

STAND-UP SKIN CARE



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

When Brian Lau launched his skin-care business, he was determined to refrain from making empty promises.

VIVIAN SONG SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Brian Lau can pinpoint the defining moment when disillusionment with his marketing job set in.

He calls it his “a-ha” moment,” the epiphany that roused him out of a slow descent in his work life into moral ambiguity and led him to chart an entrepreneurial path, instead.

Lau was in his New York office when his mother called. She was considering buying one of the expensive beauty products his company, a major global brand, peddled and wanted her son’s opinion. As do the hundreds of miracle anti-aging creams on the market, the product promised to firm, lift, erase and generally turn back time.

As the marketing guru behind the product, he knew the promises were just “a load of crock,” and told his mother so.

“That’s when she said, ‘Brian, that’s wrong?’” he recalls. “When she said that, I knew there was something fundamentally wrong here.”

Eventually, Lau, at the age of 31, decided to take a gamble, give up his

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BRIAN LAU, SKIN-CARE
BUSINESS OWNER

Rotman School of Management.

“The firms that do well are the ones that have a well-defined customer profile,” she says. “A good, small firm understands their customers and focuses on them. They don’t try to be everything to everybody.”

Lau maintains a strong online presence through the company’s Facebook page and Twitter account, which he mans himself. This enables him to communicate with his customers and receive valuable feedback. A user who complains of leaking tubes on Facebook, for instance, is answered a day later by reassurances that stronger seals are

eventually, Lau, at the age of 31, decided to take a gamble, give up his affluent lifestyle and six-figure income and helm his own company, Bread & Butter Skincare for men.

Unlike the multi-national corporate giants he worked for, his Toronto-based company would “stand against an industry with a wayward moral code,” refrain from making empty promises and ridiculous claims, and create a simple and honest product.

“We’re selling our product in ways that fly in the face of the industry,” Lau says. “We’re not going to use advertising tricks or use fluff ingredients.”

Bread & Butter products are pared down to the essentials, he says. Gone are the fillers, such as alcohols and perfumes that can cause irritation. Gone, also, is unnecessary and wasteful packaging such as boxes and cellophane wrappers. Designs are printed directly on the plastic tubes that can be recycled through the firm’s “cradle-to-cradle” packaging program.

Lau admits he’s never been especially green, himself. But years of working in the beauty industry made it impossible to ignore the excessive packaging, a practice he didn’t want to perpetuate.

“We have a responsibility to make the company as environmentally friendly as possible.”

Launched last November, the company has found a market in Canada, the U.S., Europe and, in serendipitous timing, South Africa. The bulk of his sales are online. The

Honesty, integrity and the Canadian way

Shying away from a beauty industry characterized by false promises, Brian Lau set his own path

products can also be found locally at trendy hipster hotels such as The Gladstone and The Drake.

Although he employs a handful of part-timers, Lau is essentially a one-man show, trying to carve out a brand among cosmetic behemoths that have also recognized the growth potential in men’s skin-care products.

He considers his competition long-established brands such as Kiehl’s and Biotherm. He says his

products are affordable.

The line is designed to take the guesswork out of skin care for men. Products are bundled as kits and include cleansers, SPF 15 moisturizers, shave gels or body moisturizers, which are shipped seasonally, summer and winter, for an annual cost of \$85 or about \$10 per bottle.

Packages are also approved as carry-on items for air travel, key for capturing Lau’s desired demographic: The jet-setting male be-

tween the ages of 25 and 40.

“Men who travel often for work are usually important people in the company who do a lot of face time with clients and colleagues,” he says. “They need to look presentable.”

It’s a market he seeks out, attending events that attract a similar demographic.

Toronto-based upstart Shirtpal, an online store for custom dress shirts, hosts events around the city, creating makeshift stores where buyers can design their shirts on the spot. Lau is there to distribute samples of his products to potential customers.

He’s on the right track, in theory. Understanding your demographic is one of the basic tenets of a successful business, says Becky Reuber, professor of strategic management at The University of Toronto’s

reassurances that stronger seals are being put in place to solve the problem.

Talking directly with customers and responding to their concerns promptly lends authenticity to a brand, Reuber says, and conveys sincerity and trustworthiness. It avoids the risk of employees tweeting messages that may be inconsistent with the brand. “The ones who are doing it well have a clear brand message,” she says.

To prevent competitors from encroaching on his market, Lau has to erect a “barrier to entry,” Reuber adds. For technology companies, that means securing a patent. For Lau, it means establishing a bullish brand.

“If you have a strong brand that makes potential competitors wary of going head to head with you, that can protect you, like Apple’s iPad,” she says.

To build a name that represents integrity and honesty, Lau chose to make the products in Canada, not China, where he could have shaved 25 per cent off his bottom line. He wanted to be able to control the quality of his products and inspect them as they were being made.

He thought it wise to capitalize on Canada’s stellar international corporate reputation. Canadians are widely considered to be stand-up, trustworthy citizens.

“Our mission is to set ourselves apart from the competition and have integrity in our advertising. What better place to do that than in Canada?”