Skincare Goes Scientific

Launching a new skincare line in any environment is a challenge, but launching one when supply lines are disrupted, ports are physically closed, and a global pandemic is keeping millions of would-be customers at home has nightmare written all over it.

Unless, that is, your company is the brainchild of two industry veterans whose clean, customizable skincare line was developed and ready to ship directly to consumers in 2020. With an already-virtual team, all they needed was an at-home client base with time on their hands to test and evaluate their skin. This brand was made for a pandemic.

Pure Culture Beauty, founded by former H2O+ Beauty CEO Joy Chen and former MAC Chief Chemist Victor Casale, is the first brand to use science and data to formulate customized skincare for individual clients. They were inspired by the success of 23andMe's mail-in test kits.



"I thought, 'Can't we use science and data for the

Industry icons Joy Chen and Victor Casale have launched a groundbreaking scientific and data-driven skincare line with formulated products.





beauty industry?' We could make a more specific product," Casale recalls.

The drive to deliver more effective solutions in beauty is appealing because more often than not, products are formulated for a broad range of clients. Large brands want as many people to buy their products as possible, so a moisturizer, for example, may be crafted to be one-size-fits-all in terms of skin types. The result is a watered-down product that doesn't solve long-term problems.

When a new Pure Culture Beauty client places an order, the first thing they do is take the At-Home Skin Test, a step that Chen says is essential for Pure Culture to create a targeted solution for your individual skin characteristics.

"Consumers have limited knowledge about their skin and they want to know more," she says. The test fills a unique need for clients who have been unable to visit a dermatologist or aesthetician during the pandemic. "It provides a comprehensive, in-depth look" and helps fill the absence of in-person skin care.

When people can't leave their homes or their aesthetician isn't seeing clients, Pure Culture provides "an alternative, informed way to care for your skin," Chen says.

Once the test is completed, a client sends the results to Pure Culture electronically and Pure Culture has a cleanser, toner, and moisturizer sent to them. The formulations are scientifically specific and almost too many to count.

"There are thousands of combinations in a group of products," Casale says. A set of three items is just the beginning. "We're starting from the consumer end to really understand what the needs are," Chen explains. "It's not just one product." At this time, products are not available to order a la carte just yet.

While the luxury of an almost completely at-home client base has helped the company grow since launching in September, Casale says the effort to go live in 2020 was herculean at times. At one point, the lab was moved from the U.S. to Canada and one necessary item was nowhere to be found.

Pure Culture's tests require the use of the common swab, the same one used for COVID-19 tests and gene testing. With China manufacturing closed, leaving them unable to find swabs anywhere in time for launch, Chen and Casale did what only a few in-the-know industry experts with over 30 years of collective experience could actually do: They used their connections to find a reliable manufacturer and now they have their very own Pure Culture-branded swabs. It's something that new entrants to the market would never have been able to do, yet as Casale puts it "we've done this before."

Being a direct-to-consumer brand has been a blessing in terms of promotion, brand message, and overall customer experience. The brand is not concerned with fighting for shelf space at Sephora or Ulta, but the iconic innovators say they would consider in-store retail in the future.

"Retail is morphing," Casale says and notes that a hybrid retail model, where testing takes place and then product ships out, is a future consideration. "For right now, DTC is best. After all, skin type and skin conditions change with the seasons, but also with age and life events. Whenever there's a big change, all of that contributes to your skin's needs," Casale says, and an ongoing relationship with consumers allows them to address skin changes and create new and more effective formulations for them.

With more and more people shopping online, market research firm Forrester expects in-store beauty sales to slump this holiday season. Online beauty sales, Forrester says, may rise as much as 23% over last year.

"Gifting is a key part of our strategy," Chen says. Like many brands this year, they won't wait until Black Friday to offer promotions and discounts to entice shoppers."This will be a great gift for a friend or a family member. You're not buying them skincare, you're buying them an opportunity to customize. It's a different kind of gifting. You're buying them a kit that they can customize themselves."

Pure Culture's environmentally friendly and gender-neutral packaging is identical across formulations, and includes the recipient's name tastefully printed on each of the products. Casale, who built an experimental lab in his Bay Area home's basement, says he and Chen will continue to innovate and develop new solutions post-holiday and beyond. "This is a culmination of what we've learned and where we want to go," he says.

"Launching the business is only the first step," Chen adds. The team is working on an acne-prone skin solution and she hasn't ruled out personalization for body or even hair products. "As we build our database and consumers, we're going to evolve. This is just the first step of a long journey." — By Victoria Kertz, California Business Journal.

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