

Sasha Plavsic,
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One of clean makeup's original founders talks the strategy behind Ilia's explosive growth, and what she's eyeing for expansion. BY JAMES MANSO

CLEAN MAKEUP is one of the most explosive categories in beauty, but for Ilia founder Sasha Plavsic, slow and steady wins the race.

Plavsic launched the brand in 2011, after being unable to find makeup gentle enough for her reactive skin. But in the early days, green trumped clean, and Ilia struggled to find its niche in a market dominated by either conventional products or organic and natural. Fast forward a decade, and, thanks to brands like Ilia, clean is not only understood, it's sought after. To wit: the exponential growth of the brand. Despite pandemic-induced headwinds across makeup, Ilia has tracked triple-digit growth, and industry sources expect sales to surpass \$100 million in 2021 (up from projected sales of \$35 million in 2019, as WWD reported).

Although Plavsic doesn't see Ilia as a category-inventing brand (she paid homage to BareMinerals and Jane Iredale for their work in the clean makeup space), she does recognize that she was early to arrive. "At least

in today's era, we were one of the first breakout brands to do that," she said. Today, Plavsic still heads up product development and branding, which she plans to keep driving as the brand eyes international markets.

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

Sasha Plavsic: I went to web design school in 2000, and I worked in web design for a couple years until 9/11 happened. I went traveling and I got a typography degree in London. I specialized in branding and rebranding, I worked with founders and helped. I was really good at helping to transition an existing brand to something new, and it was very visual.

How did you get started in beauty?

S.P.: I moved home [to Vancouver] at the age of 30 — I was burnt out from it. I started looking into products because my skin was so reactive, and I had just finished a six-month internship at Urban Decay.

I'd worked at all these brand and branding agencies. I actually went on to rebrand the aromatherapy company Saje Natural Wellness. My mom said, "You keep complaining about your skin, you really have to think about what you're putting on it." I started to look into it more, and in the market, there was no brand I could relate to, unless it was really high luxury.

The business is on fire — what do you credit your success to?

S.P.: Timing. It took time for this category, especially in makeup, to come to fruition. Makeup was really the last world to come to the clean party. I did work with Sephora back in 2016 on the Clean at Sephora guidelines, and we were really one of their first guinea pigs in the clean makeup category. Then, it was the rebrand, which we did in 2019. It was the launch of an amazing mascara, and an amazing foundation. Then, it was funding, and hiring people better than me at the right times. The last 18 months is when it all came together, and those pieces became more of a well-oiled machine.

You were early to the game, but now clean makeup is a much more crowded sector. How do you continue to differentiate Ilia?

S.P.: From the very beginning, I had this conversation with my mum. Our mission is clearly outlined, to protect and revive the skin: That's who we are at our core. That was what piqued my curiosity, figuring out how to formulate really thoughtful products, with claims that were efficacious and could deliver immediate results, but also benefit skin over time. I set that as a goal.

Organic and natural was really trending. I tried to fit in that category. Although we had beautiful distribution with all the great lifestyle stores, I was told our brand wasn't totally natural or totally organic, so people wouldn't buy us. I felt bad for a few years about it, and eventually, I abandoned that to take the best of naturals with the safest of synthetics and blending them together.

How do you think about expansion, domestically and internationally?

S.P.: Domestically, we've really put a focus on our own website, as well as on Sephora, they are our premiere retail partner. We do have a couple hundred boutiques, which we've been doing business with for several years. We have select beauty retailers, such as Credo, which are pioneers in the clean beauty space. Our distribution is pretty tight. We do have more opportunity with our direct-to-consumer, which was really powerful for our business. Last year, it was half of our business. We are

looking to craft a stronger plan by country. In Australia, we are growing. There are really interesting markets out there. Coming from Vancouver, Canada, the Asian consumer is a big part of consumerism. Understanding how to introduce a brand like ours to that market is something we will have to do with eyes wide open, and not rush into.

How would you describe your leadership style?

S.P.: You have to hire better people. I want people to feel like they have some equity here, physically and mentally, in their opportunity to grow with the brand. When you make people feel valued and engaged, they want to achieve their goals, and when somebody feels like they're growing in any job, there's a reason for them to stay, in order to charge forward. The way the company is structured from a leadership standpoint, I'm more or less overseeing creative marketing and product development. Lynda Berkowitz, our CEO, oversees all but predominantly sales, finance and operations. We work together in lockstep.

What has been the most challenging aspect of scaling the business?

S.P.: Different things at different times were challenging. At one point, it was money. I'm from Canada originally, and to get a loan for your business if you are a foreigner is a challenge. That posed a lot of challenges until we went for a round of funding. I had hired somebody with me who was quite experienced as an operator in the industry, and I'm a natural founder, creative on the product marketing side. So the chief executive officer I had, and myself, really complemented each other to be able to scale because she knew what to expect, and I could be focused on driving the product. But even when the pandemic happened, it's looking at the problem that comes and then being able to react to it quickly. If you sit for too long and wait, you may lose out on new opportunities.

Ilia is one of the buzziest brands in beauty — are you thinking about an exit strategy?

S.P.: It is my baby. In my previous life, when I was working on rebrands, I did have to watch founders go through transitions, and I saw things that really left an impression on me that were painful to watch, and I have that still in my mind. I love what I do and I love creating product, so it's important that one day, should we choose to find a home that can accommodate a larger strategy globally, that will have to be at the forefront to ensure there's a real partnership in the understanding of the brand.