

WHO IS THE MODERN

From protein tubs to hair care and primer, the modern man is reading wellness codes.

BY TAHLIA WHITFIELD

For years, the male consumer's relationship with wellness could be located with unnerving precision, somewhere between a black plastic tub of whey and a poster of a man whose deltoids appeared to defy biology. Protein was the entry point and the entire proposition, stacked high in matte, toned muscle-riddled packaging that promised mass, power and transformation.

Early commercial powders such as Weider's Muscle Builder were sold with hyper-developed physiques and quasi-medical

endorsements, while even earlier milk-protein powders fabricated in the 19th century, such as Plasmon, wrapped strength in classical imagery, Greek torsos and the suggestion that muscle was both ancient and aspirational. The consumer was not buying nutrition so much as a future version of themselves. The copy leaned heavily on macho bravado, authority and science-adjacent language that implied legitimacy without inviting too many questions. The male shopper was presumed to want size, and retail obliged him with a spectacle. But the shopper standing in front of the shelf today looks different.

He is reading the fine print

Fast forward, and the language has changed, not because men stopped caring about performance, but because they started caring about

the ingredients. A protein brand such as Rule 1 now leads with "100 per cent whey protein isolate" and makes a point of listing what it excludes, including amino spiking and banned substances. Muscle Nation's proposition has shifted protein from a gym bag to the pantry, describing it as suitable for breakfast or dessert, proving that protein can simply be an ingredient, not an identity marker. Switch Nutrition highlights grass-fed sourcing and low-carbohydrate content, framing protein as everyday nutrition rather than extreme enhancement. The packaging still reverberates strength, but more innately, it explains itself.

True Protein extends this explanatory turn, with founder Ben Kierath publicly referencing the five-year development timeline behind its forthcoming "True All Natural RTD," a product framed around ultrafiltration, grass-fed dairy and the absence of stabilisers, gums and artificial sweeteners.

"The modern male consumer is navigating the category with much more scrutiny, and I think that is a great change. They are far more educated now and are naturally sceptical of bold claims," True Protein's chief marketing officer Will Florance told *Inside FMCG*. "They don't just look at the marketing on the front of the pack anymore. They are flipping it over to check the nutritional panel because they want to know exactly what they are putting in their body."

Florance recounted a real demand for transparency, with consumers looking for labels that don't read like a science experiment. "They want simple, effective ingredients"



MALE SHOPPER NOW?

they can recognise. It forces brands to step up their game on formulation integrity.”

For retailers, that shift is not trivial with decades of beauty and wellness categories having been powered by the commercial logic of insecurity. Female shoppers were historically presented with endless micro-corrections to solve: anti-ageing, anti-frizz, anti-wrinkle, anti-blemish. It was a lucrative system, but one built on the language of deficiency.

He is buying beyond the gym

According to Roy Morgan, 43.4 per cent of Australian men now use skincare, up from 40.5 per cent five years earlier, while the global men's skincare market is projected to grow substantially. Participation is rising, but so is discernment, and today men are not simply buying moisturiser but buying into ingredient stories, barrier repair claims and SPF.

Consider the arc. Gillette Series in the 1990s presented grooming in metallic packaging with direct, functional claims: shave, soothe, protect and little else. Meanwhile, brands such as Kiehl's, Dermalogica, Ultracuticals and Endota speak in a clinical language that largely sidesteps gender altogether, emphasising hydration levels, barrier repair, SPF protection and active ingredients. The aesthetic is clean and instructional, supporting the man standing in front of the shelf, who is perhaps digitally fluent, comfortable with cosmetic enhancement, and capable of reading an ingredient deck without flinching.

He is managing, not hiding

Haircare, particularly hair loss, may be the clearest indicator of how far the codes have shifted. Male androgenetic alopecia – or male pattern baldness – is the most common form of hair loss in men, affecting 30–50 per cent of men by age 50, and the commercial response has expanded well beyond pharmacy staples. Legacy treatments such as minoxidil and prescription finasteride once dominated the category with clinical, problem-solution messaging, often merchandised discreetly, their presence more pharmaceutical.

Today, the tone is different. Bouf, owned by York St Brands, has channelled its male consumer more overtly through its “Bouf is for the Boys” framing. This campaign

speaks directly to hair growth, density and confidence without retreating into clinical euphemism. Last year, the brand enlisted Jack Steele of The Inspired Unemployed as an ambassador, bringing cultural familiarity and humour to a category that once lived behind pharmacy counters. Whether or not every formulation promises dramatic regrowth, the messaging is explanatory rather than shame-based, positioning haircare as maintenance and self-investment rather than crisis management. Even mass and salon-adjacent brands such as Bondi Boost and Pump Haircare foreground “growth”, “strength” and “density” in clear, benefit-led copy that leans into optimisation rather than insecurity.

UK cosmetic brand War Paint for Men, founded in 2018, has marketed itself unapologetically as “makeup for men,” comprising concealers, bronzers and tinted moisturisers in pared-back matte packaging with direct, almost utilitarian descriptors. It avoids flamboyance and parody, opting instead for neutral blacks and greys that sit closer to grooming than glamour.

War Paint normalises male cosmetic use, but it does so by building a parallel lane rather than fully dissolving gendered distinctions. The packaging is restrained and the tone almost corrective, as if to reassure the consumer that this is not vanity but maintenance. That duality is revealing, on one hand, the brand reflects genuine demand in a market projected to grow into the tens of billions globally. On the other hand, it highlights how persistent shelf language remains, and even as men become more comfortable with concealer and tinted moisturiser, the need to label it explicitly “for men” persists. This suggests the codes have not entirely disappeared; they have softened, certainly, but they have not vanished.

The real opportunity for FMCG

The larger question for retailers is whether the shelf has actually kept pace with the shopper now standing in front of it. For decades, beauty and wellness retail extracted enormous commercial value from the amplification of insecurity, particularly in categories aimed at women, where entire product ecosystems were



constructed around correcting perceived flaws, smoothing lines, reversing age, eliminating blemishes and suggesting that the consumer herself was perpetually in need of improvement.

It was a highly effective model, commercially speaking, but one built on the language of deficiency. As men begin to participate more visibly in these same categories, the temptation for retailers will be to simply replicate that playbook, recalibrating it for male anxieties and hoping the same commercial alchemy applies. Yet the signals emerging from the category suggest that such a strategy may prove surprisingly blunt.

In a global wellness economy now valued in the trillions, according to the Global Wellness Institute, the currency of retail has begun to shift, away from spectacle and towards information, away from theatrical promises and towards explanation.

Retailers therefore find themselves at something of a strategic fork. They can attempt to manufacture a fresh catalogue of male insecurities, mirroring the tactics deployed in female beauty retail, or they can lean into the behaviours already visible on the shelf, curiosity, ingredient literacy, and a growing interest in integrative wellness practices that connect nutrition, grooming and preventative health.

Across genders, the modern consumer is asking the shelf to explain itself. It comes at a moment when the commercial value of insecurity, long embedded in categories aimed at women, is being questioned, and now, retailers have the opportunity not to repeat it. ■