



Electrifying: A woman checks out skin moisture products at a Bic Camera store in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, on March 18. | YOSHIAKI MIURA

BUSINESS

Appliance makers get serious about beauty products

Facial steamers, negative ions shaping up as positive niche

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“Beauty” may not be the first thing that pops into people’s heads when they think about electronics, but struggling Japanese home electronics manufacturers see a great deal of promise in a range of beauty gadgets targeting women, from high-tech hair dryers to steam skin moisturizers.

Many makers are considering taking their products overseas as foreign competitors have yet to enter this category in a big way.

Indeed, a visit to a major electronics stores in Japan these days will reveal a lot of floor space prominently displaying beauty products.

According to a report by Nomura Research Institute in 2011, the market for beauty-related electronics product in Japan in 2010 was estimated at about ¥120 billion and was expected to increase to ¥153.4 billion in 2013 and ¥173.2 billion in 2015.

With the end of the Eco-point program, which gave consumers an incentive to buy environmentally friendly TVs, air conditioners and other products, home appliance stores need something new to boost sales, according to Michiko Matsunaga, a spokeswoman for Ya-Man Ltd., a Tokyo-based beauty electronics maker.

“Beauty appliances have the potential to cultivate the market by attracting more female customers,” she said.

Originally, beauty-related electronic gadgets were mainly produced for and used by beauty professionals such as hair salons and esthetic clinics, and Ya-Man only sold its products to businesses.

They began filtering into the consumer market about a decade ago and have picked up steam in the last few years, Matsunaga said.

Lifestyle changes have provided a tailwind, industry observers say. Consumers are increasingly becoming health conscious, and more women are working outside the home. Such products become a must for busy people who want to maintain their appearance, industry insiders say.

“One big factor is that the number of working women has increased. Rather than staying at home as a housewife, it gives them more motivation (to care about their beauty),” said Yoshiyuki Nanba, manager of the beauty and living business unit at Appliance Co., which operates under Panasonic Corp.

According to Nanba, the turning point for the market was in 2008, when Panasonic released a skin steamer that people can use while they sleep, calling it the Night Steamer.

Many consumers were apparently attracted to the idea of being able to use the product when they are asleep. The successful product has sold about 700,000 units in the past five years, a considerably large figure for beauty electronics that enhanced the category’s status.

Mainstays in the beauty electronics market include hair dryers and curling irons. The trend nowadays is to have them emit negative ions, which theoretically help keep hair healthy. Skin moisturizers are another important player.

Sharp Corp. has, for instance, developed a portable appliance that uses ions to keep skin moist. Because it weighs only 30 grams, it can be clipped to a jacket and taken anywhere with “mobile beauty” being a trend in the industry.

Nanba of Panasonic also said the definition of beauty appliances can be very broad, and products that focus on staying healthy can be part of that category.

Ya-Man produces various facial and body massage devices designed to give people a professional-quality massage at home.

Panasonic released an appliance last fall that soothes eye fatigue.

It looks like a pair of futuristic goggles and produces around 40 degrees of heat to give the wearer the feeling that a steamed towel has been put on their eyes. It also produces vibrations for a massaging effect.

Inspired by growth in the domestic market, the Japanese makers are looking to cultivate the overseas market for health and beauty products.

In October, Ya-Man started selling its portable facial and body massage machines in Hong Kong by teaming up with Jebsen Consumer Products Co., a trading firm with local sales channels.

“A lot of Chinese people go to Hong Kong to shop, so we hope this will be the first step in a future overseas plan,” said Matsunaga.

Panasonic likewise is aiming to expand overseas sales. At the International Consumer Electronics Show, the world’s biggest electronics trade show, held in the U.S. in January, the firm enthusiastically promoted its beauty and health electronics appliances.

It was an unconventional move as products like TVs, computers and cellphones are usually given the spotlight when makers roll out their hottest offerings.

Panasonic has announced that it will start selling its beauty electronics in India and Europe.

Rivals including South Korea’s Samsung Electronics Co. have yet to enter the offshore competition in the beauty appliance field.

“The competition among electronics makers has been getting intense, and South Korean makers are dominating the markets with their cost advantages,” said Masaru Mieda, who heads the beauty and health-related product marketing team at Panasonic. “We need to have a core business in the field that they are not doing.”

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