

Assessing The First Digital Beauty Trade Show

The weeklong WeCosmoprof digital event centered on forecasting the impacts of COVID-19 on the industry.

BY SANDRA SALIBIAN

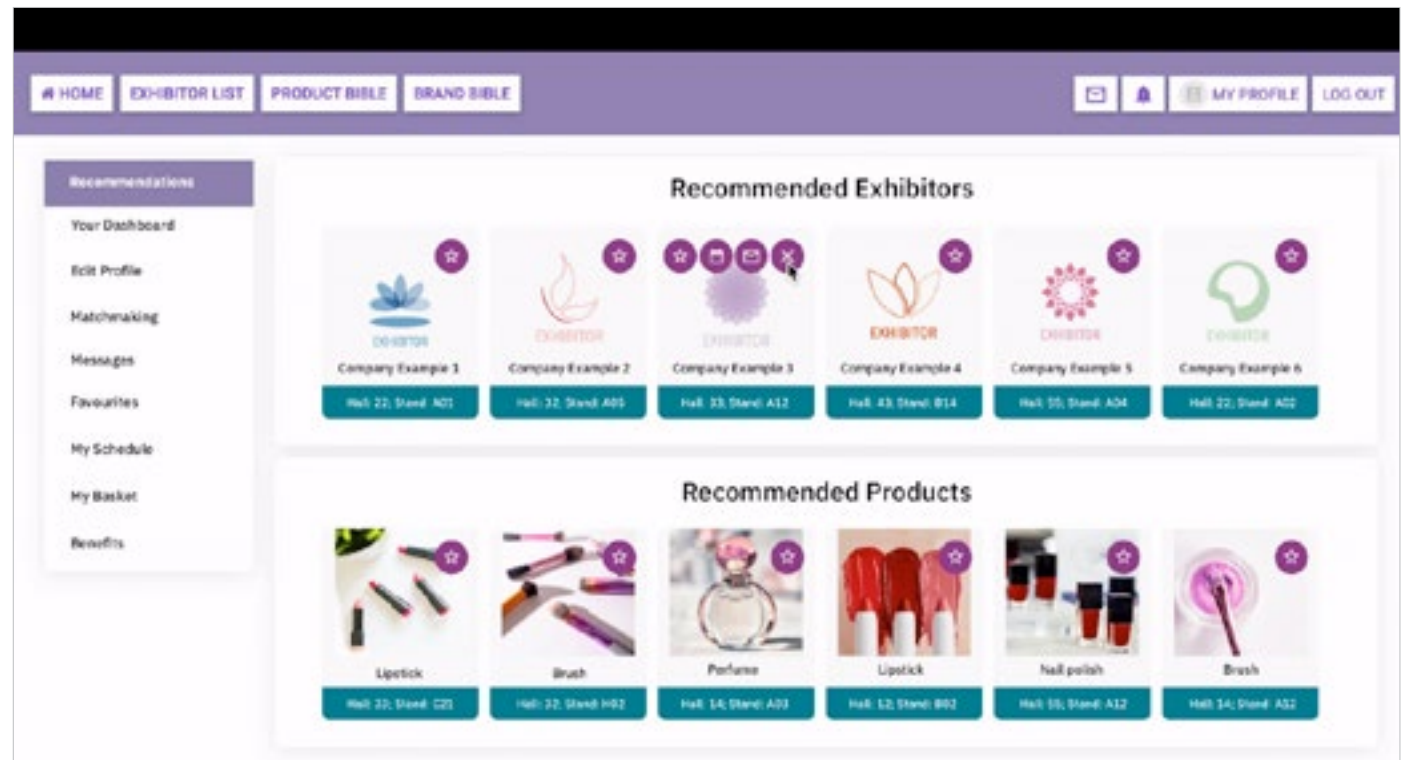
ENVISIONING THE beauty industry in 2030 was supposed to be the theme of the annual edition of Cosmoprof Worldwide Bologna but a pandemic and three date postponements later, the Italian beauty trade show format had to deal with a shorter-term forecast and question what the cosmetics world will look like after COVID-19 instead.

The coronavirus crisis permeated every aspect of the WeCosmoprof weeklong event that ended on June 10. The format represented a digital alter ego of the physical trade show, whose 53rd iteration was originally slated to run March 12-16 in Bologna, successively postponed to June and September before eventually being forgone.

Intended to ensure a continuity of business relationships among beauty operators, WeCosmoprof attracted more than 40,000 users from 100 countries who subscribed to the show's web site to access to information of more than 3,000 international exhibitors. Last year, the physical event registered more than 265,000 visitors from 150 countries.

In particular, the format offered companies and buyers a virtual environment that facilitated networking and negotiations, and provided insightful content and discussions via a packed schedule of webinars.

"The support of international players hailing from the world of design thinking and digital innovation has been essential to launch this initiative," said Enrico Zannini, general manager of the show's organizer BolognaFiere Cosmoprof. "The teamwork with key players has represented a significant change of perspective for us: we don't work as a single institution anymore, but as a leading group



integrated with international entities. The market is demanding solutions made by the whole industry, so to meet these needs and offer growth opportunities to our community, the best way is to create synergies," he added, underscoring that the format's reception was positive and in line with his expectations.

The Cosmoprof My Match software was at the core of the experience: After filling out an extensive form to indicate preferences and areas of interest, users were able to access a private section of the web site where they could find companies matched to their needs selected by an algorithm. In this digital space, visitors could also browse through the rich directory of products, connect directly with exhibitors via private messages and schedule meetings in virtual rooms for one-to-one presentations.

Exhibitors joining the digital showcase ranged from established players to emerging labels.

"We decided to participate because, in this unprecedented moment in history, investing our energy in digital events is key to maintain visibility and allows us to welcome new commercial opportunities," said Gianandrea Ferrari, vice president EMEA strategic marketing and account development of Intercos Group.

"The pandemic has prompted many companies in the beauty sector to revise their marketing, communication and sales strategies, taking maximum advantage of digital channels. From the very beginning of the pandemic, Intercos Group launched and implemented its own digital wave in order to stay close to clients, creating a promotional plan and a tailor-made reorganization to support the business in this crucial moment."

He pointed to WeCosmoprof as "an example that there are still many opportunities and new forms of interaction to explore even in the world of cosmetics, where in-person meetings have traditionally been essential" and

praising the platform as it "was well done and facilitated interaction."

Ferrari said the group is "already planning to unite digital events — which allow us to create new content and opportunities — and in-person experiences, which satisfy the need to feel and hold the product. It is vital that these two strategic realities live side-by-side in order to truly satisfy the needs of our clients, today more than ever."

"We are convinced that the traditional physical format, is more productive, but we're also aware these new ways of communicating and developing the business will be increasingly used to reach sales goals," echoed Valentina Dragoni, marketing manager of cosmetics packaging specialist Lumson.

The executive called WeCosmoprof "an opportunity to communicate outward, widen our client reach and implement new contacts" and praised its intuitive and easy-to-use format. Yet she had concerns on the event as "there have been very few contacts, so it didn't result into a real business opportunity."

As Dragoni suggested to pivot the platform toward a more business-to-business approach and to implement the "the opportunity to filter more the contacts to avoid the ones too generic or not akin for business [purposes]," Zannini replied that perfecting the match-making tool is among the priorities for the future.

Brands joining a Cosmoprof event for the first time had disparate feedback, too. While the founder of the 001 Skincare London brand Ada Ooi valued the experience positively as it enabled her to connect with new customers and retailers from outside the U.K., Mathieu Marcoulides, chief executive officer of Swiss skin-care label Virisens, pointed out that "the functionalities of the tool deserve to be refined to be faster and more user-friendly."

QVC Italy's senior beauty buyer Silvia Gatti echoed the sentiment acknowledging the organizer's efforts

but noting that the digital experience needed to evolve in a more agile and efficient way. "Searching new brands and companies can be improved since opening new conversations virtually was very challenging," she said.

Some buyers might not have used the platform to finalize orders but still found it instrumental for scouting and networking purposes. Mario Parteli and Luca Della Croce, founders of Italian start-up Abiby that offers beauty-box subscriptions and a dedicated e-commerce, said the event was helpful to lay the foundations of future collaborations and to introduce themselves to new brands.

The educational component was the strongest asset of the digital experiment. Supported by an app, the schedule of more than 30 webinars attracted between 200 to 500 users per talk.

Overall, the discrepancy between the business and educational axis showed the event's increasing need of providing informative moments beyond mere trade opportunities to stay relevant and upgrade its status in helping firms.

This dichotomy additionally proved that the beauty industry couldn't rely solely on digital — at least not in the near future. The lack of physical experience and product testing influenced the WeCosmoprof's assortment as well. For instance, the absence of many fragrances companies was tangible, while skin care was among the most popular categories.

The increased number of sanitizing hand gels and products also signaled the impact of the virus on this edition.

The product directory, conceived as a basic e-commerce display, additionally highlighted the importance of efficient communication, visual assets and packaging for a brand. With no customized booth designs luring buyers on the hunt for novelties, companies that invested in developing a strong visual identity had an extra advantage.