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wasn't on a recent birthday or when I went to the liquor store and, by resurfacing habit, rifled through my purse for my ID only to have the saleswoman offer: "It's ok, honey," in a 'the jig is up' kind of way. The moment I started to feel old took place at a department store beauty counter. I had popped in for a new lipgloss and a sales clerk asked me, with great concern, while frowning a pair of over-tweezed brows: "What do you use for those lines around your eyes?" What happened to those glory days when salespeople worried about my T-zone, those days of heaven when I was bullied into buying gel deep-pore cleansers? "Why don't you have a seat," the saleswoman said, her tone tender and grave (the kind you use when delivering some "things will never be the same" news). I hopped on a cushiony stool as she slathered my fast-pruning visage with age-defying serums and anti-wrinkle moisturizers. I left the store with well-quenched skin, empty pockets and a miniature jar of mushroom-extract-infused eye cream—feeling old and insolvent, like Golden Girl Sophia Petrillo on the dole.

But it seems it's not just my face that's changing; it's the shopping experience itself. The conventional ways of buying beauty products are getting a makeover. Toronto-based subscription service Luxe Box by Loose Button allows customers to sample products in their own home—without the counsel of a salesclerk.

"Women want to shop in a pressure-free environment," says Ray Cao, the company's 25-year-old co-founder. "We're bringing the counter to your couch. Before you walk out of a store with a \$100 serum, for example, you can sample one at home for much less." For a \$12 monthly charge, customers receive a Luxe Box stocked with three to five items, including must-haves like Dermalogica Daily Microfoliant, Laura Mercier Luster Eye Colour, and Pür Minerals 4-in-1 Pressed Mineral »

NEW ORDER
From virtual matchmakers to vending machines, OLIVIA STREN learns there's a new guard of retailers making over the way we buy beauty products.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR BELEBEAU



★ A SELECTION OF ITEMS FROM A LUXE BOX SUBSCRIPTION

Makeup Foundation with SPF 15. “Consumers were shopping more online, but they would still go to department-store beauty counters to try products,” explains Cao. “So if shopping was happening online, sampling was happening offline. We wanted to change that.”

The eHarmony of the beauty world, Luxe Box is also based on the idea of cosmetic matchmaking. But instead of, say, “Woman seeks man: must love sunsets and Indian food,” it’s more like “Woman seeks mask: combination skin and cool undertones.” Subscribers are asked to fill out a beauty profile to ensure they receive samples best suited to their specific needs and coloring. If you and Dermalogica Microfoliant aren’t a match, there is no reason for guilt or despair; just press on to the next no-strings-attached contender until you meet The One. Like speed dating for beauty lovers, Luxe Box—encouraging retail promiscuity—is a commitment-free proposition.

A similar concept is flourishing in the U.S. Last September, Harvard Business School grads Hayley Barna and Katia Beauchamp founded Birchbox, a subscriber-based company that, for \$10 a month, delivers a curated assortment of high-end samples to your home. (Birchbox has yet to come to Canada.) While Beauchamp was interning at Estée Lauder (where she witnessed piles of unused gift-with-purchase samples), she conceived the idea to create a company that would deliver samples straight to women’s doorsteps.

“We were inspired to create a service that was all about delight and efficiency,” says Beauchamp. “Even for the beauty junkie, the choices are overwhelming—

the product graveyard is something many of us know well. For the beauty novice, it is more about being in a beauty rut: using the same old-day in and out—for years. Birchbox was born to serve both and everyone in between.”

Like Loose Button, Birchbox carefully curates luxury care packages—including goodies from, say, Nars, Korres and Deborah Lippmann—and cleverly cashes in on commitment-phobia by serving up an ennui-proof cosmetic loot bag. You no longer have to commit to, say, a foaming cleanser the way you used to. “Discovery in beauty is about touching, trying, smelling... That’s where Birchbox comes in,” says Beauchamp. And you can touch, try and smell a seemingly endless variety of products, all at the privacy of your mirrored vanity.

Should you not wish to wait (or pay) for the test drive, you can download free beauty apps to do the trying virtually—and instantly. Among the most alluring come from Sephora, which allows you to peruse any product (along with reviews, ratings and tutorials from Sephora’s experts). Helping you ease the burden of choice (“Do I go with demure Bubble Bath or The Thrill of Brazil?”), OPI lets you test a polish on a virtual hand pre-mani.

But for some, the challenge isn’t decision-making, ennui or loyalty—it’s the dreaded end of a lifelong love affair. I have a friend who has enjoyed a 20-year relationship with Finesse firm-hold hairspray. “Sometimes, I want to

keep me and Finesse on the down-low because it’s just \$3 a can,” he confesses. Pushing past the shame, he continues: “I’ve always said, if I could bring one thing to a desert island, it would be ‘The Blue Bottle.’” Combing his fingers through his well-Finessed coif, he recalls the moment he discovered it was no longer available at Shoppers Drug Mart. “A sales clerk told me they weren’t carrying it anymore and it felt like a moment out of a horror film,” he says, “I wondered if I should scheme to find a way to order the last 10 crates.” Instead, my friend and his ’do made do, ordering a regular supply from amazon.com. Other addicts—of such discontinued products as those from John Frieda’s Sheer Blonde line—have managed to keep their addictions thriving thanks to eBay.

If Amazon and eBay are helping to keep the past alive, U*tique provides a futuristic, Jetsonian alternative to the trad beauty counter. A slick vending machine—officially dubbed an Automated Retail Shop—is geared toward the multi-tasking beauty connoisseur. “It seemed that shopping could be made simpler and more convenient if it were in a user-friendly, on-the-go format,” says U*tique founder Mara Segal. “I thought to myself: ‘If the one stop she makes in the day is the gym, then why can’t she pick up her mascara there? Why compromise because you are busy?’”

With a stylish interactive facade engineered in collaboration with Rux Design, a New York-based product-design and architecture firm, U*tique debuted at Fred Segal in Santa Monica in 2009. U*tiques have now made their way to airports (New York’s JFK Jet Blue terminal) and hotel lobbies (Las Vegas’s The Cosmopolitan), carrying nearly 60 products that range from GlamGlow mud masks to Bliss Sinkside Six-Packs to upscale takes on classic vending-machine fare (instead of Snickers bars, you’ll find Vosges Haut Chocolates). Products are displayed in bubbles that light up when selected; a robot, dwelling inside, will dispense your new purchase. And with any luck, those robots won’t share their thoughts on your facial wrinkles. □