



A New Ideal

Photography by Barrett Sweger

The beauty industry is changing how it speaks to consumers and revolutionizing the products it creates. The new standard? Out with the too-perfect, in with the real. Words by Archana Ram.

Smooth-as-a-baby legs, a luscious pout, hair so glossy you can see your reflection in it—for years these were the images of beauty presented to us on a pedestal. The goal was, to put it simply, perfection, or rather, a homogenized version of it, with no consideration given to individuality. But the tide has begun to shift. A new wave of industry leaders are flipping the script, ditching hyper-airbrushed looks and, instead, encouraging people to celebrate and find strength in their own beauty. Think Billie razors showing models with body hair (something previously unheard of for a hair removal brand) or Fenty Beauty's commitment to conjuring truly comprehensive color palettes. To dig deeper into the evolving industry, we talked to Prose cofounder Paul Michaux about what's motivating this shift, how his brand is founded on personal expression, and why individuality in beauty is the ultimate power play.

Q: Before founding Prose, you worked at L'Oréal and Christian Dior. What did the beauty industry look like when you were starting out?

A: My first beauty experience was when I was 16. I went to work for Clarins in Neuilly Sur Seine near Paris as a mailman. I was actually just trying to earn money to buy a computer! I came to the U.S. in 2015 for a job in digital at L'Oréal which is where I first worked with [my Prose cofounder] Arnaud Plas. We chatted a lot about what we liked and disliked about the beauty industry. These big beauty corporations would rely on tactics that started with segmentation: research and development comes up with an innovation, then marketing uses it in product launches. It's a model that's about pushing more products, so many products that you don't even know what they're doing anymore! It's



through those conversations that the idea for Prose was born. Back then in 2016 hair product marketing and innovation was more about the retailer than the customer. Yet people were still complaining about bad hair days, so we thought there was something to be done here. Everyone's hair is so unique, but it was a beauty sector where inclusivity had not been matched with products. So we wondered, how can we cater to that? And we discovered customization was the way.

Q. Since your start, the industry has changed significantly. It's less about hard-to-attain, overly perfect hair, and more about realism. What do you think is driving these broader perceptions?

A: Beauty used to be very ego-driven and marketing played on this aspect, but as a society, we've begun to reject overly-styled and Photoshopped hair because it's just unrealistic. We want to see ourselves represented in the world around us. And that's as true for fashion and film as it is for haircare. There is no singular miracle product that will transform someone's real, everyday hair into a retouched blowout. Thankfully that's no longer what we aspire to; instead, we aspire to be our most authentic selves, without sacrificing health or emotional wellbeing. Prose's values have always been deeply rooted in celebrating personal expression. It's about accepting the gift of who you were born to be.

Q. What's social media's role in all this?

A: Because of how we're connected digitally, in general we're exposed to many more pictures of others and also of ourselves. This obviously comes with its own issues, but I believe that it also can bring us closer to a real definition of what beauty is—something more natural, genuine, relatable, and accessible. People are more willing now to show vulnerabilities and what were once considered imperfections. Now beauty just means a better version of who you are—not the supermodel on the cover of a magazine. And with new idols come new standards. Brands now exist through the visual representations that real people create about them and no longer through the sole lens of their advertisements.

Q. Prose takes it a step further, designing not for hair types but for the individual. Why was that important?

A: We wanted to understand the origin of the problem. For example, do you have dry hair because you're spending time at the beach or because you color your hair? With that type of information we can finally create the correct formula for each individual's needs. It was a lot of work to come up with the quiz we use for each customer. We worked with the chemists and hairstylists to make sure we were collecting the right data to generate the perfect formula, making sure the customer

could answer the questions in a simple way. We're truly custom—if we get the wrong data, we get the wrong formula. Back in 2016, there were only one-click brands and here we were asking people to go through 25 questions. But we tested it extensively and I spent a lot of time talking to people about their hair. People have so much to say about it!



Q. How do you think the industry is going to evolve for the customer?

A: I believe customization is here to stay. It's an obvious answer to address people's needs and sustainability challenges. For one, you're not wasting precious time trying to figure out your beauty regimen. You're not only saving your money by foregoing all the trial and error, but you're also not putting your hair through the trauma of experimentation. And when your custom formula works for you, you're not throwing it in the trash. Plus, the understanding that what you put on your body has an effect on how you look and how you feel—that merging of beauty and wellness—will grow even more. People know what's not good for the environment is not good for you. It's about a more holistic approach to beauty.