



THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

Is the breathtaking price tag on LUXURY COSMETICS justified, or will off-the-shelf FAVOURITES work just as well? You be the judge, says DANIELA MASSENZ

Mention I'm a beauty writer when I'm out and about and, inevitably, the question pops up: 'Are expensive beauty products really that much better than the cheapies?' The answer, of course, is not that simple.

THE CASE FOR LUXURY

That shiny product with its new technology we see on TV and in glossy magazines has come a long way to get here. Months or even years before, the lab boffins were hard at work researching and developing new or improved ingredients and formulas that are ever-more effective. Next come clinical trials to test if

these work and are safe, then it's finding how they work with the other ingredients in the formula. If that formula is stable and pleasant to use, they start user trials. But a fail in any of these areas means going back and reformulating. Needless to say, this is an expensive exercise and companies either buy these formulas from independent developers, or create them themselves, in the case of global giants like L'Oréal, and the cost is often carried by their flagship brands (Lancôme, Yves Saint Laurent and Redken in this case). They may have exclusive right to use the patented ingredients or technology

for a certain time, after which, they will be shared with their affordable sister brands (like Vichy, L'Oréal and Garnier).

An example of how this works is with L'Oréal-owned active ingredients like Mexoryl sunscreens, explains Bertrand de Laleu, MD of L'Oréal South Africa. 'They are used across

the company by brands such as Lancôme, Vichy and Garnier, but the concentration used may be different. In addition, the rest of the raw materials that make up the product will be different for the mass product, to keep the cost down. In luxury, we don't have that limitation.'

John Knowlton, independent consultant to the cosmetics industry, says premium products often contain optimal doses of active ingredients for maximum therapeutic benefit or a fast clinical result. They also tend to have higher levels of pure pigments (in make-up) and a higher concentration of pure perfume oils (in fragrance).

More concentrated or quality ingredients can mean that a little goes a long way, so you save money in the long run. I'm almost embarrassed to admit I've used a particular premium eyeshadow palette daily for going on three years, and it's still going strong.

And if you wonder why many natural and eco-friendly products are often pricier, the cost mounts up because of ingredients that have to be grown and farmed sustainably, and accreditation by organisations such as Eco-Cert doesn't come cheap.

A key difference between luxe and mass is that 'at the lower end, what you see is what you get,' says Knowlton. 'At the upper end, it's "what you see

is what you experience". Buying a cosmetic is partly an emotive or sensory experience. You have a relationship with the product you use. And it's a very good user-experience on more expensive products.' You're also buying the iconic name. 'Customer expectation is a big consideration in luxury,' says L'Oréal Luxe GM Marketa

Havlik-Liebenberg, 'They expect product education and service.'

'Buying a cosmetic is partly a SENSORY experience'

THE CASE FOR THE UNDERDOG

It's hard not to feel a frisson when an independent survey

shows a 'drugstore' cream's results have left its costly department-store rivals choking in its dust. Who doesn't love a bargain? So how is it that mass brands manage to bring quality products to the consumer at such an affordable price? De Laleu explains, 'BB cream is a good example. There is real know-how in formulating this product, but the ingredients used are not expensive, so we're able to bring it to market at an affordable price.' Kiehl's is another. 'The brand invests in what is inside the bottle with unique, effective formulations, rather than the packaging.' The result is an excellent product at a very good price.

'It's also about economies of scale,' says Parfums Christian Dior South Africa GM, Armine Kalogeropoulos. 'As luxury beauty products are niche, the costs of research, development and production are much higher. In make-up, luxe seasonal colour looks are handmade, manufactured on a smaller scale and launched in limited editions.'

As part of my job, I've been lucky enough to use products from among the world's costliest right down to ones I could put in my supermarket trolley. There have been excellent ones and some duds at both ends of the spectrum. My own beauty arsenal has a healthy mix of both.

I lean towards 'cosmeceutical' skincare and admit that name brands (not always expensive) are persuasive – there's reassurance in knowing they have to adhere to certain safety standards and have research and testing behind them. I also look at ingredients, texture, and packaging that will protect the formulation from degrading in air and light. Has this rule steered me right? I like to think so.

MY ADVICE

In the end, it boils down to personal choice, and what you can afford. Value is not about the price tag. Most of us are prepared to pay for products that work, and you will find effective products that fit your needs, pocket and social conscience. What you should do before you shell out your hard-earned cash on any product is your homework.

Research formulations: learn to read labels and go to reputable online reviewers for product crits. Ask for samples (luxe products usually have trial sizes, or they may be able to decant some for you). It will only last a few days, but it will give you an idea of the texture and whether it suits your skin. For make-up, have a trial with the product you're lusting after, and see how you like it. That goes for fragrance too. Try it on your skin, live with it for a few hours and see how it develops with your personal chemistry before you give in to that impulse unless you simply have to have it, however it turns out.

And remember to always have realistic expectations. A skin cream may slow the march of time and lifestyle on our faces, but it will not be able to do what a facelift or non-surgical procedures like laser are capable of. Happy shopping! □