably less about the brand visibility and more about the platform,” said Wissink. “Amazon is just not known for premium beauty. It’s very much a value beauty destination. It was an attempt by Amazon to break into the premium beauty space, which has just been really hard for them. Amazon’s a great place to monetize awareness, but it’s not a great place to build awareness.

“Ulta and Sephora are places you go to get curation and validation,” she added. “If you make it into Ulta or Sephora, you have been selected by their buyers, who have the pulse on the industry. In beauty, Ulta and Sephora are like the Vogue editors for fashion. They’re believed to be the closest to what’s trending.”

Others like Skkn are beginning as direct-to-consumer before entering stores, while Bieber’s Rhode is only available on its website. These models tend to have small volume runs in order to avoid significant inventory risk. Most experts believe they will eventually end up in stores. In the meantime, the smaller runs mean it will sell out sooner, helping to create hype.

And on pricing, which straddles both ends of the spectrum for celebrity beauty brands, the jury is still out.

Toward the top of the pile is Kardashian’s pricey \$630 Skkn by Kim nine-step system, including a toner, exfoliator, hyaluronic acid serum, vitamin C8 serum, face cream, eye cream, oil drops and a night oil. At the other end is Bieber’s Rhode, with all products priced below \$30.

It is too early to determine the success of these ranges, but Wissink believes that it will be most interesting to see how Bieber’s brand performs as celebrity-owned lines are not that common in the mass market.

“We typically see collaborations with mass — Colourpop and Morphe and some of the makeup artist or celebrity collaborations that they’ve done. E.l.f. is

another one that does a lot of collaborations. One exception was Flower Beauty by Drew Barrymore that went to Walmart. It’s done OK. It certainly doesn’t do the volume that we see around some of the big high-profile brands.”

As for the success of Skkn’s high price point, only time will tell.