

## Beauty brands hope virtual makeovers encourage shoppers to try new looks

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Mulling what one might look like with electric blue eye shadow is one thing. Buying, applying and venturing out in public in an unconventional hue is quite another.

It's a vexing problem for beauty retailers who sometimes struggle to convince shoppers to try new things, said Diana Smith, senior research analyst with market research firm Mintel.

Some companies are using [virtual reality technology](#) to let customers try on products from their smartphones. Sephora in February added a "Virtual Artist" to its app that lets customers test 3,000 shades of lipstick and lip gloss. L'Oreal's Makeup Genius app offers a similar service for many of its makeup products. Nail care brand Sally Hansen's ManiMatch does the same for nail polish, and if you've ever wondered what you'd look like as a redhead, Matrix Color Lounge will give you an idea before you apply the dye.

"If you ask people how they feel about shopping for beauty products, a lot of people say it's confusing and overwhelming, which causes them to stick to their routines. Adding an element of experimentation and fun is one way brands are responding," Smith said. "Virtual technology is going to be a growing trend."

Using the apps feels similar to taking a selfie or video chatting, with the ability to apply makeup to the face on the screen as though applying a filter in Instagram or editing a photo in Snapchat.

Sephora has been following the virtual try-on trend for years, but recent improvements in the technology made it a genuinely useful tool, not just a gimmick, said Bridget Dolan, vice president of Sephora's Innovation Lab.

L'Oreal worked with animation industry experts to create an app that knew which parts of a person's eyes got shadow, liner and mascara and could track them in real time to keep the virtual makeup in the right spot, said Guive Balooch, vice president of L'Oreal's Global Technology Incubator. L'Oreal took more than 100,000 images of products in varying light conditions on models with varying skin tones to make sure colors and textures looked right, he said.

Some app reviews on iTunes questioned the accuracy, but others said they were impressed and entertained. Sephora's virtual try-on feature has only been out two weeks and has less feedback, but so far people have tried on 20 million shades, Dolan said.

Nearly two-thirds of people who bought beauty products in the last year purchased items they use on a regular basis, according to a Mintel survey released in February. Only 30 percent said they sought to try out something new, still more than the 20 percent of people who reported making an impulse buy in the last year.

Virtual makeover apps are another take on existing strategies retailers use to push customers to try new things, like free samples and subscription services, Smith said.

Sephora Virtual Artist is designed to get people to discover new colors, with two different ways to request shades selected at random, Dolan said in an email.

"In user testing, we noticed people were blown away at seeing

themselves in bright fuchsia lipstick for the first time - giving them the confidence to go and try bold shades they had always feared," she said.

Although both Sephora and L'Oreal allow in-app purchases, both Dolan and Balooch said they're meant to improve the in-store experience, not replace it. Both companies declined to provide statistics on app-driven sales.

"We think this will eliminate the need to swatch your arm with 20 shades in store, and instead be able to narrow to the few you actually want to try on," Dolan said.

Beauty sales online or on mobile devices are still dwarfed by purchases at brick-and-mortar stores, but customers are increasingly using smartphones to research products or browse, Smith said.

Nearly half of shoppers Mintel surveyed said they'd rather look for information on a product on their phone than talk to a sales associate.

"Younger shoppers in particular are more likely to see their phone as a personal shopping assistant," Smith said.

Unlike the shoppers who get overwhelmed by choices, a smaller group of beauty enthusiasts enjoy browsing for new products and looks and sharing their own ideas, she said.

Apps that let people "play" with products even when they aren't in a store and share photos to get feedback from friends could be "an opportunity to tap into their passion about the category" and turn customers into advocates for a brand, Smith said. Mintel's survey found 71 percent of people who bought [beauty products](#) at least 11 times in the last year said social media influenced what they bought.

Eventually L'Oreal plans to use anonymous data from the app to spot trends that can help it improve products, Balooch said.

But the main goal is improving customers' experience with the company's products, particularly for those shopping in stores where they can't test before buying, he said.

"For those people it's an empowering tool," he said. "Soon, virtual reality will be the conventional way of trying things on."

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