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WHEN NATURE MEETS SCIENCE

GREEN IS GOOD. BUT IS IT GOOD ENOUGH? THEREIN LIES THE RUB FOR A GENERATION OF ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE CONSUMERS WHO ALSO EXPECT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF EFFICACY FROM THEIR BEAUTY PRODUCTS.

BY JENNIFER WEIL
ILLUSTRATION BY KAREEM ILIYA

Ellen is about as green as they come. She's never known the taste of meat, buys only organic veggies and has a penchant for natural fibers, clothingwise. When she buys something, Ellen likes to verify its provenance, since certain countries' manufacturing practices don't live up to her ethical standards.

Yet something unforeseen happened recently, which has to do with beauty.

"Since growing up with Weleda, The Body Shop and fennel-flavored toothpaste, I've mostly stuck to organic skin care products," says the Paris-based 27-year-old. "But when more people started addressing me as madame rather than mademoiselle, I decided to buy an antiaging serum I'd heard was a sellout in the U.K. and that a colleague told me was really good."

Ellen began using Boots' No. 7 Serum, a decidedly high-tech alternative, and with the move, joined the legion of consumers trooping across the natural/non-natural products divide, willing to forgo their ideals for efficacy.

"We've found that globally, women want results [from their products]," says Jenny Belknap, vice president of global marketing at Origins. "If they can get results from a natural, organic product, they'll choose that. But if they can't, they'll stick with the traditional product."

Procter & Gamble has discovered something similar. "Women want the choice of natural organic

products, but they don't want it with any trade-offs," says Jenny Rushmore, sustainability leader, P&G Beauty & Grooming. "And the main trade-off is performance."

Such consumers have been dubbed the "sustainable mainstream," and research shows that about 65 percent of women belong to the group.

A recent study by The NPD Group revealed comparable data. "Whether it's makeup, skin care or body care, more than half of consumers are saying they're using [natural] products in addition to their existing [conventional] products," says Karen Grant, senior global industry analyst and vice president, citing as an example that 60 percent of those who say they use natural makeup also use regular makeup. For its study, NPD defined "natural" as what consumers perceive as such.

"The number-one thing that consumers are telling us about [natural] products is they feel they're safer for them, safer to use on their skin, that they're better for their health," continues Grant.

"Today, even more than in previous years, consumers live in a world of fear—for their personal safety, the future of our planet, their economic conditions—and that has had an impact on the way they purchase products," agrees industry consultant Leïla Rochet Podvin, founder of Cosmetics Inspiration and Creation.

NPD says natural beauty is most popular