

RealStyle by Patricia McLaughlin

DRUGSTORE LIPSTICK

More women are buying it, and they may not go back.

Cosmetics sales increased by 25 percent during the Great Depression. Everybody says so. Ever since, it's been assumed that lipstick sales go up in bad times. (You know -- the way hemlines were supposed to rise with the stock market, an idea that hasn't made any sense since the miniskirts of the 1960s, which marked the last gasp of fashion's consensus on The One True Approved skirt length.)

Kinda makes you wonder who was keeping such meticulous track of every 25-cent box of face powder sold in every drugstore and five-and-dime and department store in America from 1929 up until the beginning of the Second World War. And even if somebody was, which seems unlikely, why would you assume an increase in sales was a reaction to the catastrophic economy? After all, wearing makeup was still a bit suspect in the 1920s; by the '40s it was taken for granted, so it would hardly be surprising if women bought more of it.

Even so, as the real estate bubble continued to leak air and the mortgage mess further unraveled and the recession deepened last year, true believers in the lipstick index were still counting on what the UK Guardian called "a huge anticipated sales boom in lipstick."

Never happened. In fact, some market research suggests that women are spending more on hair and skin care and less on lipstick.

Which may not mean they're buying fewer lipsticks; they may be buying less expensive ones. A year ago, Sharon Glass, group VP for health, beauty and wellness at Catalina Marketing, was already telling Drugstore News that "consumers are looking for increased value. ... Consumers are shifting their behavior. For instance, someone who bought a department store lipstick a year ago ... is now buying it in a regular drugstore, and (she's) adapted to that lipstick."

Will she go back to the high-priced spread when the recession's over, assuming it ever is?

Kat Fay, senior beauty, personal care and retail analyst at Mintel market researchers, says drugstore makeup "has come a long way" in terms of quality and range of choices. "Some women," she suspects, "will be loath to return to \$30 mascara when they've found one they like for \$7.99."

OK, but mascara's easy. Hard-core beauty experts can go on and on about which mascara brand delivers the blackest black, Fay says. But, to the typical non-beauty-product-obsessed shopper, "black is black." You can't go too far wrong with black mascara.

Lipstick is a whole different kettle of fish. There are a zillion different formulations -- mattes, pearls, frosts, sheers, stains, glosses, balms, liquids, plumpers, minerals, long-lasts -- and each one comes in a zillion or so col-



With so many shades and so many formulations, how's a customer to choose? Photo illustration: Patricia McLaughlin

ors, which change from season to season, so whichever one you liked last year has probably been discontinued. It's a perfect example of psychologist Barry Schwartz's "paradox of choice," wherein "too many choices can paralyze people into inaction."

To a customer who's used to the department store model -- where you walk up to a random makeup counter and are somehow appropriated by that brand's sales associate, who proceeds to guide you through the selection process to your purchase -- the drugstore or big-box store beauty aisle can be dizzying. So many brands! And you can keep going back and forth from one rack to another until you're shopped out without anybody ever latching onto you and helping you decide.

And even if, out of pure inertia, you do begin to focus on a particular brand, how do you pick a color without a row of testers that let you try it out on your wrist or the back of your hand?

The quality and selection of mass-market cosmetics may have improved, but their manufacturers and retailers "are not quite there yet in courting the consumer," Fay says.

If makeup makers can afford to bind blister packs of samples of every shade of a new foundation line into millions of

magazines, why can't they figure out how to provide samples of lipstick shades to customers of mass-market retailers?

Short of that, Fay says, most brands do their best to show you what you're getting. Either the lipsticks are packaged in such a way that you can see the actual color of the actual lipstick through the clear plastic packaging, or else there's a plastic tab that's (theoretically) the same color as the lipstick. Many women who know their way around drugstore beauty aisles, she says, will bring along their current favorite lipstick so as to be able to match the shade as closely as possible. Or else they'll try to remember a favorite shade -- much riskier, given the unreliability of color memory -- and look for a new shade that looks similar.

Beyond that, many if not all drugstore brands number their shades to make it simpler to find the color you liked last time: As Fay says, "If you can't remember Golden Sedona Sunset, you just have to remember 606."

Another thing she recommends to the shopper looking to overcome her lifelong dependency on the smokey-eyed lady behind the Clinique counter: Ask your friends what works for them. Ask your relatives. Ask anybody whose makeup impresses you.

Also, as I myself have noticed, there are about a zillion beauty blogs where people endlessly chat about their favorite brands and formulations and shades.

Many drugstores and mass merchants -- CVS and Walgreens are two -- have hired beauty advisers, trained to help customers with the range of products they sell, for the cosmetics aisles of some of their stores. (I personally have never laid eyes on one.) CVS and Walgreens also promote their no-questions-asked return policy on cosmetics: If you hate the color or texture, return the product (with a receipt) for a 100 percent refund.

Drugstore.com makes the same offer to online customers, who must find choosing makeup colors even scarier, given the variability of computer screen color reproduction.

A Canadian drug chain, Shoppers Drug Mart, has even developed an iPhone app that lets customers try out new lipstick shades on photos of themselves on the screens of their phones.

But sampling the actual color of the actual lipstick remains the gold standard. Until mass-market makeup companies figure out how to do it, most drugstore makeup purchases will continue to be what Kat Fay calls "replacements," where you buy the same thing you're about to run out of, or "repertoire expanders," where you try a Bare Escentuals gray eyeshadow because you like your Bare Escentuals brown.