Bettina Mercado of Bettina Cosmetics: Five Things You Need To Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry

An Interview With Jilea Hemmings

Jilea Hemmings Follow
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Share your story — customers support businesses that have a compelling story. You are the person behind the brand and customers want to know who they are supporting and why. When I began to invest in marketing, the suggestion was not to let people know the brand was Puerto Rican because a city like Paris sounded more luxurious. I insisted on letting people know who our brand was because that is who I am and it proved them wrong. Nationality is not what opened our doors but the fact that we were a brand they knew and could trust because of our commitment to quality.

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As *a part of our series about "Five Things You Need To Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry", I had the pleasure of interviewing Bettina Mercado, who turned her entrepreneurial vision into reality by reshaping the family-owned business, M & J, Inc., which had focused on distribution of imported cosmetic brands in Puerto Rico since 1963. Mesmerized by the world of opportunities, she became a self-educated administrator, product developer, marketer and producer of her brand, and challenged the company's growth possibilities by adding new cosmetics products to its portfolio under the name of the well-known nail enamel brand, Bettina. Now, under the name of Bettina Cosmetics, the brand has sustained its place as the bestselling nail enamel in Puerto Rico and it is within the top cosmetics brands for producing high-quality products at affordable prices.*

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

My parents, Victor and Julia, imported cosmetics brands mainly from Italy. I am the youngest of four siblings and remember my parents stressing the fact that we had to complete a formal education, but they never suggested that at least one of us should consider business administration to be able to succeed my parents when the time came. Needless to say, we all chose different career paths, and I became an actress. I graduated from NYU and worked in NYC for 10 years before my parents reached out for help. I was sure I was not necessarily the best successor, but when I asked them what they would do if I didn't accept the offer and the answer was they would sell, I realized I was not ready to see the business in other people's hands. In 2001, I moved back to Puerto Rico and soon fell in love with the business. As a Latina and actress, I was a savvy makeup user and knew a lot about both retail and prestige brands and recognized good quality products because of their excellent results. It took about three years to learn from my mother as I inserted myself in all aspects of the business before beginning to make bigger, more impactful decisions.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

A couple of years after I began in the business, I heard about a local beauty show that is the main industry event of the year in San Juan. I rented a space and brought two folding tables with tablecloths and filled them with lots of products. I was so excited to be able to talk to customers and get their feedback on the brand. Those two days, I only heard good things about the brand from lots of people who knew it and I was very excited. At the end of the show, when my husband was helping me wrap up, he looked at me in the eyes and asked, "how did it go?" and I said, "great!" He then added, in the most loving and respectful voice, "If you believe your brand is worth two folding tables and cloths, your customers will also believe so." I was silent for a while and needless to say, closing the folding tables was painful to me. But that is all I needed to push myself to grow personally and professionally to be able to improve the business and drive it toward new growth.

Are you able to identify a "tipping point" in your career when you started to see success? Did you start doing anything different? Are there takeaways or lessons that others can learn from that?

The tipping point for me began in 2010. My mother believed that marketing was a cost, not an investment. She finally trusted me to establish a budget for marketing that year. I found a boutique marketing agency that worked with me on branding for the first time. They said that the trend for makeup products was to use a black background, globally-known models or actresses and to place the products in a corner. I knew that my competitors marketing budget tripled mine and my only chance was to bet on differentiation. I decided that we would go for the complete opposite with a white background, and focus on the product itself while we had talented and beautiful, but not so well-known, Puerto Rican models. When customers visited retailers' cosmetics sections, they would see a lot of black displays housing global brands and somewhere in between, there was a white display and packaging with a magenta logo, which definitely attracted the customers' attention. We made the product the protagonist and communicated its features and benefits in Spanish, while we had both languages on the packaging itself. Also, for the first time, we were able to communicate that the brand was from Puerto Rico and designed by Latinas, for Latinas, which soon made it sought after, especially because of its skin tone options.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person to whom you are grateful who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

The one person that has helped me for the past 19 years to become the professional I am now is my mother. Julia Mercado has been my inspiration. She spent three years teaching me the skills I needed to understand the business and then gave me the wings to fly. She was patient, kind and also very assertive to clearly let me know what I needed to improve on while explaining how I could make better use of all of my talents for the business to thrive. At first, considering she had been in the business for thirty-eight years, employees were reluctant to accept the fact that I was their new leader. Some of those employees used to walk me to buy candy after school when I was growing up, so they could not see the possibilities I could bring to the table at 32 years of age. I was still "La Nena" (a little girl) to them. So, they would walk past my desk to go talk to my mother to get the answers they needed, as quietly as they could, because I was only 10 feet away from her desk. She answered the first few times until she realized she was not helping me, so the next time, she said "I'm not the boss here, you just walked past her desk." Had she not publicly given me the space to earn their trust, she would have never established a real opportunity for a successful transition of leadership.

Ok super. Let's now shift to the main part of our discussion. The global beauty industry today has grown to more than a half a trillion dollar business. Can you tell us about the innovations that you are bringing to the industry? How do you think that will help people?

Our commitment is to provide consumers with safe products that are paraben and phthalate free, vegan, and cruelty free, while our nail enamel formula is also 8-free. We believe that beauty products can provide the expected results without adding chemicals that would be absorbed into the blood stream, causing potential harm to customers.

In 2021, we will launch an app that will provide the service customers need to simplify their product selection such as detailed information on how to use the product, what shades best suit them and product features and benefits.

Can you share 3 things that most excite you about the modern beauty industry?

I am excited I have the honor of being a part of an industry that is so creative, evolves constantly and has proven to endure most trials. I'm also glad to see that the industry is more inclusive than 20 years ago, though aware we still have a long way to go. I'm very proud to say that we began shifting the Puerto Rican market when we developed the right skin tones for Latinas and nowadays, we see more brands inspired by minorities providing the color variety and skin tones they need. Finally, I look forward to continuing to see how technology continues to develop to serve the industry in making beauty education so much more accessible. With these new, innovative approaches, customers can learn how to use products and find DIY tips with tutorials that are now available at the palm of their hands.

Can you share 3 things that most concern you about the industry? If you had the ability to implement 3 ways to improve the industry, what would you suggest?

I think the industry has a responsibility to develop sustainable and recyclable packaging, consistently provide clean formulas, and to address the proliferation of counterfeit cosmetics. Counterfeit is a big business that can become a health hazard for consumers if not managed. I believe the industry could improve by becoming transparent with their clients and educating them, so they know how to read labels and what to look for in ingredient lists.

You are an expert about beauty. Can you share a few ideas that anyone can use "to feel beautiful"?

It's been said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and unfortunately, sometimes our own eye doesn't see beauty when we look in the mirror. To feel beautiful, you need to love yourself. You are not less beautiful than the stereotypes of beauty you have been told to aspire to be. When I develop makeup products, I think about how they will eventually enhance your beauty and have fun while at it. There is no "one tip fits all!" I can only hope I can inspire to feel good all of the time while feeling comfortable in your own skin.

Here is the main question for our discussion. Based on your experience and success, Can you please share "Five Things You Need To Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry". Please share a story or an example, for each.

1. Differentiation is a must — customers are not necessarily looking for another lipstick, they look for brands that are unique and make them feel they are exclusive. I have always been focused on reviewing all brands in the market before I develop a new product and try to go as far as possible from what is already out there. This starts with different colors, packaging, formula, and most importantly, results.
2. Integrity has to be your top value — a dear friend of mine, Carlos Velez, a business leader coach, once taught me that integrity is to "always do what's right, regardless of the consequences." When integrity is the most important value and the entire organization lives by it, you'll always do the right thing, and customers will appreciate it. Usually the consequences are tied to profit loss, but it costs you more to lose a customer, a supplier or an employee because you weren't doing the right thing — at any given moment. It takes a lifetime to build a reputation, but only 5 minutes to lose it.
3. Get certified — if you are woman, minority or veteran owned, get certified. Customers have specific budgets to purchase from companies that are. I became minority and women-owned certified two years ago and it has opened doors much faster for our businesss because retailers are looking for these types of suppliers.
4. Share your story — customers support businesses that have a compelling story. You are the person behind the brand and customers want to know who they are supporting and why. When I began to invest in marketing, the suggestion was not to let people know the brand was Puerto Rican because a city like Paris sounded more luxurious. I insisted on letting people know who our brand was because that is who I am and it proved them wrong. Nationality is not what opened our doors but the fact that we were a brand they knew and could trust because of our commitment to quality.
5. Be simple and honest — people are busy, and they want products that provide the results they are looking for in a few steps, so don't invest in several products to solve what can be solved with just the perfect ONE. Don't write claims on the packaging that are not achievable because after all the marketing efforts you will be left with a one-time customer. The best marketing is that of a satisfied customer sharing their testimony with others.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

We live in a world full of violence. For some reason, the ability to respect the lives of others has been lost and tolerance is scarce. As a woman, I have been supported by a considerate husband who believes in my dreams and helps me grow as an individual and as a leader. I cannot conceive the idea that there are still people trying to restrict the freedom of those who they supposedly love. When I think of beauty products that cover blemishes, I don't think of covering the scars caused by violence. That is why I would love to be able to raise awareness against violence. If I could create a movement against domestic violence, regardless of gender, I would call it "Makeup was not created to cover Wounds."

Just a few years ago, we developed a nail enamel collection called "Celebrate who you are." With it, we wanted to raise awareness and communicate a message of hope for victims of domestic violence. In Puerto Rico, like so many other places in the world, violence has been rising to dangerous levels for years. With this collection, we created six shades of nail enamel with names inspired by attributes such as Powerful, Creative, Daring, Unique, etc. On the bottom label, right below the barcode, we included the phone number of the government office that provides help to victims. We came to know that aggressors tend to search their victim's personal property, and if they were to find a brochure or business card with information on how to get help, they would become more aggressive. We invited people who suspect that friends might be victims to give them the nail enamel since it would not raise suspicion to the aggressor while the number could possibly save their life.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

Antonia Novello, the first Puerto Rican and first woman to become Surgeon General of the United States said, *"I believe that fortitude is key. Go at it. Go at it. Go at it. When you succeed, don't forget the responsibility of making somebody else succeed with you."*. Throughout the years, I have never been afraid to "go at it" every single day, and I have learned to be persistent, strong and resilient now; but that was not always the case. I used to believe I was just giving continuation to my family's business. I felt that it was so much easier to be under the radar, unnoticed. It took a while to appreciate my own accomplishments and to believe I was the woman behind the brand. Antonia's quote made me realize that I could be of service to others helping them accelerate their business opportunities by sharing my own experiences in product development and leadership. That is why I enjoy mentoring new entrepreneurs hoping to help them develop viable businesses that at the same time, contribute to our economy and create jobs when they are so desperately needed.

How can our readers follow you online?

You can follow us on our Instagram and Facebook pages, @Bettina Cosmetics and @Bettina Cosmetics USA. You can also visit our website, www.bettinacosmetics.com, where you can make online purchases or find a store that is nearest to you for Florida residents.

Thank you so much for joining us. This was very inspirational.

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About the Interviewer: Jilea Hemmings is a staunch believer in the power of entrepreneurship. A successful career revamping Fortune 500 companies was not enough for her entrepreneurial spirit, so Jilea began focusing her passion in startups. She has successfully built 6 startups to date. Her passion for entrepreneurship continues to flourish with the development of Stretchy Hair Care, focusing on relieving the pain associated with detangling and styling natural black hair. For far too long, people with tender heads have suffered in pain. Until now.

Business

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