

Affirmational Marketing in the Beauty Industry

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What is Affirmational Marketing?

The traditional way of designing marketing has been to make it aspirational. For a long time consumers have been inundated by commercials and advertisements convincing them that they could become popular, healthy, happy, beautiful—if only they would buy this product. The beauty industry is no exception; in fact, it may be the biggest culprit of all. Preying upon deep-seeded cultural expectations around image, especially amongst women, beauty brands have a long history of marketing their products as the “fix” to all skin and body imperfections. In doing so, whether intentionally or not, brands have contributed to harmful norms that promote a singular image of what it means to be beautiful. Recognizing the negative impacts this long-standing practice has had on mental and social health, certain brands have begun to change their strategies. Hence arises affirmational marketing—the antidote to aspirational marketing, seeking to affirm and validate consumers as they are rather than convince them that they need to be better. Affirmational marketing features ordinary people from no one particular background, encompassing inclusive marketing and combating harmful societal norms. In the context of the beauty industry, through strategies such as diversity of models, intentional language use, and positive tones of content, affirmational marketing validates all bodies and all skin types in an effort to empower and uplift instead of convincing consumers that they need to be fixed. At its most essential level, affirmational marketing in the beauty industry is about making everyone feel that they are beautiful just the way they are.

Affirmational Marketing in the Beauty Industry Today

While the beauty industry as a whole has a long way to go, inclusive and affirmational marketing is becoming more mainstream today. In 2004, however, when Dove launched its Real Beauty campaign, the idea was considered revolutionary. Dove sells a variety of skin, hair, and

body products, making it a very personal and intimate brand to engage with, particularly within the everyday lives of women. The brand's Real Beauty campaign is focused on increasing confidence in women and girls by encouraging them to overcome their insecurities and to see themselves as beautiful. Dove's 2006 "Evolution" video (Exhibit 1) marked a tipping point towards the campaign's success. The anti-photoshopping mini-film achieved virality on YouTube and was named the #1 campaign of the 21st century by AdAge judges and members.¹ Since then, Dove has continued to build on the momentum of Real Beauty, launching the Dove Self-Esteem Project and partnering with experts and celebrities alike to continue the conversation around confidence in women and girls. Dove clearly benefited from an early-mover advantage on the trend towards inclusivity, allowing the brand to establish the authenticity and credibility in the space necessary to enable the lasting success of the Real Beauty campaign. Yet what was seen as radical in 2004 is considered by many of today's consumers to be mere table-stakes in order for them to engage with a brand.

Gillette's Venus entered the razor market in 2001 and has since become a staple of women's shaving and personal care aisles. Though self-described as a hair removal brand, the company's marketing portrayed a different vision; "ads often portrayed a group of equally thin bikini-clad models bobbing their smooth legs in unison," with no body hair in sight.² Other ads showed those same homogeneous models shaving already shaven legs. Disrupting the market alongside other brands such as Athena Club and Flamingo, Billie launched the "Project Body Hair" campaign in 2018, aiming to tear down the stigma surrounding body hair and directly critiquing the misrepresentative marketing of brands like Venus. This campaign prompted an almost immediate response from Venus, launching their inclusive "My Skin, My Way"

¹ Bahadur, 2017

² Flora, 2022

campaign. In an effort to further authenticize their brand message, Venus teamed up with the Animal Crossing video game in 2020 to create avatars highlighting freckles, acne, cellulite, scars, stretch marks, body hair, other “skin realities” like vitiligo, tattoos, psoriasis, and differently abled bodies (Exhibit 2). With marketing tactics like this, the brand is working to shed their past misleading and inauthentic ads. However, Gillette Venus’ history of less-than-inclusive marketing content is likely to create skepticism amongst consumers over whether this campaign is a genuine commitment to change, or simply an attempt to capitalize on a trend.

Unlike more established brands such as Venus, which have been forced to use new campaigns to redefine themselves as inclusive, the growing suite of new DTC beauty brands has the advantage of promoting that image from the beginning and making it part of their core brand identity. Launching almost in tandem with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, 19/99 is a Canadian beauty brand seeking to remove age from the beauty conversation altogether. The company launched with only two products: a lip pencil and a high shine gloss, tackling not only the issue of age but also combating the wastefulness of the industry. The company’s core mission is to focus on products that work for women of all ages, hinted at by its name, which establishes that their products are as much for 19-year-olds as they are for 99-year-olds. The products and marketing promote makeup as an accessory rather than a necessity, with the goal of encouraging customers to use makeup for creative expression at any age (Exhibit 3). 19/99’s vision coincides with an industry-wide movement away from terms like anti-aging, shifting to more skin-positive marketing and products that avoid convincing customers to pursue perfection.

Influence of Affirmational Marketing on Tactics and Strategies

Today’s move towards more inclusive, affirmational marketing is a result of a multitude of factors, many of which are tied to younger generations of consumers. One key factor is the

rise of social media and the subsequent backlash against it. Gen-Z consumers who grew up with social media have become aware of the false image of perfection it portrays and the subsequent harm caused. A desire for more authentic, real content has pushed brands to shift who and what they include in marketing messages.³ Marketers will have to be more conscious about the types of influencers they are partnering with on social media and where those influencers are perceived to fall on the spectrum from perfect to authentic. Another important factor is the rising expectations that consumers have of brands when it comes to diversity. According to a Deloitte survey, the youngest consumer groups tend to notice inclusivity in advertising the most—and what they notice affects what they purchase (Exhibit 4).⁴ Addressing these expectations will require marketers to seek out more diverse representation when building advertisements, and to be conscious of the language they include in their messaging. These groups are young and growing, pointing towards a future where inclusive marketing will only become increasingly important. Engaging in inclusive marketing will allow brands to reach more customers and protect their reputation amidst higher consumer expectations, now and in the future.

As consumers become more engaged with and aware of the shortcomings of brands in the context of inclusivity and diversity, traditional marketing tools will fall further to the wayside. Brands will no longer be able to rely on the antiquated cycle of developing products and then convincing consumers why they need those products; rather, there will be a greater shift to customer-centric marketing, where brands emerge and evolve with the main goal of meeting customers where they are at—focusing on their needs, preferences, and values. Inclusive marketing trends will accelerate the move towards viewing the customer journey as circular, with the consumer placed chiefly in the center, compared to the previous model of a linear journey

³ Chitrakorn, 2022

⁴ Brodzik & Cuthill & Young & Drake, 2021

(Exhibit 5). This circular model will call for a greater emphasis on pull marketing, wherein companies create content that invites consumers to engage with the brand, as compared to push marketing, wherein companies push products in front of consumers to convince them to purchase. The most successful brands will likely be those that put their core mission ahead of product and profits, as their values and their ability to manifest them will be what builds connection and loyalty among consumers and proves the authenticity behind their efforts. This is evident already in the difference between legacy brands, like Gillette Venus, who are creating new campaigns to prove to consumers that the brand can be inclusive, and start-up brands, like 19/99 beauty, who integrated inclusivity into the core of the brand's identity from the beginning. As new start-up brands continue to rise to popularity and inclusive marketing continues to gain momentum, the difference between authentic and surface-level efforts made by companies to follow this trend will become increasingly apparent.

The Future of the Trend and What's Left to be Done

Campaigns from legacy brands and the rising popularity of direct-to-consumer brands alike reflect a change in the beauty industry from aspirational to affirmational marketing. These brands no longer focus on creating unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards for consumers, but instead on meeting customers where they are at and showcasing that reality in marketing materials. The shift to affirmational marketing manifests in the rise of brands such as 19/99 which focuses on removing age from the conversation around beauty, and marketing efforts by established brands like Dove and Gillette's Venus to create a skin and body-inclusive brand presence. Although it may seem that this trend is capturing the attention of the global beauty industry, there is still work to be done. To date, North American and European brands have led the movement towards affirmational marketing, while much of Asia remains tied to the

aspirational model; however, some Asian brands have begun to adopt more inclusive messaging in their marketing, and it can be expected that this will diffuse throughout the Asian beauty market. Though some brands may see this shift as a trend, others will understand that an inclusive and diverse beauty industry has become an expectation amongst younger consumers, especially Gen Z. The most successful brands will prioritize mission and core messaging over profit and products, as consumers watch which companies authenticate those values in their marketing.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Dove “Evolution” (2006) - [watch on YouTube](#)

Dove’s “Evolution” mini-film was radical in the way that it pushed against photoshopping by revealing the extent to which it changes the true appearance of a woman. The advertisement was named the #1 campaign of the 21st Century by AdAge judges and members, and marked a tipping point towards the success of Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign, which continues to live on today.



No. 1 Dove: Campaign for Real Beauty

196 597 DISLIKE SHARE DOWNLOAD SAVE ...

Exhibit 2: Venus “Skininclusive” Summer Line

The Gillette Venus Skininclusive Summer Line of avatars launched for Animal Crossing intended to reach a younger audience demographic while tapping into consumer interest in increased inclusivity.



Vitiligo Vibe

A deep turquoise bikini with scalloped top and high-waisted bottoms complete with a sheer aqua kimono with cutout lattice sleeves.

Skinsider Knowledge
Vitiligo is an autoimmune disease that manifests in white patches on the skin. Even though it affects all races, ethnicities and genders across the world, most people (including scientists!) know very little about this condition. Because of that, even though Vitiligo is not life-threatening, it is extremely life-altering.

DESIGN CODES FOR FACE	MO-MS07-YQYB-189K	MO-GNFP-X2D4-3H7R	DESIGN CODES FOR BODY	MO-W4FV-YFJ7-JJH	MO-XG41-PRH4-TMDB
	MO-94PY-1J8S-YV0S	MO-480V-WW68-3KHP		MO-MLSJ-K0MY-TN5D	MO-BS90-9WNW-97XJ
	MO-YT0T-BG6N-P122	MO-162W-FG8Y-NTC7		MO-3MDJ-M3MK-VPMS	MO-9WDY-RBV7-2PQ9
	MO-00GY-BTGG-8FXH	MO-VM0V-1FV3-NQNB		MO-Y2DR-29VQ-FHF7	MO-MNRG-M3HW-6V8W
					



Exhibit 3: 19/99 Beauty “There is No Magic Number” - [watch on YouTube](#)

19/99 Beauty uses their marketing materials to convey the message at the core of the brand identity: that beauty is for everyone and is not restricted to a certain age group.

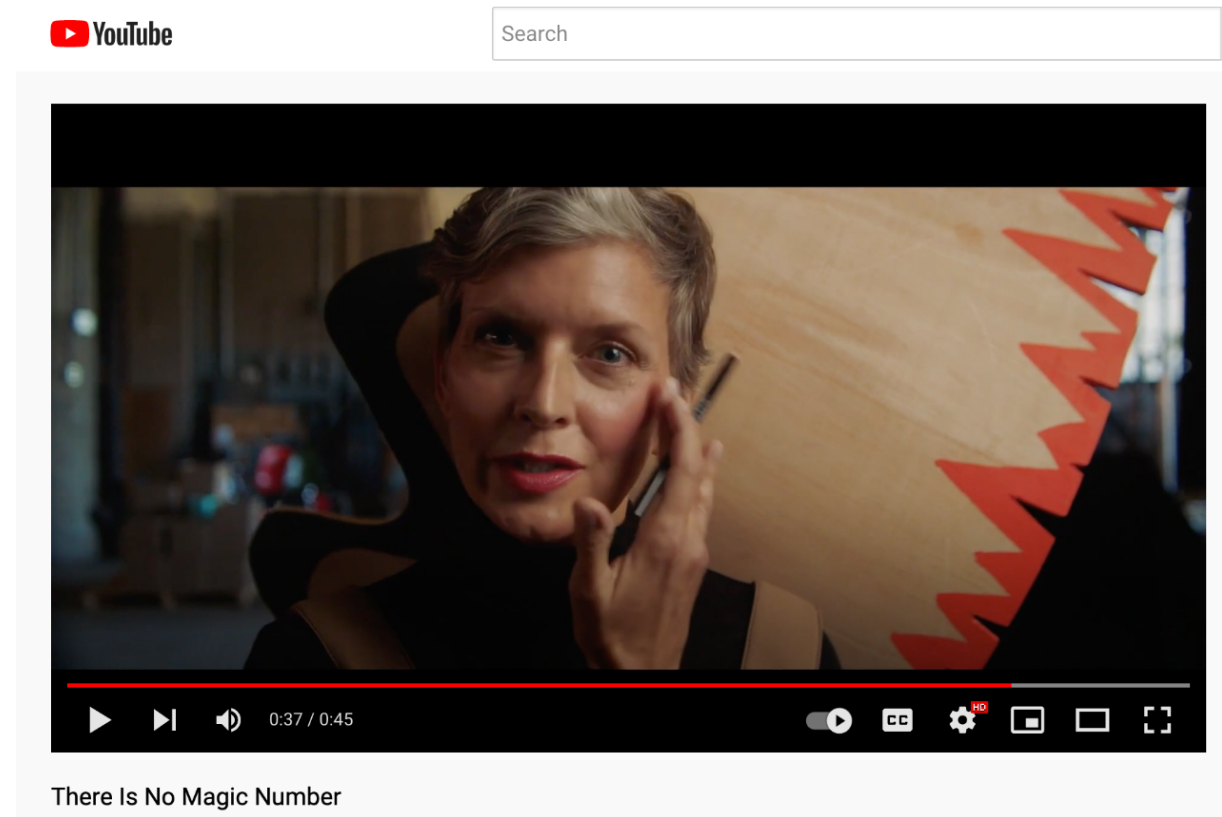


Exhibit 4: Deloitte Global Marketing Trends Executive Survey Results

Across industry groups, younger age groups (18-25 year olds) tended to notice inclusive marketing more often than older age groups (46+ year olds)--and this informed their purchasing decisions. As this generation comes of age, inclusive marketing efforts will be more and more important to brand success.

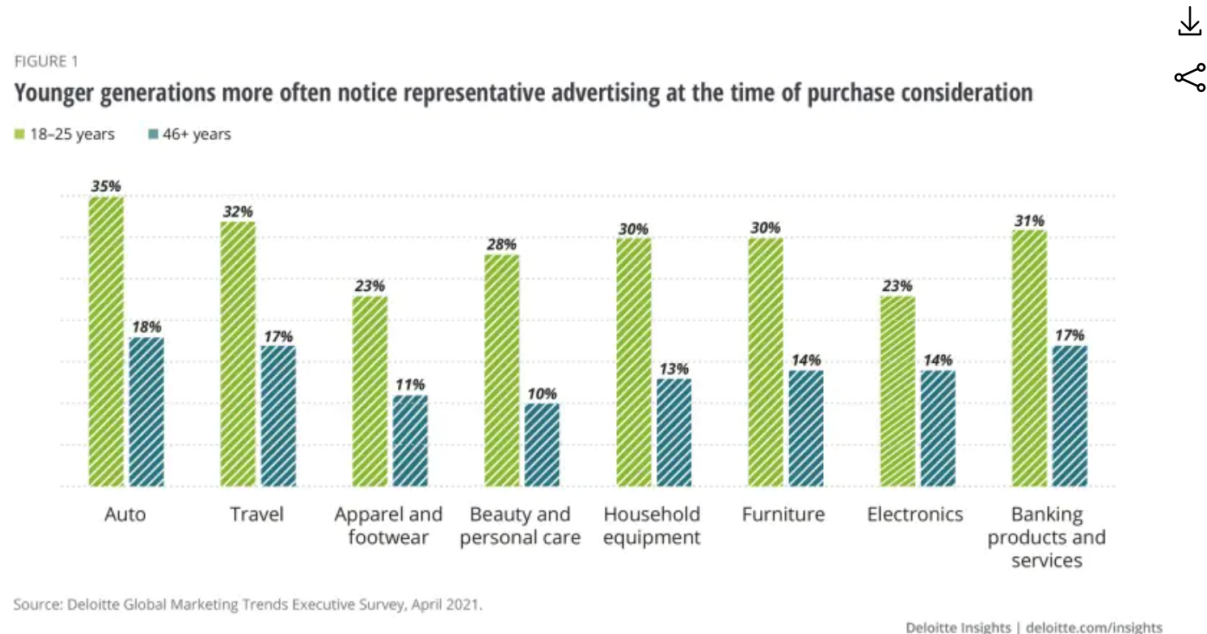


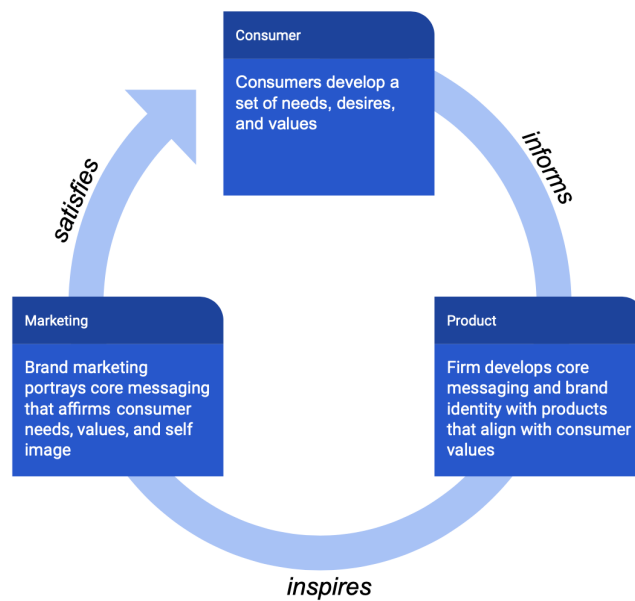
Exhibit 5: Customer Journeys

In the previous customer journey model, customers came last. Consumers now expect a customer centric model where brands cater to their needs and values.

Old Journey:



New Journey:



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