

March 23, 2006
Skin Deep

Dear Web Log: Hated the Shampoo, Loved the Soap

By PETER JARET

I am in Chicago, friends!" Kristen Kelly, 24, of Brooklyn, announced recently. "I do love this city and always enjoy visiting, but I wish the weather weren't so misty and dismal today. Anyhow, I did a very foolish thing and left my shampoo and conditioner at home. (I alternate between Pantene Blonde Expressions and Frédéric Fekkai Baby Blonde), so I was stuck with whatever the hotel had to offer."

Ms. Kelly's "friends"— the 600 to 700 people who visit her blog, Beauty Addict, on an average day — could guess what to expect next: a product review. The Sage and Thyme Infusion shampoo from Bloom? "I used a whole little tube for one wash, and the lather was so low it didn't even feel like my hair was clean," she reported. The matching conditioner? "Thin and runny." Only the Clarity face bar got a thumbs up. "I stuck one in my bag to take home," she confided.

Ms. Kelly's breezy writing, strong opinions and cheerful passion for beauty have won her blog, which she started writing just last September, a loyal following.

A click away, at Shaveblog, Corey Greenberg was effusing over Cary Grant. "Man, what I wouldn't give to get daily shaves like Cary Grant," he wrote a few weeks ago in a posting that included a movie clip showing Grant shaving. "Not a hint of razor burn, skin irritation, red bumps, or even just that faint shadow I always have."

Mr. Greenberg's blog, a mix of shaving arcana, personal reminiscences and product reviews, attracts some 40,000 readers a day.

By every measure, the blogosphere is booming. The number of blogs has doubled every five and a half months for the past year and a half, according to Technorati, a San Francisco-based search engine that is tracking 27.2 million blogs. And the number of beauty-related blogs is almost certainly rising as fast. A recent search on Technorati turned up 307 blogs related to beauty and 50 related to makeup. A search for individual postings using the keyword "Pantene" turned up more than 9,100.

In many ways, blogs are ideally suited to the pursuit of beauty. The vast number of new products provides plenty of grist for reviews. And because beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder, personal opinions — the *sina qua non* of blogging — matter above all. Where except on a blog (and maybe at a tell-all slumber party) could someone blurt out, "If her face looks like she applied spackle with a butter knife, well, maybe she is not the one to do your makeup"? Where else would you confide to thousands of strangers: "You are not looking at a pink or red gloss girl. I just don't look good in them. But somehow, the tint-gloss combo just ... shines!"

Indeed, many beauty blogophiles log onto their favorite sites simply to chat about their passion. "I can be in touch with so many girls I'd normally never come in contact with, from around the world," said Wendy Skursky, 29, a direct-marketing specialist in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., who admits that she checks out her favorite beauty-related sites while she is at work — "way more than my boss would care to know about."

The quintessential blog is written and designed by one person. Blogdorf Goodman, for instance, is the work of a writer from Youngstown, Ohio. Like so many blogs, hers has the unedited feel of a letter to friends. In a recent review of a lotion by Lorac, she carped: "It was impossible to control how much came out. I just don't like these pumps that give too much product."

Some, like I Am Pretty NYC, are written by professional makeup artists. Others are the work of hobbyists. Still others are small businesses in their own right, with teams of bloggers paid to write about beauty. Heather Kleinman, 33, of Portland, Ore., started Cosmetic Connection in 1996 as a hobby. "I was writing reviews of samples I picked up at the department store," she said. When the site gained a following, she hired other bloggers to join in. "I was getting questions about products for different skin types, different ethnicities, different hair types," Ms. Kleinman said, "and there was no way I could test them all."

Many of the most popular sites allow visitors to exchange tips and reviews and even swap products. "Hey, I'm on a quest to find the perfect nude lipstick," said a recent post on Makeup411, another Portland site. "I'm a natural blonde with fair skin, pink undertones and blue eyes. My natural lip color is quite pink. Any suggestions welcome."

Within minutes, a response: "Hi there! You have the same coloring as me. I love Estée Lauder Vanilla Truffle. So much so, I went out and bought six for fear of 'discontinued.' LOL. Do not go by the Web page, not the same color. It's a great nude lippie."

The phenomenal growth of the blogosphere hasn't been lost on beauty product manufacturers or their marketing agencies. Some have started blogs and online forums. And Sephora, MAC and other large beauty companies frequently appear in click-on ads.

That makes blogging profitable for some. The most successful can earn \$3,000 to \$10,000 a month, said Henry Copeland, founder of BlogAds, in Carrboro, N.C. Ms. Kelly already makes enough from ads and affiliate links on her site to pay the costs of maintaining her blog.

The best way for a blogger to distinguish his or her voice from others is to impress successful bloggers, who then include links on their sites. The more links a blog has, the higher it rises on search engine listings.

But attracting attention can take time. "At first I was getting like two hits a day," Ms. Kelly said, "and I'm pretty sure they were my mom."

For small beauty product manufacturers, even one favorable mention on a popular blog can mean big business. When Nancy Boy was started in San Francisco in 2001, its founders eschewed traditional advertising and reached their target audience, gay men, exclusively through the grapevine and a small store front. Business grew slowly. Then Mr. Greenberg heard about Nancy Boy's shaving cream from a friend, tried it, and raved about it on Shaveblog.

"Our business just took off," said Eric Roos, a Nancy Boy founder. The company, which did \$100,000 in business in 2002, is projecting sales of \$4 million in 2006.

As it happens, Mr. Roos was already writing a blog of his own, which appears as an unobtrusive link on the company's online order site. The blog, a witty, often poignant and unabashedly gay account of everything from his stint with Up With People to the travails of coming out as a gay man, rarely mentions beauty. Still, it has gained a devoted following. "For me it's a way of making personal contact with customers," Mr. Roos said. "It lets people know who we are and what we believe." Indeed, the Nancy Boy blog has become so

popular that, even though it almost never mentions the company's products, it now helps drive business.

"I'm a huge fan of what they make," said Gordon Herzog, a chief financial officer in Atlanta. Mr. Herzog stocks his bathroom with Nancy Boy's products. "But I often check out the site even when I don't need to order anything," he said, "just to see what Eric's saying."