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WHY ARE GERMANS OBSESSED WITH NATURAL BEAUTY?

Environmental concerns and fears about harmful ingredients such as parabens and phthalates have beauty consumers showing more interest in going organic. In Germany, natural products have been on the shelves for decades. What's driving the success of this sector in the country?

Location [Germany](#)

Featured Experts

[Elfriede Dambacher](#)

Elfriede Dambacher is an independent consultant for the organic and natural cosmetics market in Germany and runs her own consultancy firm, Naturkosmetik Konzepte, based in Dortmund.

[Jörge von Kruse](#)

Jörge von Kruse has been a co-director of natural cosmetics brand i+m since 2007. The company has been in business for 40 years.

Author

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Barbara Woolsey is a Canadian journalist based in Berlin, regularly contributing to outlets such as Reuters, Thrillist and The Guardian on culture, travel, startups and more. Currently you can find her taking Greek classes.

Highlights & Data

- Germany's love of natural cosmetics is rooted in a long-standing commitment to environmentalism and sustainable consumption
- These cultural values are also reflected in the popularity of organic food and herbal remedies
- E-commerce is enabling upstart natural cosmetics brands to gain customers outside of brick-and-mortar
- The mainstreaming of this segment is also opening up shelf space for niche brands in drug stores
- The global organic beauty market is projected to be worth nearly **\$22 billion** by 2024, up from **\$11 billion** in 2016 (*Persistence Market Research, 2016*)
- Sales of natural cosmetics in Germany **almost doubled** between 2007 and 2017 (*Naturkosmetik Konzepte, 2017*)
- Drug stores account for **42%** of the natural cosmetics market in Germany (*Naturkosmetik Konzepte, 2017*)
- Sales of organic food in the country increased by **5.9%** between 2016 and 2017 (*AMI, 2018*)

Scope

Amid damning research about harmful ingredients such as parabens, synthetic colours, and phthalates, beauty consumers around the world have become much pickier about their skincare products. It's part of the reason why the global organic beauty market is projected to be worth nearly \$22 billion by 2024, up from \$11 billion in 2016, with this growth also being fuelled by Gen Y's environmental concerns and a desire among older generations for cosmetics with added health benefits. [1][2]

In Germany, such beauty products are available on drugstore shelves next to their conventional counterparts, and they range from niche brands such as Dresdner Essenz and Nonique to multinational labels with extensive product lines. "Many pioneers of natural cosmetics call Germany home and from that a strong movement emerged early on," explains Elfriede Dambacher, owner of consultancy firm Naturkosmetik Konzepte, which estimates that revenues from natural cosmetics in Germany almost doubled between 2007 and 2017. [3][4] What's driving the continued success of this sector in the country? Why do so many Germans choose to buy organic when it comes to beauty?

Starting with flower power

Germany's love for natural cosmetics stems from the environment movement of the 1970s, when anti-establishment attitudes in West Germany fuelled activism against industrialism, nuclear power, and the former divide between the nation. [5] According to Dambacher, this is when many Germans started seeking out organic products, particularly detergents and cosmetics. Natural food and health food stores subsequently sprung up, and cosmetics became one of their merchandising staples. [3]

The robust natural cosmetics market also connects to Germany's historical roots in biodynamic and organic farming. The country is home to Demeter International, the world's largest organic certification program, utilised in over 50 countries to verify that biodynamic products meet appropriate standards. [6] The association was founded in 1928 based on the practices of Rudolf Steiner, the father of biodynamic farming. [7]

This rich heritage of environmentalism is still visible nationwide; in 2016, Germany ranked fifth in the world for its progress towards a greener economy, and it occupies the #13 spot in RobecoSAM and Robeco's list of sustainable countries. [8][9] Additionally, the 2017 Food Sustainability Index placed Germany third out of 34 countries on sustainable food consumption, and sales of organic food increased by 5.9% between 2016 and 2017. [10][11] This concern about what Germans put into their bodies is being reflected in their beauty purchasing, with many people wanting both organic foods and natural cosmetics to be properly authenticated. "Natural cosmetics must differ from conventional cosmetics clearly in their entire recipe," says Dambacher. [3]



Environmentalism is embedded in German society

Timothy Paul Smith (2018) ©

The homeland of homeopathy

Herbal and natural remedies are deeply ingrained in German culture, with research from 2010 finding that 70% of people claimed to use them. [12] In fact, homeopathy was invented by Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician, who published his first work on alternative medicine in a medical journal in 1796. [13] The practice enjoyed a renaissance in the 1970s, when it was rediscovered by the upper echelons of West German society, including the wife of a former German president, and a big lobby was founded. [14]

The spread of homeopathy internationally has only strengthened the German belief in herbal and natural healing. Despite its dubious scientific merit, homeopathy holds a privileged legal status in the country. While medicines must pass stringent scientific regulations, these alternative treatments have no such requirement. What's more, people can claim back on them through their insurance companies. [14]



Germans are paying close attention to what goes in or on their bodies

Andrew Sutherland (2018) ©

Before the big craze

Dambacher explains that, in Germany, natural cosmetics “have a long tradition before the megatrend came.” [3] The nation’s drug stores (which sell home products, cosmetics and some groceries, but do not fill pharmaceutical prescriptions) have been selling natural cosmetics since the 1980s, and now that they have reached a level of mass popularity, these retailers are eager to have more variety on their shelves.

Berlin-based natural cosmetics company i+m has seen its sales grow by around 150% over the last three years, according to co-director Jörgo von Kruse. [15] The brand was launched in 1978 by midwife Inge Stamm, who found that babies’ skin was becoming irritated by conventional products. Trained also as a druggist and herbalist, she developed a skincare line using plant-based raw materials. [16]

“*Drug stores are trying to reach certain customer groups and, with a sustainable local brand like i+m, make their own marketing green*”

Jörgo von Kruse, co-director of i+m

i+m makes most of its revenues via drug stores. It is on the shelves of Germany’s second-largest chain, dm, as well as the chains Budnikowsky and Mueller. “They all approached us,” says von Kruse. “Drug stores are trying to reach certain customer groups and, with a sustainable local brand like i+m, make their own marketing green. Not long ago, when we negotiated with Rewe, they said it’s not important at all how much of you we sell, we want you above all things as a green ‘beacon.’” It’s a mutually beneficial relationship for all parties as it helps build consumer trust for an independent brand such as i+m to be “in a drugstore next to conventional cosmetics,” he adds.

[15]

To better compete in the skincare and beauty aisles of drugstores, von Kruse notes that the company redesigned its packaging in 2007. i+m opted for a sleek logo and colourful labels, with the words 'fair', 'organic' and 'vegan' in large type – a departure from the understated packaging it had used before. “Natural cosmetics used to be about ‘good but cheap’ and without marketing,” says von Kruse. “But in the cosmetics sector, marketing and packaging play a central role.” [15]



Retailers are keen to be seen as green

Darren Nunis (2018) ©

Auf wiedersehen to health food stores

The traditional distribution channels for natural and organic cosmetics – natural food and health food stores – are waning. German drug stores have strengthened their presence in this growing space, accounting for 42% of the market in 2017 while the traditional retailers for such products make up just 22% of sales, according to Naturkosmetik Konzept. [17] This is partly because large drugstore chains are ubiquitous, have more to offer, and can be more competitive in their prices.

Since start-up brands still find it difficult to get into brick-and-mortar shops until they have built up some recognition, many are focusing on expanding online, explains Dambacher, adding that e-commerce is the fastest-growing channel for natural cosmetics, which is also cutting into sales at natural food and health food stores. This shift is partly down to the fact that there are often no staff advising and selling products at health food stores, which may lead consumers elsewhere. “With this approach, the specialist trade is unlikely to gain new customers interested in natural cosmetics,” says Dambacher. [3]



New beauty brands are finding their markets beyond the high street

Jay Lee (2018) ©

Insights and opportunities

“In the 1970s, [natural cosmetics] started out as an idea of bettering the world, but now it’s about ideas such as business, lifestyle, and not harming the world,” says von Kruse. [15] Natural cosmetics appeal to a range of demographics because of a longstanding level of product awareness in Germany, providing multi-faceted commercial opportunities. **Lavera**, for instance, delivered natural cosmetics to the world of fashion by opening a pop-up stand at Berlin Fashion Week in July 2018. Visitors could have their make-up done, or have face masks and lip gloss mixed for them in the Lavera Lab. The brand boasts totally natural, vegan and organic products – even the packaging is climate-neutral. [18]

Since Germany leads the way in natural cosmetics, more and more international brands are entering the market, notes Dambacher. And because of the global shift towards natural, chemical-free cosmetics, German brands are also enjoying more buzz beyond their borders. For example, i+m offers its website in Swedish and Russian as well as English to support successful partnerships in both these markets. At home, meanwhile, the number of drug stores is set to grow, inevitably creating more shelf space for natural cosmetic brands. In February 2018, supermarket chain Edeka announced it was starting its own drug store chain, with plans to open 50 branches a year. [19]

Dambacher expects the natural cosmetics market to increasingly polarise between mainstream and niche, leaving room for a range of different players. The extended market for natural and organic beauty – products with and without certifying labels, and those simply ‘inspired’ by nature – has already gained a market share of 17%, and further growth is being predicted for the future. [17]

Related behaviours

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