

'Virtual mirror' tech used to sell makeup

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Now that an Israeli company has developed "virtual mirror" technology for trying makeup on using a digital picture, ladies, it's going to be a lot harder to keep yourselves from splurging on new cosmetics.

"Our strength is photorealism. We show you, very exactly, how the makeup will look on you," EZface founder Ruth Gal told United Press International as she demonstrated the company's Internet technology, the first iteration of the product. "We're turning the screen into a mirror."

Cosmetic companies can license this technology to use on their Web sites, and several have already done so. L'Oreal Paris, Maybelline, Garnier and the Italian company Madina Milano use EZface at their sites in North America, Western Europe and China.

After uploading a photo to the site, the customer can add everything from foundation to mascara and hair dye, Gal said. Every step of the way, the customer controls how thickly the makeup is applied and has the option to check back with the "before" picture.

In addition, because women tend to seek more feedback on their choices than men, the site also has the capability for customers to "shop with an adviser" -- a professional hired by the company -- or to "shop with friends."

Using these applications, several people see the same picture in real time and can consult with each other using Voice over IP or Internet chatting, EZface co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Rami Orpaz said.

When she has a look she likes, she can save it, print the picture, send it to friends, or link directly to the Web site that will sell her the products she's chosen.

This is a very powerful marketing tool for a store or a cosmetics company -- a type of business that could use a sure-shot solution. "There is no customer loyalty to cosmetics companies," Orpaz said.

"The companies invest a large portion of the product price in promotion, but every three to four months there's a new season (and a new color palette), and no continuance like every other normal company has," he continued.

"Even supermarkets have some kind of loyalty club.

"We let the brand or the retailer keep a connection with the customer on the basis of a photo," Orpaz said. That way, a few months down the road, the company can send Customer X a picture of herself in the new fall line of makeup."

Customer X is more likely to bite, Orpaz said, because she doesn't feel that the company is sending out a mass advertisement -- the ad is tailored to customer X's features, or color preferences, or whatever. The point is that it's personal. The companies can "develop loyalty" this way, Orpaz continued.

The idea of holding on to loyal customers rather than always seeking new ones is well-tested in the field of marketing.

"It's expensive (and time-consuming) to bring in new customers," marketing expert Rob Frankel told UPI in a telephone interview. Better to make sure the ones you have will keep coming back.

For companies, these kind of relationships are gold, and the terms in which Frankel spoke about achieving them were unequivocal.

"Branding is not about getting your prospects to choose you over your competition; it's about getting your prospects to see you as the only solution to their problem," he said. It is a statement which, as a consultant, he has trademarked.

The initial seed of an idea for EZface came to Gal after a long day of work as an accountant. "I was looking online for the latest trends, and all the Web sites were like catalogues -- I could see the colors, but found it very hard to make a decision ... I didn't know what would look good on me," she said.

She checked to see if there existed some way to virtually try on the makeup, and finding none, approached Orpaz as a potential investor for the venture.

"I got excited about (the idea) within five minutes," Orpaz said, and he decided to serve as not just an investor, but as a co-founder and CEO.

"Why? Because someone came to me with a need," he said. He explained that most companies invent a solution, and then only when they're marketing it do they look for the problem.

A product that grows out of a consumer's need is the holy grail of marketing, Orpaz said, because it means people will be more likely to buy it.

However, the company is not stopping at Internet applications. A pilot program is already under way in Israel to test in-store video kiosks, Gal said.

The kiosk is outfitted with a camera to photograph the customer on the spot, and the device will also come with a feature to print a shopping list of the cosmetics chosen. Impulse buyers, however, beware: Prices are not listed along with the products in the pilot version, so it could be easy to overspend.

The technology is, for the most part, realistic and user-friendly. UPI's test of the kiosk revealed that customers photographed while already wearing mascara will get scary and spider-like results when virtual mascara is added, but other kinds of makeup lightly applied did not interfere with the virtual session.

The company said in its promotional material that makeup sales increased in the stores with a kiosk.

The next step currently in development for the company is a version of the application for cell phones. "The target market for this technology is younger," Gal said. As such, it will be more of an entertainment application than a program to show off professional makeup looks, she continued. Called "Crazy Face," the program will offer standard makeup looks as well as KISS and Halloween-style makeup.

Discussions of the future don't go beyond that, for now. "Actually, the kiosks are the 'next thing,'" Gal corrected. "And the cell phones are the 'next next thing.'"

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