



Case Study:

MELÉ

Year: 2022

MELÉ

This case study was prepared for the client MELÉ to introduce their new skincare products for People of Color. It was developed and designed by Anomaly. In the Impact on Innovation category, it won gold.

Executive Summary:

Despite 40% of the population identifying as multicultural, Black and Brown skin has long been underserved in the skincare category. As a large, global skincare leader, Unilever knew we had the resources and scale to meaningfully serve this need and community. We uncovered that there was a lack of science-led, efficacious products serving the melanin-rich community and responded by creating MELÉ: a brand and line of products founded in The Science of Melanin-Rich Skin. MELÉ launched with immediate success -- outpacing initial sales expectations and becoming the most-awarded face care brand in the US after only 10 months in-market.

Definition of your challenge:

When it came to skincare, far too many Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) were underserved. Skincare products marketed to people of color were frequently labeled “for all shades and skin types”, but too often, products were designed for lighter shades and retrofitted to be suitable for darker shades. These products rarely, if ever, accounted for basic differing needs like moisture imbalance, hyperpigmentation, and even transparent sun care.

Core target audience

From African American to Hispanic to South East Asian and indigenous peoples, we are for anyone who proudly celebrates the beauty of their melanin-rich skin. Our core targets are between the ages of 18-44 years old, and are both digitally savvy and particularly vocal on online platforms. In general, the skincare community is built on trust - and this is especially true in the melanin-rich community.

With so few products in the market that really help-- some even harm-- their skin, they want and need products they can trust and genuinely work. And they are willing to invest time and money into finding skincare solutions that address these needs. Many have come to distrust the industry and feel ignored by brands completely or priced out of products that cater to darker shades.

Measurable Objectives

#1 CREDIBILITY

As a new brand and product line from a large corporation, it was essential to establish credibility. 63% of women of color felt ignored by the industry and believed there weren't enough effective products for them. We needed to demonstrate new standards of efficacious care - not just “compete,” and winning awards was essential to drive trust with melanin-rich consumers.

#2 AWARENESS

As a completely unknown brand, we needed to make ourselves visible quickly and authentically. We defined awareness KPIs around media impressions and social engagement rates.

#3 PURCHASE

Due to the global pandemic, our product launch was limited to e-comm. This made it critical to perform strongly on Target.com, our first partner e-comm site, to secure in-store distribution and establish an omnichannel distribution plan quickly to expand our presence and meet consumer demand both online and IRL.

The Key Insight & Strategy:

The institutions and processes that shaped the category historically catered to one group: light skin.

- FDA regulations for basic SPF only require testing on "fair" skin types (I, II, III)¹.
- Black and Hispanics represent 7% of U.S. dermatologists² despite being 31% of the population³.
- 47% of dermatologists report insufficient exposure to dark skin during medical training⁴.

Brands that did cater to darker shades skewed natural and mild to not irritate Black and Brown skin - but consequently, weren't as efficacious as skincare for lighter skin.

A powerful insight emerged: **while many brands claim to understand BIPOC consumers, no brand yet understood BIPOC consumers' skin.**

We became obsessed with understanding what makes skin shades unique so we could best nurture and enhance it - as no brand had truly done. Simply speaking, the biological differentiator between skin shades is the amount of melanin present. Melanin is an amino acid that gives skin its pigmentation. The more melanin, the darker our complexion. Melanin has beneficial properties, like shielding cells from UVA/UVB exposure - helping skin age slower. But highly melanated skin has challenges, too. With beautiful pigmentation comes hyperpigmentation. This can appear as dark spots, scarring, uneven tone and texture. Hyperpigmentation can come from common irritants - dryness, oil, acne - because the body's natural response to distress is to create more melanin. It became clear why mild, natural formulas were widely adopted by the BIPOC community: most available skincare barely helped - some even harmed - darker shades.

To combat the market's colorblind approach, we would innovate and differ in two critical ways:

- Build a brand that addressed the unmet needs of common melanin-rich skin concerns.
- Create products more efficacious than mild, natural brands to effectively meet these needs.

Melanin became our hero.

Execution:

In September 2020, we launched our brand and product line with a campaign titled, "We See You " starting with a film outlining our purpose and brand story. We also demonstrated our dedication to understanding melanin-rich skin at a scientific level and always putting melanated skin first by releasing product messaging that addressed the unique, unmet needs of Black and Brown skin.

Our strategic positioning, The Science of Melanin-Rich Skin, and brand persona, Science with Sass, truly guided every development and communications decision.

Product Development Process

We knew as a brand rooted in science, it was integral to incorporate dermatologists of color into the very initial stages of product development, rather than just an aspect of communications, like many other brands did.

We engaged board-certified dermatologists of color to co-create our products, identifying the top needs of melanin-rich skin based on personal and patient experiences and research, from which R&D formulated a full skincare regimen made of 10+ product solutions that were high-performing, safe and enjoyable to use on melanin-rich skin.

Ongoing Melanin-Rich Consumer Panel

We recruited 30+ melanin-rich consumers to an ongoing panel to collaborate and develop our brand with, over the course of 2 years. These consumers tested our brand and provided feedback at every touchpoint: name, formula, package design, visual identity - even the launch campaign.

Visual Identity and Creative

Our very brand name, MELÉ, derives from the word melanin. Paired with our persona, Science with Sass, we created a visual system using sleek scientific iconography and glowing talent to highlight our scientific creds and vibrant personality.

Purposeful Content and Channels

To truly serve the melanin-rich community, we needed to go further than just selling products.

This led to several brand acts, including:

- Authoring a skin diagnostic to educate consumers on their melanin-rich skin and how to care for specific concerns.
- Building a training curriculum for estheticians, cosmetologists and makeup artists with resources and tools to create a new generation of skin care practitioners.
- Working with board-certified dermatologists, estheticians and scientists to cultivate and oversee curriculum and training for the professional treatment of melanin-rich skin.



Results:

- Within weeks of launching, we saw that the melanin-rich community was embracing our brand and products as an authentic solution to a long term issue. Compared to Unilever benchmark averages, we ranked in the Top 30% of brands in terms of consumer understanding and resonance and performed especially well with consumers for “Personally Relevant” and “Credible”.
- By 8/31/21, we had received 13 awards by major publications across the industry - including Elle, Harper’s Bazaar, Glamor, Oprah, Cosmopolitan and others - making us the most-awarded new face care brand in the U.S. Media outlets routinely cited our science credentials, representative development process and effective, resonant product line.
- By August 2021, we had received 836.7M PR and earned media impressions and 261.8M impressions across print, digital and social - far exceeding expectations. We also achieved an average social engagement rate of 5% - above Unilever’s benchmark of 2%.
- Our innovative product line was embraced by the community, with all products receiving an average rating of 4.5/5 stars and 3K+ positive consumer reviews across partner sites.

- Exceeded launch sales goals by +123% by end of 2020, secured in-store distribution, and reached +148% of our in-store target.
- Within the first three months in-market, our sales had so much positive momentum that secured +60% national in-store distribution with Target. Since launching in-store, we exceeded our target reach by +148% and expanded to additional distributors including Amazon, CVS and Ulta - proving our product-market-fit, and establishing critical omnichannel sales points with consumers.
- Between October 2020 - August 2021, we saw a +56% increase in new visitor site traffic - successfully bringing people deeper into our owned ecosystem.

Industry Impact:

1. As marketers and product developers, there are still so many stones left to be turned when it comes to understanding historical bias in what we create. We should always ask ourselves if we're considering everyone and how we can do better. To truly serve a targeted audience (in the case of Mele, an underserved population in skincare) it's critical that we understand the root of the problem for that consumer vs. solving for symptoms. In Mele's case, it was a lack of understanding and representation in the fields that led to skincare solutions, so we needed to root our products in science that *really* understands melanin-rich skin.
2. Strategic rigor-- and research in particular-- is paramount to understanding nuance. Because Mele is for all melanin-rich consumers, not just any one race or ethnicity, it was incredibly important to understand the nuances, motivations and needs of even more specific consumer groups so that we didn't fall into a generalization trap. We needed to understand the shared values and shared challenges in order to authentically and meaningfully serve & connect with the larger audience. And throughout the entire process, input from consumers made all the difference. From spotlighting the need and urgency for a new product to co-creating concepts to culturally-informed branding to communicating the brand/products correctly and effectively, we should never operate in silos. We should never assume to know someone else's perspective.
3. Comms are not always the solution. Here they are part of the solution, but simply telling a group that "we see you" is an empty promise unless you take action to back those words up. We *saw them*, but more importantly we saw what was missing for them and we took action to create what was needed. Action also manifested itself beyond the product too, ensuring we brought the brand to life with primarily melanin-rich agency teams, production partners, talent, etc., so that we could credibly say that this brand was for-- and with-- the melanin-rich community. More brands should approach work with this action-first approach.