AR Try-On Technology Is No Longer an Alternative in the Beauty Industry

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8 hours ago
Key insight:

- While virtual product sampling isn’t a perfect substitute, it allows consumers to experiment more than they might otherwise.

For beauty brands, which depend on consumers testing lipsticks and mascaras by applying them directly to their face, the notion of a contactless, socially distant future presents immediate obstacles.

It’s not like the pandemic hasn’t brought a bundle of new challenges for the industry already. With store closures and fewer people concerned about wearing makeup in quarantine, Estée Lauder Companies reported that sales were down 11% during the first quarter of 2020. L’Oréal experienced a 4.3% decline.

Thankfully, beauty brands have been experimenting with digital alternatives for the past few years. Their current task is to make these efforts the primary way customers sample products prior to purchase.

So far, things are off to a promising start. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, Ulta Beauty’s virtual try-on tool GLAMlab, which the retailer debuted in 2016, has seen five times more usage compared to the average monthly rate prior to the pandemic. Current in-store signage next to product displays encourages consumers to access the feature from their personal device.



"We have seen a strong and significant adoption rate for GLAMlab through this whole crisis," said Ulta Beauty's chief digital officer, Prama Bhatt, who noted that as stores continue to reopen, the ideal scenario involves shoppers using the digital try-on tool on their phone while also engaging with a sales associate.

MAC has seen similar shifts in consumer behavior. In 2017, the beauty brand began installing augmented reality-powered mirrors in over 120 of its retail stores located around the world, then introduced virtual try-on technology online in 2019. Since late February, MAC has seen usage rates of its online feature increase threefold compared to daily prepandemic levels.

"As we've seen a surge in our online sales, we've seen a

significant increase in engagement with the tool," said Ukonwa Ojo, MAC's global chief marketing officer.

Sephora also offers consumers the opportunity to sample hundreds of products through an AR feature on its mobile app, but declined to participate in this story.

As wonderful as these tools might be, they can't quite make up for the physical texture that comes from trying products on in-store. But they're still in their infancy and getting stronger and smarter every year. For instance, both Ulta Beauty's and MAC's AR features identify skin tones, then provide shade suggestions.

Without having to clean up and wipe off before moving onto the next product, the tools allow consumers to rapidly go through row after row of merchandise without hesitation.

"Because of the ease of moving through different categories or products, you might even try things you might not have typically tried," said Bhatt.

Aveda and Estée Lauder—two more beauty brands seeing increased consumer engagement with their virtual try-on offerings—are promoting their services through their websites, email communications and various social channels. A video posted to Aveda's Instagram account in early April, for example, shows a woman's hair color instantly switching between brown, pink, purple and blonde.



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But AR isn't the only way forward for product testing amid Covid-19. Since January 2018, L'Oréal has been working with Toronto-based product-sampling platform Sampler. All people have to do is sign up, create a profile, answer some questions

about their preferences, then wait for the free snacks, beverages and cleaning products to arrive in the mail.

Partners such as L’Oréal benefit from getting their products into the hands of consumers primed to like them. Brands can also capture the email addresses of these individuals and direct them toward newsletters and other promotions.

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