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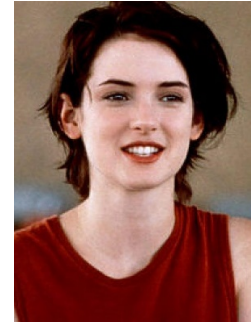
## The Beauty Industry Has a Gen X Problem

*It's all about millennials now, but maybe the two generations can find common beauty ground.*

[CHERYL WISCHHOVER](#) Oct 13, 2016

Generation X, to use a very Gen X reference point, is the Jan Brady of generations. Boomers are Marcia, the bossy one. They're still holding public office and doing things like voting in favor of Brexit. Millennials are Cindy, the young, cute, sassy, occasionally whiny one who reads articles like "10 Beauty Products You Absolutely Need Before You Turn 30." Jan, the forgotten middle child, doesn't care about contouring that much and just really wants 15 minutes to herself without someone demanding attention from her every goddamned second of the day.

Gen X'ers are about 35 to 55 years old now. If you were the same age as Rachel, Monica, and Phoebe when you watched *Friends* on Must-See TV Thursday in the '90s, hi, you're middle-aged. I still think of myself as Winona Ryder circa *Reality Bites*, but the reality is that I am *Stranger Things* Winona, a slightly frumpy, frenzied, and occasionally unhinged mom of young teens.  
Winona Ryder in *Reality Bites*, 1994. Photo: Universal Pictures



The beauty industry is so focused on millennials because there's a lot of money to be made there. According to the Pew Research Center, millennials are now the biggest living generation in the US. They are 75.4 million strong, compared to 74.9 million Boomers and a paltry 66 million Gen X'ers. Now's the time to hook 'em on hyaluronic acid and under-eye concealers, especially since many are in their late 20s and early 30s and starting to build up some earning power and fine lines of their own.

But what about Gen X'ers and our ever-deepening crow's feet? Even though we only make up 25 percent of the population, we have 31 percent of the spending power, according to a recent *Forbes* article. As a generation, we've been called slackers, latchkey kids, the MTV generation, self-deprecating, skeptical, and disillusioned. It's hard to market a so-called miracle product to someone who came of age listening to Nirvana.

As a result, the beauty industry generally takes Gen X for granted. "If [older] women knew how these companies talk about them behind their backs, they would be booted faster than Debbie Schultz at the DNC," says Lesley Jane Seymour, the former editor-in-chief of the recently-shuttered *More* magazine, a publication geared towards an older,

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professional female reader. "It is appalling how these executives treat older women. They take their loyalty for granted. Do not. They will move on." (In a particularly ironic twist, after I spoke to Seymour and seven months after *More* was shut down, it was relaunched as an online lifestyle site... for millennials.)

I took an unscientific poll of 10 Gen X friends to ask them how they buy beauty and perceive beauty marketing. "I do think that companies can try to appeal more to middle-of-the-road customers like me," says Kelly, 42. "For makeup and skincare, they're either trying to reach a super-young audience or a seemingly older audience that I'm really hoping I don't fit into just yet!"

Across the board, they all said they rarely go to department stores to shop for beauty products, generally don't read magazines unless they're at the nail salon, and, while they are selectively loyal to certain brands (Bobbi Brown and Olay were name-checked by several), they tend to brand-hop.

"I have no brand loyalty because I have no favorites," says Mary, 45. "In my ideal world, there would be an experienced, knowledgeable, neutral party that could evaluate me and recommend products without pushing one brand or line. I know that Sephora-type places are supposed to do that, but I haven't had positive experiences. It seems like the salespeople are usually young and don't understand 40-year-old skin."



Julianne Moore and Liya Kebede in a lipstick ad. Photo: L'Oréal Paris

According to Karen Grant, a global beauty industry analyst at the NPD Group, Gen X'ers are "highly engaged users." She also notes that "in the 35- to 54-year-old group, more women are using five or more makeup products, which is more than the 18- to 24-year-olds and as many as 25- to 34-year-olds. We're seeing increases in that age group actually using more makeup products." So why aren't beauty companies engaging with this shopper, and, more importantly, engaging *well*?

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First of all, representation is a problem, as it is all across the fashion and beauty media landscape for basically anyone who isn't white, young, and skinny. Just look at *Harper Bazaar's* new "Fabulous at Every Age" issue, featuring Gigi Hadid at a wizened 21 years old.

This isn't to say that older women haven't been featured in many beauty campaigns through the years. Julianne Moore and Jennifer Lopez, among many others, have been longtime L'Oréal Paris ambassadors. In 2014, it was suddenly trendy to feature older women in beauty advertising, a move that I considered lip service then and still do, because there definitely isn't equal representation of 43-year-olds versus 23-year-olds in beauty ads.



Jennifer Lopez, not your average 47-year-old. Photo: L'Oréal Paris

A beauty PR acquaintance of mine says if I had asked her a few months ago, she would have said beauty companies were definitely ignoring Gen X. But there finally seems to be some awareness within the industry that 40-year-olds exist and even, you know, wear makeup and still care about how they look.

Back in June, Lynn Tilton, the owner of Stilacosmetics, told *WWD* that she was revamping the brand in order to have wider demographic appeal for the younger-skewing makeup brand. At a recent Stila event, Tilton, who is in her 50s, explains it was partially about product aesthetics. "I always used Stila, but it wasn't what I carried in my purse to pull out in front of people, because I wanted something more elegant," she says.

To this end, Stila has done away with some of the more inexpensive-looking and brightly-colored packaging in favor of matte gold. The brand is also focusing on its Stay All Day franchise, which features new lip and brow products and appeals to women of all ages due to a large color range and ease of use.

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Despite the fact that there are brands out there — like Bobbi Brown, Clinique, and Estée Lauder — that are seemingly popular with an older makeup user, one industry vet felt the need to start a brand from scratch specifically for women of Gen X age and older. Holly Mordini, a makeup artist and Gen X'er who was the vice president for global artistry and education at Smashbox for almost 15 years, launched Stroke of Beauty last fall.

"The vision and inspiration came from my own bathroom mirror. I was having a hard time applying my makeup in a way that didn't look like I was trying too hard or [made me] look too covered up," Mordini says. "It was the turning point. Instead of blaming my skin and thinking, 'okay, there's something wrong with me,' I started to blame the makeup."

Stroke of Beauty launched with one product, a concealer, on QVC. Since then, the brand has launched a brow pencil, brow fiber gel, eyeliner, and an eyeshadow stick, sold on QVC and the brand's site. "I started to look at it from my fine arts background," Mordini says. "Contrast, definition, line theory. How can I incorporate all of those elements into formulas that really solve the daily challenges that women face when they're moving into their 30s, through their 40s, and beyond? My focus is that you don't need to reach for full coverage because you're an older woman." She hopes to launch at retailers more widely once there is a larger product selection.



Then there are the skincare campaigns. The word "ageless" is thrown around a lot lately. Jennifer Lopez, 47, is the poster child for this concept, and likely has a skincare regimen, at least according to this January *W* story, that few women can afford or have time for. (Does it count as using an older woman in a campaign if that woman doesn't *look* older?)

Olay has a campaign now that proclaims its products will give users "the ultimate beauty victory. Nobody has any idea how old you are... you can be ageless." It's a pretty creepy message. To its credit, the company uses models that are definitely not 22-year-olds, but I don't want to be a vampire. I just want to get rid of some dark spots and the line between my brows that makes me look eternally pissed off.

In one of the most overt appeals to Gen X that I've seen from a beauty company yet, Philosophy just unveiled a campaign with Ellen Pompeo, 46. In the video snippets that the brand has promoted heavily on social media, Pompeo rolls her eyes and does push-ups and other robust activities as an old-timey, '50s-style narrator says, "Welcome to middle age. It's all downhill from here. Wind down your career. Give in to your dwindling capacities."

"We were excited about having a laugh and poking fun at all of these ridiculous stereotypes that are constantly thrown at us and just saying, 'this is stupid,'" explains

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Rachel Shelowitz, the vice president of global marketing and development at Philosophy. "[Gen X] has grown up more pessimistic and a little more skeptical, so I think that in order to connect with this group of people, you can't come out with this glossy ad and say everything is going to be okay if you use this product. Instead, you have to do it with a wink."

I like the ad and concept, though I'm not so sure about Philosophy's persistent use of the word "coolager" to refer to women in this age group. A coolager, according to the brand, is a "role model for women younger or older who want to envision their lives as uplifting, enlightened experiences instead of a series of planned events." Marketing neologisms, especially ones that require a definition, rarely work. While I definitely think I am (occasionally) still cool, maybe let's stop trying to make coolager happen. What I'm noticing is that there's actually some overlap between generational beauty needs now. Millennials are starting to have the same beauty concerns as Gen X'ers. Seymour says that her millennial daughters regularly swipe her products and clothes. "The old idea that if an older woman liked your brand, then the twentysomething wouldn't like it is a fundamental misreading of the sharing that goes on today," she says. I get as many questions about Botox and products for under-eye bags from my millennial friends and coworkers as I do from my older peers.

If companies don't directly offer us what we want, we'll find it somewhere else, even if that means venturing into the soft pink wonderland of millennial marketing, because Gen X is nothing if not scrappy. While there are obviously women in both generations who want contouring and purple glitter eyeliner, Gen X and a large chunk of millennials share a desire for natural, simple products. A representative for Stroke of Beauty notes that, since launch, "younger" women are engaging regularly with the brand on social media.

Brands like Milk Makeup and Glossier, the latter of which is arguably the most millennial beauty company in existence right now, can appeal to just this type of Gen X'er. "I don't actually think of Glossier as a very millennial-specific line," says Victoria Kirby, the beauty director at *Redbook*, whose readers are mostly working women with families. "What makes that brand really successful is that it's the products that everyone wants to have in their makeup bag regardless of how old you are. They're just really great, easy, problem-solving products."

**Nudestix** is another perfect example. This brand was launched in 2014 by Jenny Frankel, an ex-M.A.C executive and the cofounder of CoverFX, and her two teen daughters. Almost all the products come in pencil form in classic colors. They're easy to use, require no brush or skill, have sophisticated black packaging, and are flattering on almost everyone. In other words, they're perfect for a fortysomething who is multitasking every minute of the day.

The brand was initially intended for a teen and millennial audience, and Ally and Taylor, Frankel's daughters, do all the social media and meet press for the brand. It's sold at Sephora and Urban Outfitters, but now Jenny goes on QVC to sell the brand to an

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older audience. "We notice on social [media] that we have followers who are 13 to 50," Taylor says. "With Nudestix, it's really not about age, it's about lifestyle."

If a 20-year-old beauty entrepreneur and her mom figured this out, maybe the rest of the industry will, too.

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