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Beauty and the blog

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Web 2.0 enters the lipstick jungle

"ARE you ready for Botox?" asks the website, getting straight to the point. To find out, you can take "the Botox quiz" (question three, for example: how close do you have to be to see your "issues" in the mirror?). Welcome to [TotalBeauty.com](#), a new website that not only provides invaluable advice on vitally important personal "issues" but also highlights some of the most important trends in e-commerce.

The beauty industry is second only to dry groceries in the number of new products it launches each year in America. Until recently however, the internet's potential to publicise new products has been left untapped by the beauty-products firms, which have preferred to get the word out via old media, especially women's glossy magazines, from *Glamour* to *Seventeen*.

Yet such is the irresistible power of the internet that even beauty wants the eyeballs of online beholders. In particular, in the past year or so, a glamorous regiment of bloggers has started to write about beauty products. This unnerved the industry at first, until it realised that it could use its favourite, tried-and-tested methods for getting its way—for instance, securing favourable reviews by showering the new bloggers with freebies. As a recent article in the *New York Times* put it, "Beauty Blogs Come of Age: Swag, Please!"

Yet while amateur bloggers scramble to claim their pre-launch samples or even exotic trips abroad (Chanel flew 15 bloggers to Paris to meet its top *parfumeur*), the professionals are now scenting fresh quarry and closing in. In December TotalBeauty went live, promising to become, inevitably, the "Google of beauty". This was co-founded by Emrah Kovacoglu, who a year ago quit Procter & Gamble, where he had headed digital marketing for brands such as Max Factor and Cover Girl, to launch the new site.

For an executive at what is arguably the world's leading consumer-goods company to quit for an internet start-up backed with \$10m of venture capital may feel very 1999. But Mr Kovacoglu is convinced this is no bubble. The joy of "Web 2.0" is that ideas that were dreamed up prematurely in the late 1990s can now be pursued profitably—or so he hopes.

The goal of TotalBeauty is to be genuinely independent, which is potentially disruptive to an industry reliant on a captive media. As well as catching the reader's eye with arresting questions such as "Make-up primer: worth the extra step?" and "How old is your skin?", there are some hard-hitting reviews of the sort that would rarely make it into a glossy magazine. One feature, for example, names the "worst-rated hairspray": best avoid Pantene Texturize, by, ahem, P&G.

Mr Kovacoglu is betting on several Web 2.0 trends that are shaping all sorts of businesses, not just beauty. One is the demand for independent, reliable content. TotalBeauty has signed up some of the leading bloggers, promising them a bigger audience in return for accepting restrictions on the freebies they might receive. He has also hired four full-time editorial staff. The site has already built up a vast library of product reviews.

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Beauty products are particularly suitable for independent review, he says, because they are a “very emotional category for women, who want to be sure they get the right product.” Which also makes this a great sector for a second trend: user-generated content. TotalBeauty is big on getting its readers to interact with the site and with one another, and to post their own reviews. The goal is to mirror the success of sites which give a large role to customer reviews such as [Yelp](#) (for restaurants), [Amazon](#) (books) and [CNET](#) (technology).

Another recent trend, reflected to some extent in the same sites as well as in TotalBeauty, is for vertically focused websites, which focus on a particular narrow segment or community, to grow faster than big, diversified web portals.

The biggest challenge for TotalBeauty is to grow big enough to attract the attention of companies like Mr Kovacoglu’s former employer. Like most massive firms these days, P&G and the competing beauty-products companies may be keen to shift their advertising dollars online. But they are too big to want to deal with a zillion different blogs, each of them drawing only a few eyeballs into what Chris Anderson has called “long-tail” markets. “Big advertisers can’t find accessible inventory online,” says Mr Kovacoglu. “They want sites that can give them at least 2m unique visitors a month.”

After only three months online, he says that TotalBeauty is generating 950,000 unique visitors a month, which is “half way”—though Mr Kovacoglu’s eventual goal is to reach 5m in a year’s time and to be the biggest beauty website. Getting there will not be easy: this is a crowded field, with websites such as [iVillage](#), [Makeover Solutions](#), and [Glam.com](#) already well established, and a real possibility that the glossy magazines will make a serious attempt to create their own effective web presence. It remains to be seen if readers will value user-generated content and independence as much as the current hype predicts (and whether TotalBeauty will be able to resist the traditional temptations of the industry). Yet if Mr Kovacoglu succeeds he stands to make, er, a pretty penny.

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