

# Fashion Fair's aim: Soften its age lines



Makeup artist Amelia Washington applies makeup to a customer at the Fashion Fair cosmetics counter at the Carson's store in the North Riverside Park Mall. (Alex Garcia / Chicago Tribune)

By **Corilyn Shropshire** • Contact Reporter

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**T**erez Baskin used to bypass Fashion Fair Cosmetics when she shopped for makeup. So did Courtney Waldon.

But on a recent visit to the company's downtown Chicago headquarters, they and a handful of other fashionable young women were oohing and aahing over the brand's new lipsticks and eye shadows that carried names such as Catfight, Lace and Rage.

What changed their opinion? A makeover, of course.

Aiming to shed its image among young African-American women as the brand their grandmothers and mothers wear, Fashion Fair Cosmetics is in the midst of a reset. The storied cosmetics brand, designed for African-Americans, wants to be better known for its trendy turquoise eye shadows and of-the-

moment nude lipsticks.

Over the past few years, Fashion Fair, a unit of privately held Johnson Publishing Co., has shed its products' cotton-candy pink packaging for sleeker cases sporting chocolate and silver tones.

It has launched new cosmetics and is working to boost its online and international sales.

Department store displays are getting face-lifts too -- the first was at Macy's Herald Square in New York - - with mini-face-lifts in several U.S. cities, including Chicago, Atlanta and Miami, to follow this year.

"We have the legacy of what this company represents and the passion and energy to keep evolving," said Amy Hilliard, who joined the company in February as president. "It's coming from a base that no one can take away from us. How fabulous is it that I'm able to buy cosmetics from a line that (has) always been geared toward people who look like me?"

To get the word out, Fashion Fair is taking a step beyond its traditional advertising on the pages of its parent company's Ebony and the now digital-only Jet magazines. That includes courting influential beauty bloggers such as Baskin and Waldon at informal gatherings featuring croissant sandwiches and sweet tea.

During her visit to Fashion Fair's offices, Waldon tried the foundation and a brightly colored eye shadow called Livid. She left the luncheon with a bag full of samples.

"It (feels) very light," she said of the makeup. "It was no more of that orange look the foundations used to have."

Fashion Fair, founded in 1973, describes itself as a prestige brand, positioning itself among power players such as M.A.C., Estee Lauder and Clinique. Such cosmetics generally carry a premium price, often five times that of a drugstore brand. For instance, Fashion Fair's True Fix foundation is \$29, compared with CoverGirl's Clean Liquid foundation, which is \$5.94.

Across the country, Fashion Fair cosmetics can be found at 500 department stores, including Macy's, Carson's and Dillard's.

Department stores account for about 27 percent of all U.S. cosmetics sales, according to NPD Group, a Port Washington, N.Y.-based market research firm. But that has been shrinking, squeezed by rapid growth online, which accounts for about 14 percent of cosmetics sales.

Fast-growing specialty beauty shops such as Sephora and Ulta Beauty also are pressuring department store cosmetics sales, analysts said.

Officials said Fashion Fair has no plans to lessen its focus on department stores, but it also isn't set to say if it will try to expand into Ulta or Sephora.

Its online sales, which make up less than 5 percent of total revenue, are growing quickly, up 17 percent last year.

"Our first priority is to ensure we have optimized our business with our existing partners," said [Desiree Rogers](#), CEO of Johnson Publishing Co. "We believe there is tremendous untapped opportunity with our current footprint."

Much of the revamp has been plotted by Rogers, brought in several years ago as CEO to breathe new life into Johnson Publishing Co. and Fashion Fair Cosmetics.

When she arrived in 2010, Rogers, who previously served as social secretary at the White House and is a former executive of Peoples Gas, said she found a business in mourning.

Fashion Fair's creator, Eunice Johnson had recently died. Her husband, John Johnson, who founded Johnson Publishing Co., died five years earlier.

Revenues at Fashion Fair had been "bouncing around" for years, according to Rogers, who said the company is profitable. And competition was fierce. Estimated sales fell from nearly \$58.6 million in 2004 to \$47.9 million in 2011, according to figures provided by market research firm Euromonitor International. But they have been ratcheting back up since then, reaching \$50.4 million in 2013, according to Euromonitor.

Johnson Publishing Chairman [Linda Johnson Rice](#) acknowledged that the brand, like its customers, had aged, and it failed to court new consumers.

"We were a little complacent and OK with the customers we had, and that's not good enough," she said. "If the brand is going to grow -- you've got to reach out to new customers, meaning younger customers."

Still, Fashion Fair faces a hard climb back, industry watchers said.

Once an afterthought, women of color have become a prime customer in the past 15 years.

Better-known premium brands armed with bigger marketing budgets are now formidable competitors in specialty as well as department stores, including Estee Lauder, which owns the M.A.C. Cosmetics line and Lancome.

At the same time, inexpensive drugstore brands such as CoverGirl and L'Oreal have expanded their offerings for black and Hispanic women.

Smaller niche brands, too, have reached out to women of color, including BECCA, Bobbi Brown and Smashbox.

"There was a time when to get the colors that match (darker skin), you had two choices," said NPD Group's Karen Grant. "Whereas the consumer had no options before, they have options today," she said.

"The ethnic consumer isn't looking for something just targeted to them, but that includes them."

Flush with choices, younger women have increasingly turned elsewhere for foundation, lipstick and mascara. Beauty blogger Waldon, who likes to try on makeup at department stores, said she skipped the Fashion Fair counter because the colors were "lackluster."

"I think that's why a lot of people ventured away from Fashion Fair to M.A.C., because they were attracted to all of the colors M.A.C. had," Waldon said.

Among other changes, Rogers brought in celebrity makeup artist Sam Fine, known for making up the faces of supermodels including Iman and Tyra Banks, to create a line of makeup.

The brand aims to overhaul its department store counters to match the sleek, modern shop-in-a-shop look at Macy's Herald Square.

Most of the major renovations have been unveiled at the brand's international counters, including in London, but mini-face-lifts, freshening up Fashion Fair's cosmetics counters, are planned this year in cities including Chicago, Miami, Memphis, Tenn.; and Little Rock, Ark., company officials said.

Fashion Fair's beauty associates, known as "advisers," who work behind the cosmetics counters in stores, are being retrained by a newly hired training director. In the past three years, Fashion Fair has introduced more than 10 new products, including a mineral foundation and a body oil.

Rogers, who declined to disclose the price tag for the brand revamp, also commissioned research on how to position Fashion Fair best to capture the most customers. This year, it brought back some lighter shades of foundation to attract Latina and other lighter-skinned consumers and will open a new counter in Puerto Rico.

There are also plans to boost Fashion Fair's presence in Europe and Africa, Hilliard said, noting that international sales from locations including stores in Canada, the United Kingdom, Botswana, France and Tanzania make up about 15 percent of the brand's business. The brand is finalizing a deal to distribute Fashion Fair in the Middle East, according to company officials, and plans to open a South Africa location this year.

After the luncheon, beauty bloggers Baskin and Waldon said they planned to pick up Fashion Fair items.

But Baskin, who said she grew up watching her mom, aunts and grandmother wear Fashion Fair, also said she expects to see more.

"There's a lot of competition" in the African-American market now, she said. "This is a good start. It's great, new and fresh, but what else?"

crshropshire@tribune.com

Twitter @Corilyns

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