

A Guide to Beauty & Body on Amazon

A white paper covering beauty as a category on Amazon where we explore its history from department stores to DTC, delve into the key brands in the space and their winning strategies, and share how Cartograph would launch its own beauty brand.

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Beauty on Amazon: how we got here

Beauty has arguably been Amazon's most impressive category win in the post-pandemic years. Described in the 2010s as a place where luxury beauty couldn't work, and effectively blocked by many retailers, Amazon has become a core pillar of emerging and incumbent beauty brands alike.

The convenient shipping and flexible return policies have made it a major beneficiary of the selfie video era, where shoppers browse armed with tutorials, education, and informed discovery.

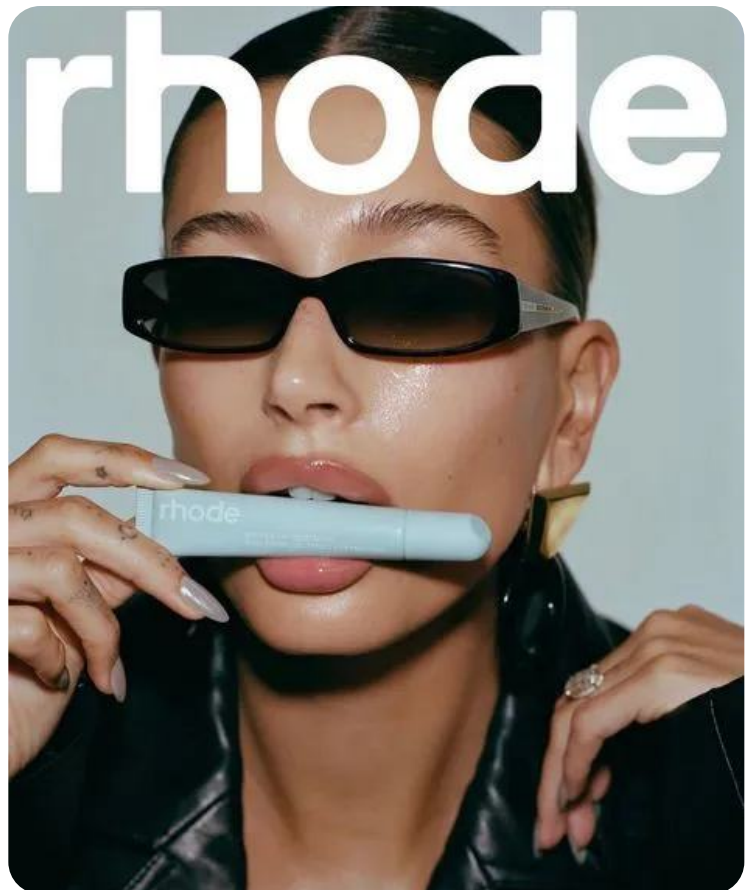
More than ever, Amazon plays a critical role in shaping how beauty brands connect with consumers. In this guide, we'll explore how the industry has evolved as well as how brands play in beauty's today—from in-store exclusivity to direct-to-consumer models and, ultimately, to a fully integrated omnichannel approach.

Whether you're an established brand or just starting out, understanding the context of these trends and the current state of beauty on Amazon will provide valuable insights for staying competitive in an ever-changing market.

– **Chris Moe, CEO, Cartograph**

Highlights

- **How we got here:** Once thought unsuitable for luxury, Amazon has become well-known sales channel for beauty brands, backed by convenience, flexible returns, and social media-driven discovery.
- **Evolution of beauty on Amazon:** Beauty shopping quickly shifted from malls to (DTC) brands, then to an omnichannel approach where Amazon plays a key fulfillment role alongside social media and brand websites.
- **Key players and their strategies:** Brands like CeraVe, Paula's Choice, and Fenty have thrived on Amazon through influencer marketing, inclusive product lines, and science-backed formulations. They combine affordability, credibility, and omnichannel strategies to capture a wide audience.
- **Growth opportunities in beauty:** Gaps in technical products, sustainability, men's grooming, and wellness offer untapped opportunities for beauty brands on Amazon.
- **If we launched our own brand:** We walk through the key factors involved to create a successful brand with a niche audiences, partnering with creators, and using innovative, clinically-backed ingredients.



The evolution of beauty on Amazon

The department store days

If you grew up in the United States, you likely have a core memory of going to the mall as a kid and passing the fragrance and beauty section on your way to the escalator.

The reality is, there was a time—i.e. the 90s and 00s—when hitting the department store was the primary way to discover new brands. There was no online retail, no Shopify, and certainly no Amazon.

Brick and mortar was it, and beauty consumers relied on that in-store experience to interact with brand-placed sales associates, sample products, and receive personalized recommendations. It was known to be a premium experience, and highly concentrated to a small number of very large beauty brands.



Change started to creep in as malls began to innovate and attract a younger generation. Specialized retailers that highlighted smaller, cooler, and more innovative brands grew in popularity. Still, the shopping experience of these stores, and where learn about the latest in beauty, took place in physical retail.

All that changed, however, at the turn of the 2010s.

From In-store to DTC to omnichannel

There are a handful of reasons for the shift to online. First, the rise of early social media adoption and the democratization of online shopping (thanks, Shopify!) played a massive role.

The emergence of mobile phones also created a complete shift in consumption habits, where users could not only shop but find inspiration and education for new products.

As department store and mall shopping declined, direct-to-consumer (DTC) beauty brands began to thrive, offering a streamlined experience where brands controlled everything from product design to storytelling.

Brands like **Glossier**, **Drunk Elephant**, and **The Ordinary** capitalized on this shift, pioneering a new era in beauty where social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, became the main marketing tools for engaging with younger consumers.

Glossier, in particular, was a trailblazer, cultivating a community-first approach that made customers feel like they were co-creators of the brand. By leveraging platforms that allowed direct interaction with their audience, these brands sold products and built cultures around their offerings.

The rise of DTC-focused brands reshaped the beauty industry, allowing newer, indie brands to bypass traditional retail models and connect directly with a digital-savvy, younger audience.

Through the 2010s, some beauty retailers held on to their market power with exclusivity deals that kept brands off Amazon, but in the last five years, deals barring brands from selling on Amazon have become less common, as many brands now prioritize building an online community before partnering with retailers.

Social media trends and the nature of virality on platforms like Instagram and TikTok helped brands achieve rapid growth, giving them visibility that would have taken years to achieve through conventional advertising.

DTC only distribution models have downsides with growth limitations, leading to a shift towards omnichannel strategies. Incorporating platforms like Amazon alongside DTC websites and physical retail locations became ubiquitous.



The evolution of beauty

In-store to DTC to omnichannel cont'd

Brands, like Fenty Beauty, have evolved their understanding of the customer journey away from the "acquire" mindset: discovery and path to purchase is rarely a single series of steps, but rather multimedia and multi channel. In this world, Amazon is an essential and common fulfillment end-point to capture the audience that has been engaged with and constructed elsewhere.

This strategy also acknowledges that Amazon shoppers may be unaware of a brand's DTC presence and instead discover it through the convenience and reach of Amazon's marketplace.

At Cartograph we've launched dozens of DTC-native brands and found consistently that just 3-5% of DTC consumers moved their buying to Amazon after the oft-feared Amazon launch, indicating that the channels can coexist without eroding market share and truly be incremental.

The omnichannel strategy gives beauty brands greater flexibility, access to wider audiences, and the ability to offer a seamless experience across different touchpoints—all while meeting customers' growing demands for convenience and variety.

Selling beauty on Amazon today

Key players and their winning strategies

The beauty industry has expanded rapidly in recent years, with a growing emphasis on innovative formulas, sustainability, and inclusivity. From drugstore staples to high-end brands, the market is diverse but shaped by several key players defining how others operate.

Here are some of the leading beauty brands on Amazon:

1. CeraVe

CeraVe is a dermatologist-recommended skincare brand renowned for its simple, effective, and affordable products. Its success can be attributed to:

While they've long been known for their science-first approach to formula development with their products, they've also nailed advertising on Amazon with their famous Michael Cera(Ve) campaigns across the board.



2. Paula's Choice

Paula's Choice is a pioneer in advanced skincare, also known for its science-backed approach and transparent formulas.

All of Paula's Choice products are developed with a focus on research, using proven ingredients like salicylic acid, niacinamide, and retinol.

They also take pride communicating both the benefits and potential drawbacks of every ingredient, empowering consumers to make informed decisions.

What's most impressive is how they use the ingredients as a gateway to engage online with customers through rich content creation. This only bonds them closer to the customer and creates a lasting impression.



3. Ouai

Ouai is a luxury haircare brand that merges modern style with high-performance formulas, thanks to its celebrity hairstylist and founder, Jen Atkin.

Having celebrity influence like this immediately gives credibility to the brand, and their "cool girl" aesthetic is an aspirational selling point to customers too, who want to look effortless and chic without being fussy.

But perhaps an even stronger selling point specific to Amazon is the way their bottling and packaging stands out with such a clear aesthetic. A lot of brands underestimate the power of emphasizing details like this online, but it makes a psychological difference to consumers.

Selling beauty on Amazon today

Key players and their winning strategies cont'd

4. e.l.f. (eyes, lips, face)

e.l.f. is a leader in affordable and inclusive makeup products. Their success is driven by fast product cycles. They quickly update and cycle products on their digital Amazon shelf, staying ahead of trends and ensuring that the latest viral beauty items are always available.

They're also great leveraging high-production videos and commercials on their Amazon store to engage shoppers and enhance the online buying experience.

Last, e.l.f. encourages Amazon shoppers to "follow the store" to stay updated on new arrivals and promotions, which builds loyalty. And they reward Shoppers can earn rewards on their e.l.f. purchases wherever they shop, highlighting e.l.f.'s omnichannel strategy that bridges online and offline experiences seamlessly.



5. Saie

Saie is a rising star in clean beauty, making its mark on Amazon with modern, minimalist makeup that's also sustainable and eco-conscious. Their success can be linked to:

- **Sustainability focus:** Saie highlights their clean ingredients through comparison charts on Amazon, helping shoppers easily see the benefits of their eco-friendly, ethically sourced products.
- **Minimalist, glowy aesthetic:** With a focus on "no-makeup" makeup, Saie's products enhance natural beauty, favoring a dewy, fresh look that resonates with modern consumers.
- **Curated product assortment:** On Amazon, Saie offers a well-thought-out selection, pushing both bundled products and their "Satisfyingly small-sized essentials." The bundles provide great value, encouraging customers to explore multiple products, while the small sizes drive trial and attract new-to-brand customers.

6. Sol de Janeiro

Sol de Janeiro is a Brazilian-inspired body care and fragrance brand known for its luxurious, tropical-scented products. It's no secret they've got Gen-Z in a chokehold, with their Cheirosa 76 and 62 dominating the For You Page on TikTok right now.

SdJ is known widely for their emphasis on body positivity that creates a strong connection with their diverse customer base.

Perhaps what's most compelling is the way they use their vibrant brand personality to show up in visual merchandising and through marketing campaigns.

And it's creating a "thumb-stop" experience for shoppers on Amazon.

Gaps and opportunities in beauty

Technical products focus

Beauty is shifting from brand-driven to product-driven, as consumers increasingly value ingredients and proven efficacy. TikTok's role in driving the surge of sunscreen formulations, popularity of retinoids, ceramides, and K-beauty regimens, underscores this shift. Brands should focus on the science behind products and emphasize technical benefits.

Sustainability

Although common in many categories, sustainability in beauty is still an opportunity. Consumer demand for eco-friendly packaging and refillable options grows. Brands should highlight sustainability efforts in product listings and offer refills to encourage eco-conscious purchases. Nécessaire sets a strong example, having achieved Plastic Neutral certification and fully offsetting its plastic footprint.

Anti-pollution and blue light protection

Environmental stressors like pollution and blue are gaining attention, but few products target them directly. Brands should introduce skincare specifically formulated to protect against these aggressors and address the rising demand for climate-adaptive beauty.

Men's grooming & beauty

Men's skincare and makeup remain underdeveloped markets on Amazon. Brands can capture this opportunity by using male-specific keywords and imagery, collaborating with influencers, and promoting products on Amazon Live to target this growing audience.

Gaps and opportunities in beauty

Stress-relief and wellness-integrated beauty

Beauty and wellness are converging, and there's a clear gap in products that offer both. Products infused with calming ingredients like ashwaganda, holy basil, passionflower, or lavender can meet this demand. Creating a dedicated wellness section within an Amazon Brand Store can help position these products effectively.

Limited-edition and seasonal products

Beauty brands often focus on everyday use but miss the opportunity to capitalize on seasonal launches. Like other holiday-specific CPG, beauty tied to holidays or special occasions resonates with consumers and drives gifting. Limited-edition items create urgency and buzz, boosting visibility and sales.

Form factor innovation

Innovating product formats is an untapped opportunity. Stick or balm formats for products like serums and sunscreens offer convenience and portability, appealing to consumers seeking easy-to-use options. Brands should explore new forms that enhance the user experience and differentiate their offerings.

If Cartograph launched their own brand on Amazon

Target a specific audience

Brian Chesky, Airbnb's co-founder, said, *"How do you make something for a million people? Pick one person and build something personal. Design something until they love it... Then you get the second person and keep iterating until they love it. And so on."*

While Chesky is no beauty expert, the same advice applies to building beauty brands, and especially those who want to break into Amazon.

Targeting a specific audience allows for sharper, more personalized marketing efforts, which increases the likelihood of brand loyalty and advocacy. Brands that try to appeal to everyone often lose focus, resulting in generic messaging that fails to resonate with any particular group.

By identifying a clear, niche audience—whether it's clean beauty enthusiasts, eco-conscious buyers, or those with sensitive skin—you can develop messaging, product offerings, and experiences that deeply resonate.

This focused approach also makes it easier to refine your brand's identity and stand out in a crowded market.



Partner with a creator

Influencers and celebrities have become key way for founders to launch and grow their own brands. Partnering with the right creator can be a game changer.

Whether the creator becomes the face of the brand or is associated in a co-founder capacity, their influence and following provide credibility and reach beyond what's measurable via performance ads.

From Hailey Bieber's Rhode to Lady Gaga's Haus Labs, leveraging someone with an existing influence to tap into an established fan base can amplify brand visibility far more effectively than traditional advertising alone.

We find digitally native creators, particularly YouTubers, tend to have the strongest connection with their audience and the most successful product launches.

Consumers trust personalities they follow, and when they see someone they admire promoting a product, it lends the brand a sense of authenticity.

Additionally, creator partnerships can provide a consistent stream of content, feedback, and engagement, which is crucial for growth, especially in a competitive category like beauty.

If you're wanting more info creators, here's a primer we published last year on [the Rise of Creator-Led Brands on Amazon](#).

If Cartograph launched their own brand on Amazon cont'd

Technical ingredients with clinical backing

The beauty industry is often saturated with flashy marketing and trend-driven products, but what can truly set a brand apart is the use of scientifically proven, innovative ingredients. Consumers are becoming more educated and discerning, seeking products that have real efficacy backed by clinical research.



By prioritizing ingredients that are not only new and cutting-edge but also validated by scientific studies, a brand builds trust and credibility with its audience. This strategy goes beyond aesthetics; it offers real solutions that consumers can rely on, which fosters long-term loyalty.

Paula's Choice and The Ordinary are known for applying this approach, and when brands highlight the clinical benefits of ingredients like hyaluronic acid or niacinamide, backed by peer-reviewed studies, they position themselves as experts in their field and can attract consumers looking for more than just pretty packaging.

Form factors to align with customer lifestyle

To truly connect with your target audience, it's essential to consider their lifestyle and the unique ways your product can seamlessly integrate into their lives. This includes thinking beyond traditional beauty formats and exploring innovative form factors that resonate with how your audience lives, works, and plays.

For example, creating beauty products that are travel-friendly, sustainable, or multi-use can directly cater to modern consumers' needs. This alignment not only drives product usage but also fosters emotional connections, as customers feel understood and valued.

Successful brands do more than just sell products—they create solutions that solve problems and fit perfectly into the lives of their consumers, making the brand indispensable.

Build a relationship with your community

In the current landscape, brand loyalty is built on more than just product quality; it's driven by a brand's relationship with its audience. Having an engaged, loyal customer base is one of the most valuable assets any brand can cultivate.

Active communication, feedback loops, and community-building efforts help foster trust and authenticity. When customers feel like they are a part of the brand's journey—whether it's online or IRL (shoutout to the Rhode beauty photobooth!), they are more likely to share their experiences and advocate for the brand.

This word-of-mouth marketing is invaluable and often more powerful than paid advertisements. By investing in ongoing dialogue with your customers and making them feel heard, brands can turn buyers into lifelong fans who will champion the product to others.



Looking ahead

Amazon's growth in beauty across price points stands apart in their efforts to grow from the "everything store" (read: cheap stuff, to you fast) to a genuine "hyper-mall" of premium products.

The explosion of online education, tutorials, and innovation on social media has created an excellent match for Amazon, where a combination of expertly branded, yet differentiated and technically complex products and shine above the competition.

You could argue that the pace of innovation, or at least adoption of ingredients becoming more popular around the world, has accelerated because of comparison shopping products touting the latest trends, whether it be more inclusive shades, new SPF ingredients, or snail mucin.

At Cartograph we love working with challenger brands bringing new and exciting products to the market that can deliver something innovative to consumers.

If this sounds like you, we'd love to chat!

Helping brands **grow** products that are better for people and our planet.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss your brand approach on Amazon, please feel free to reach out. We're always happy to chat, and offer a free audit of any Amazon strategy.

Get in touch here: contact@gocartograph.com

