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INFINITE BEAUTY MATCHES THE SKIN-CARE PRODUCT TO THE CUSTOMER

By Barbara Thau

INFINITE BEAUTY'S "MULTICONCEPT" SELLING philosophy is intended to offer affluent women 35 or older the upscale skin-care products that will uniquely fit their needs — no matter the brand. The 10-store boutique retailer boasts a staff of highly trained beauty consultants who could be described as "brand agnostic." Indeed, in a culture as devoted to beauty and skin care as this one, perhaps such agnosticism is welcome.

"Department stores carry a large array of products, but each product line has its own counter kiosk," said Jonathan Houri, president of Infinite Beauty. "That means if a shopper asks a salesperson at the Sisley counter the best product for their skin, they'll say, 'Sisley.'" Similarly, he says, the La Mer sales associate will push La Mer, and so on. And though beauty retailers such as L'Occitane and Aveda do tend to dot malls, they are single-concept stores, he says.

But the reality is that "there is no best skin care," Houri said. "What works for me might not work for you. You can look at a ton of great reviews online, but they might not be right for you, because your skin is different."

By contrast, Infinite Beauty customers are encouraged to try out a variety of

brands under the guidance of consultants who are not tied to any one line.

If the format sounds familiar, that may be because Sephora inspired the concept, Houri says. Unlike that specialty beauty chain, however, which carries a wide price range of products, Infinite Beauty focuses on the upscale niche. The consultants work with each customer to find the mix that is just right for her — an eye serum from one maker, an anti-aging product from another, Houri says.

Infinite Beauty offers high-end boutique lines such as Ahava, Gold Elements, Forever Flawless and Gratiae — collections at the level of what one finds at tony department stores like Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue. Price points range from \$30 for hand cream to as high as \$5,000 for an anti-aging set. The stores generate about \$2 million in



sales each per year. “We’re seeing an increase in sales every year,” Hourí said.

Then there is the spa component: Infinite Beauty’s facials are performed by licensed aestheticians who trade notes with the beauty consultants. “Sales people develop a relationship with the customers, many of whom come in once or twice a month to get a facial,” Hourí said. “That’s how the relationship transforms. A lot of sales people become great friends with the customers.”

As of July, prestige skin care hit \$3.6 billion in year-to-date sales, up 2 percent from the comparable period the previous year, according to NPD Group.

Infinite Beauty operates eight mall stores in California, Maryland, New York and Virginia, plus two freestanding units: one in Palo Alto, Calif., and the other in New York City, a nearly 2,000-square-foot, two-level site that opened on Man-

hattan’s Upper East Side in September. “Our stores are usually around 1,000 square feet, but the Manhattan store is our flagship, so it is substantially bigger,” Hourí said. “The entrance level is the sales floor, and upstairs is the spa, which offers a wide range of beauty treatments. It consists of three treatment rooms, a luxurious lounge and a waiting room.”

The store is on a prime corner in a high-traffic area of an upscale neighborhood in a major market, Hourí points out, and others concur. “They’re in the heart of the richest ZIP code in the city, with both tourists and residents, and Bloomingdale’s is just a block away,” said Faith Hope Consolo, chairman of Douglas Elliman’s Retail Group, which brokered the 10-year lease.

Infinite Beauty plans to open three or four stores per year, setting its sights now on Chicago, Los Angeles and Hawaii, to

culminate in perhaps 30 or 40 stores in total. “We don’t want to be a huge brand, but a smaller boutique [chain],” said Hourí.

The company’s plans are bigger for a new format in the works, however: Nature’s Beauty Elite, which is to roll out next year or the year after. The concept follows Infinite Beauty’s skin-care-only model, but is aimed at the mass market, with more affordably priced products. While Infinite Beauty will continue to target the women seeking top-of-the-line products, Nature’s Elite will serve shoppers “who want the best they can afford,” said Hourí. He envisions an international chain eventually, he says, with about 200 stores.

To be sure, this is a crowded market, Hourí concedes, as skincare is booming, but beauty is a recession-proof business. “New stores are opening up like mushrooms after the rain.”

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