



Body Positivity

With summer in full swing, body care — from sculpting services to skin care-inspired products — is back in a big way. For more, see pages 6 and 7.

PLUS: Sol de Janeiro's Heela Yang on the feel-good factor and the new color trend in men's grooming.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC T. WHITE FOR WWD



Heela Yang

The Sol de Janeiro cofounder talked scaling a business from a single stockkeeping unit to a category-spanning powerhouse. BY JAMES MANSO

WHEN HEELA YANG, cofounder and chief executive officer of Sol de Janeiro left her career — which included gigs at Lancôme and Clinique — to move to Brazil, the change was equal parts jarring and empowering. “It was a whole new experience for me, and it was exciting, but very nerve-wracking to have all the things that make you feel comfortable stripped away,” she said.

Her time in South America was well spent, though, serving as inspiration for Sol de Janeiro, the Brazilian-inspired body care brand which she cofounded with Camila Pierotti and Marc Capra, whom she knew from her marketing days. “I got pregnant that first month I was there, I was at the heaviest of my life, and I wasn’t really feeling that great about myself,” Yang said. “We had this idea of feeling really great in your own skin and confident about yourself, and loving every part of your body.”

The brand, which launched with its Bum Bum Cream in 2016 and set off an explosion in body care, has since expanded to include hair

care and fragrance, and industry sources expect global retail sales to reach \$200 million in 2021. Today, Yang runs the business, while Capra oversees the in-house creative team and Pierotti runs product development and training.

What was your first job, and what did you learn?

Heela Yang: I worked in the investment banking division of Goldman Sachs. I knew nothing about finance, but I had a really strong desire to be financially independent — as a woman, that was very important to me. I decided to learn, and I did learn a lot. It was an intense, two-year-long bootcamp on finance, and everything I learned there, I use every day running Sol de Janeiro. It also helped me earn an acceptance to business school at Harvard, which is where I found my passion for marketing.

How has Sol de Janeiro’s point of view changed since its launch?

H.Y.: The genesis of the brand was to bring Brazilian confidence to the

world, this sense of feeling really good in your own skin, no matter what shape, size, color, gender preference. That’s what I personally experienced when I moved to Brazil. Caring for yourself head-to-toe is very much a routine that everybody does in Brazil. So has our point of view changed as the business has grown? Not at all. Our original tagline is “Love it, flaunt it, you’ve got it.” It captures who we are and is built around this inclusivity which is inherent to the brand.

Who is your core consumer, and what is attracting them to the line?

H.Y.: Our consumer crosses all ages and gender expressions, which is a dream come true for a marketer. They’re passionate about the brand, they generally love our sunny positivity. They also love how our fragrances make them feel, and how others react to them when they’re wearing our fragrances. We invite them to dream and escape. Bum Bum is more than a cream that fixes a problem. We make caring for yourself an everyday ritual. It’s a pleasure and not a chore.

Bum Bum Cream has such a cult following — what do you credit that to? Have you been able to replicate the same level of success across the line?

H.Y.: We created this cream in my dining room. It was a real passion. We paired our formulation, which is highly efficacious, with this fragrance and the product has taken on a life of its own. The word of mouth has been an integral part of this phenomenon. The Bum Bum Cream is a huge part of our total sales, but it’s not a majority now that we’ve extended into bath and shower. Hair care is just taking off, and when we launched our shower gel on sephora.com in 2016, it sold out in six hours.

Sol de Janeiro is going into Sephora at Kohl’s — how are you thinking about attracting consumers from the mass market?

H.Y.: Consumers from the mass market are either constantly upgrading, or they’re trying to find new products, especially today. Body care is a very easy category to understand, and we are in Sephora by J.C. Penney. We’re doing incredibly well there. That’s a possible indication of consumers from mass, and being able to attract them into the premium industry.

In addition to being a success at Sephora, you’ve said that your d-to-c business tripled last year. How do you see Sol de Janeiro’s distribution evolving?

H.Y.: Our distribution will always remain digital-first. Today, 70 percent of our sales are transacted online. We’re continuing to see triple-digit growth there, and it’s our main focus, as well as working with wholesale

retailers with strong digital capabilities. Brick-and-mortar will continue to be important for us, since sales staff at retailers have been our biggest ambassadors. People discover us in-store, and they try and smell our scents. It’s a very important part of our experience.

What did you learn from scaling the business so quickly?

H.Y.: My number-one focus has been building the team and the culture. As the company grows so quickly, your distribution expands and your product line updates, you need talent. We’ve doubled our team in size every year.

How does your latest body launch, Bom Dia Bright Body Cream, fit into your body care portfolio?

H.Y.: This cream is a moisture-rich cream, and it offers very different benefits from Bum Bum Cream. It has very gentle exfoliation with fruit AHAs, and we also have vitamin C to provide a brightening boost. It also has cupuaçu butter, which is the Amazon alternative to shea butter, and it has a brand new fragrance.

Where do you see the most opportunity?

H.Y.: I’m just getting started. We only have 25 products, and we haven’t even touched face, which is a monster category and has great potential for us. We’re a true lifestyle brand that can cut across multiple categories.

What are your three biggest priorities for the year ahead?

H.Y.: First, my team. We’ve gone through a lot together in the past 16 months, and our offices are being renovated right now to be more open and flexible. Second, we have a really exciting product innovation pipeline. We’re in fragrance and hair now, and we’re just scratching the surface. As you know, almost every launch we have shot up through the top five products at Sephora. Continuing the momentum is really important. And my last is investing behind our digital capabilities — 30 percent of our business is on our own website.

What didn’t you learn in business school about being a founder?

H.Y.: There is so much value to actually doing things, rather than hypothesizing or theorizing. It’s the only way to learn. I could have learned a bit more about career development. Also, it’s the emotion of creating a brand. We’re emotional beings, and we can be as rational as we want about ‘this skin care works for me,’ but at the end of the day, we are moved by emotion. I tell my team all the time, “creativity before capital.”

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