

READERS' CHOICE AWARDS • PARKER POSEY

Hemispheres

SEPTEMBER 2022



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About Face

Sunday Riley makes your beauty her business

By Sahar Khan • Illustration by Lucie Birant

When Sunday Riley was 12, she read that by that age Marilyn Monroe was already using anti-aging moisturizer. “I remember thinking, *Oh my gosh, have I waited too long to start?*” Riley recalls with a laugh. She made up for lost time by becoming a teenage “resident expert” on skin care, then went on to study chemistry. In 2009 she founded her eponymous skin-care brand, which bucked prevailing trends by incorporating soothing botanicals to balance active ingredients.

It’s a testament to Riley’s leadership as CEO and her scientific prowess as a product formulator that in the decade since, her brand has gained cult status worldwide. Oprah Winfrey loves the Ceramic Slip face wash, while *RuPaul’s Drag Race* star Trixie Mattel is partial to the C.E.O. Glow face oil. (We’re also fans: In 2019, Sunday Riley defeated dozens of competitors to become United Airlines’ amenities partner.) Riley still writes every formula and personally tests every ingredient. “It’s like being a chef,” she says. “You write the recipe. You keep experimenting until you get it right.”

On quantity vs. quality: “I’m a big believer that you’ve got to put the best product out. That’s why you see brands that have been around for less time than us that have 100 products, but we

still have a very small assortment. We don’t have 10 moisturizers; we don’t have five sister lines. Everyone wants to have clean beauty, but that does cost more. The quality of the ingredient that you put in the product really does matter. It matters to the world, it matters to the environment, but it also matters to your skin. So we’ve always decided to have less product—[but it’s all product] that we can stand behind.”

On how the pandemic changed skin-care habits: “It gave people more time to spend on their skin, and they started taking care of themselves a little bit more. I think when you’re surrounded by the concept of viruses, you start paying attention to your own health: your physical health, your immunity, your mental health. Applying skin care and taking care of yourself helps with your mental well-being.”

On leadership challenges: “I’ve always had persistence and grit in spades, but the lesson that I’ve had to learn, particularly as a woman, is to give really honest feedback to people who you like. I consider myself a tough person, but that is a tough thing for me to do. They always say don’t become friends with the people you work with—how do you not become friends? You spend hours with them. You have wins, you have losses

together. You have shared hopes, so of course you build a relationship that is personal. Yet, still, you have to operate [as a boss], because you’re employing hundreds of people who are relying upon you to give honest feedback, and that is very difficult sometimes. So I’ll say, ‘Hey, I’m going to say this with love and kindness: This is not OK, and let’s talk about why. You’re going to hate me until 5 o’clock, but then, afterward, tell me how your kids are doing.’”

On success: “Success, to me, means not worrying how I’m going to pay for everything every five seconds. It wasn’t that long ago I remember being at the grocery store and not being able to pay for \$125 worth of groceries for my kids at 11 o’clock at night. I would take off one thing at a time and see if now it would ring through on my debit card. One of my kids was like, ‘But not the cookies.’ And I said, ‘No, the cookies go.’ I still worry about money today, even though it’s bigger sums, [like] that marketing thing that someone wants. If you had moments where you were tight on money in your childhood, it stays with you in your adulthood, and you always kind of think like that. It’s like I’m always checking all the doors to make sure the house won’t come crumbling down. But maybe that’s also the secret to my success, because I don’t take it for granted.”