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### Creating a customer-centred brand

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## CREATING A CUSTOMER-CENTRED BRAND



*Amira Geneid of Zahara discusses how the brand listens to their community to deliver beyond expectations.*



One of the greatest advantages of running a small business is the ability to quickly adapt to the needs of an ever-changing consumer landscape. Customers want to be seen and heard, and Amira Geneid, founder of Zahara, a halal cosmetics line, knows that small businesses can turn actionable feedback from their audience into opportunities that large corporations often have no way of doing.

Adhering to ingredients that are permissible by Islamic law, halal cosmetics contain no alcohol or animal products. In 2015, the global halal cosmetics market was valued at USD 16 billion. By 2025, it will be worth more than 50 billion, a demand fuelled by the Muslim community, which comprise almost a quarter of the world's population. The way Amira sees it, "As a Muslim woman, I can better understand the needs of other Muslim women. We can be more on the ball than even Estée Lauder because we're talking to our customers directly all the time. We can also move quickly — if we want to get something done, we sit down, hash it out, and make decisions on the fly."

### **Amira, let's start with your background.**

I studied Business at the National University of Singapore, but I was always clear about wanting to study entrepreneurship. I decided to intern with Luxola; Luxola was just a start-up then and I was passionate about make-up, so it seemed like a logical step. After that I knew I wanted to start my own make-up company, but I had to figure out how I was best suited to serve this. I started thinking about halal cosmetics because my sister and I couldn't find a single brand that we would swap our MAC and Benefit for — and that seemed wrong. Make-up is such an important part of most women's lives and, obviously, religion is too, but most Muslim women worry about the conflict because we don't always know what we are putting on our faces.

After NUS, I applied to Draper University based in Silicon Valley. It's like a pre-incubator — you go there before you've even birthed your idea and they help you cultivate it. At the end, investors were coming up to me wanting to know more about Zahara. That gave me confidence, so I thought, why not just do it myself? Two years later, the brand was born.



**Can you tell us about the market you serve?** Our target audience is women aged 18 to about 38 living in Singapore and Malaysia. They're also typically Malay.

Spending power between the markets is slightly different because of the currency. We've had to keep in mind that \$18 for nail polish is very affordable here in Singapore, but if you convert that it's nearly RM60. We actually decided we didn't want to compromise on quality or the actual product to cut costs, so what we've done is to work really hard to increase our perceived value instead. We're working to improve our branding and total experience so that when customers do spend that money, they feel satisfied and valued by us.

**Retailing beauty products online can be tricky because people still like to test products, right?** Yeah. We're trying to develop a lot more content so people can see our products on the face. We now have Instagram Stories every single day, which is something we launched only two months ago. We swatch new products every day so women can see them on a real person.

We're also developing a physical presence by selling more to salons so people can try the products before they buy them.

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We know that women like to touch and feel products, though, so we probably will eventually launch brick-and-mortar, but we'd rather do more agile things like pop-ups and events for now.

**How do you serve your customers and how have they, in turn, shaped your service approach?** I think the best way to serve customers is if you actually listen to them and give them what they ask for. What I say about Zahara is we're a halal cosmetics brand: we build make-up for our sisters and we sell from sister to sister.

We can't do that without actually communicating with our customers so we talk to them a lot. It's one of the most important things in our business. For example: we're launching a new collection of nail polishes, and the first thing we did was to send out a survey asking our community what colours they wanted to see. We received 500 responses within 12 hours. We learnt what colours our customers wanted, but more importantly, we learnt that they want to have a say so they get what they want.

Once in a while, if we want our audience to touch and feel products, we do need to go in person and look at their faces as they're applying the products. Are they happy? Are they not? So we had gatherings in the past where we would host a group of 20 girls and pass around make-up. It's like mini focus groups but we call them make-up parties. The aim is to get more intimate feedback as well as foster closer relationships with the community we're trying to build. Having these make-up events is so important to me, especially when we're launching new products.



The best feedback has always been from our customers because they're quick to pick up when we're lagging in a certain area. When products are slow to restock, our customers are the first to say, "Hey, Lady Boss has been out of stock for two weeks. What's going on?" At the beginning, a lot of what we were doing was reactionary, but now we're creating more structure to adjust to our volume growth. We have reorder points, so we know if something is below a certain number, we have to start getting the warehouse to bring more stock to this location.

Customers want their products fast and they also want them in whatever form that they expect them to come in. We once had a promotion where we had a gift set that was displayed in a box, so customers were frustrated when they received the gift set without the box. That taught us that our marketing has to be very literal so we can clearly manage customer expectations.

**What do you think good service in e-commerce entails?** When I think of good service, I think about the brand and if it has met my expectations. Good service is when I order a product and the product comes to me exactly how I wanted it without me having to reach out at all.

Great service, though, is when I feel connected to the brand — if they exceed my expectations, if I feel delight opening it. I've had amazing brand experiences where I open the box and the scent captivates me. That's what we're trying to build: that whole experience that goes beyond the product. All these little extras like a nice box or a sticker, or something special that communicates the essence of the brand. If these are things I'm getting pleasure from, then I think my customers will too, and I want to bring that to them. ✦