

online beauty buzz

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Cosmetics makers mingle with possible consumers on social networking sites.

Most beauty executives agree there is no better product endorsement than a recommendation from a buddy. So it's no wonder, then, that media-savvy beauty brands are tapping online social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, to create groups of "friends" linked by their love of cosmetics.

Some firms are even going at it alone, launching their own social networking sites into cyberspace.

Facebook, founded in 2004, and MySpace, started in 2003, enable people to create online profiles through which they can interact with their friends by sharing ideas, photographs, music, blogs and videos.

A study called "Beauty and the Blog," published in April by Washington, D.C.-based beauty research and brand strategy firm The Benchmarking Company, reports that according to a poll of 2,500 respondents, more than 27% of women in the U.S. have posted a comment about a beauty brand on a social networking site, message board or blog. And 67% of them are more likely to buy a beauty product if they read a good comment about it made by other consumers.

Beauty brands, including Unilever-owned Dove and Coty-owned Rimmel, have posted profiles on Facebook and MySpace, where visitors can sign up to become "friends" and receive product and company news. Some individual products also have dedicated profiles, which were set up either by the companies that produced them or by individuals who create "fan clubs," such as the "We Love Lancôme Juicy Tubes" group and the "Acqua Di Giò—All You Need to Succeed" group. While not necessarily created by or even endorsed by the brands they are from, such profiles often contain links to their official websites.

A few beauty firms have even taken the step recently to create their own online social networks. This January, for instance, Procter & Gamble introduced its Capessa site, capessa.com, for "like-minded women." Here, members can discuss wide-ranging topics, from how to beat acne to how to deal with breast cancer. More specific to a product is Coty's network, What R You In 2?, created in March and

tied into the launch of its CKIN2U fragrance.

Social networking taps into the psyche of the so-called "Web 2.0" generation—namely, consumers who spend more time chatting on the Internet than watching television, the traditional venue for beauty advertising.

"Only one out of two French people watches adverts on TV," Jacques Séguéla, group vice president of Havas Advertising, told beauty executives at the World Perfumery Congress tradeshow in Cannes, France, in June. "We can no longer completely rely on television. Brands must become a 'media brand.'"

"With TV viewing figures in decline, people are spending much more time online," continued a Coty spokeswoman. "Brands need to look at how they are spending their money on communication to be more effective."

It's just a matter of looking at the numbers to see what a lure social networking sites are these days. MySpace is among the web's top destinations. In July in the U.S. alone, the site boasted 70 million active unique users. Facebook, meanwhile, which was originally conceived as a networking site for students at Harvard University, was opened to everyone in 2006. In July, it registered 30 million unique visitors worldwide, according to its founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Far from attracting solely the teen set, such sites now reach people of all ages.

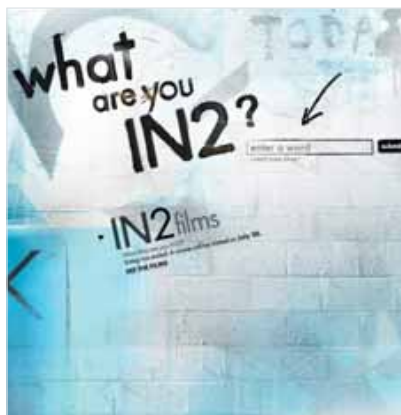
"As the overall visitation to Facebook continues to grow, the demographic composition of the site will likely more closely resemble that of the total Internet audience," said Jack Flanagan, executive vice president of ComScore Media Metrix, a Reston, Virginia-based tracking firm, in a statement.

At the end of March, 41% of MySpace users were aged 35 years and over, according to Hitwise, a New York-based tracking firm.

Social networking sites also offer viral marketing opportunities.

"The appeal of the 'Net is the ability to connect with people one-to-one-to-many," said Debra Williamson, senior analyst of Emarketer,





a New York-based market research firm. So, for instance, when people sign up as “friends” of a beauty firm or brand, their names automatically get posted on their own personal profiles, which are visible to each of their networks of friends.

“With MySpace, and other networking sites, it’s great, because you are taking the product to the consumer,” said the Coty spokeswoman. “[You’re] entering a social atmosphere, which is different than if you entered a brand website.”

Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, for instance, recognized the power of the medium when he and his beauty license holder The Estée Lauder Cos. promoted the late summer introduction of his fragrance Unforgivable For Women on his MySpace page.

“By the time the fragrance comes out, I’ll have a million friends on MySpace,” the rapper told WWD, WWD Beauty Report International’s sister publication, earlier this year.

In this way, “people have a closer connection to the brand, as they’ve chosen to be a friend of the brand,” continued Emarketer’s Williamson.

Through social networking sites, brands can reach consumers in a highly targeted manner, said Kareema McLendon, co-founder of Champaign, Illinois-based niche fragrance brand Abinoam, which provides news on upcoming beauty events and products through its MySpace and Facebook pages.

“Since this news only goes to visitors who have actively sought out the page and our Facebook friends—who have it presented in a very low-key manner—it is unlikely to annoy like an e-mail blast,” said McLendon. “Not annoying your friends should probably be the primary rule of thumb in any sort of online interaction.”

Given such sites blur the boundaries between the personal and the commercial, executives advocate such softly, softly approaches.

“In general, crass commercialism on a site like Facebook will offend the community and risk blowback,” said McLendon.

Crass commercialism aside, some executives question the ethics of a beauty brand that functions like a person in creating its own “fan” site or profile.

“It’s really easy to create a page on MySpace and say that I am a person,” said Patrick Guedj, creative director of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton-owned Parfums Kenzo in Paris. “We don’t want to do that.”

For those who do test out the medium, a token MySpace or Facebook presence is by no means enough to get their brands’ messages across, executives say.

“Being part of a social network is an ongoing living, breathing ex-

perience,” said Williamson. “It’s not just creating an ad and putting it out there. It’s really about finding a way to connect with the audience—what you can offer the community. It’s not enough to just have a presence there; you need to find a way to interact, offer a service, something they are going to want to take, to make their own.”

For his fragrance launch, Combs, for instance, shot a series of mini movies that were shown on his MySpace page and on his brand’s website. Through those, he reckoned that he could touch about 3 million people per day.



Consultants at Mary Kay, Avon and The Body Shop are also recognizing the potential of putting a personal slant on their brands by using Facebook to promote their events and to share tips of their trade.

“I set up a Facebook page simply to let people know what I was doing in my Mary Kay business,” said Courtney Phelps, an independent consultant, based in Paw Paw, Michigan.

Fellow Mary Kay consultant, Chicago-based Erika Gesme, said she generated traffic to her website by offering a 10% discount on products to Facebook users. There was no hiding her marketing message.

“By adding my group to your list of groups it is like a walking advertisement, so I really appreciate that,” she wrote on her profile.

No doubt, the ultimate coup for beauty brands is when cybernauts take marketing—planned or unplanned—into their own hands. Take the example of London-based student Mary Grace Nguyen Guzon, who created The David Gandy Appreciation Society in tribute to the British model who stars in Dolce & Gabbana’s Light Blue Pour Homme fragrance advertising campaign.

“I had a strong feeling that this male model, although unknown, would soon become popular. So I took it upon myself to introduce the group and bring together a load of Facebook fans who would agree,” explained Guzon.

Today on Facebook, there are at least eight David Gandy fan groups boasting almost 700 members—and counting.

For Procter & Gamble, Dolce & Gabbana’s fragrance license-holder, the word-of-mouth promotion didn’t cost a penny. And, as for Guzon, she acquired a handful of new “friends.”

Such an example highlights how social networking sites are able to connect like-minded people for just about anything—or anyone—of their choosing.

“The sites provide an arena for free speech,” continued the Coty spokeswoman. “There’s an element of creativity, where users can create the content and are not being dictated to. So, there’s a sense of ownership.” ■