



## STYLE

DIGITIZE AND MOISTURIZE:  
COMPUTERS CAN FORMULATE  
A LINE OF COSMETICS SUITED  
ESPECIALLY FOR YOUR FACE

# customized skin care



Zenith Hussain, right, gets a consultation from Nathaniel Benson, president and co-founder of LAB21, at Valley Fair's Nordstrom, while her husband, Syed, ponders the technology.

LUCI S. HOUSTON — MERCURY NEWS

By Candace Murphy  
Mercury News

lion possible formulations.

The deal is this: A customer, with the



Zenith Hussain, right, gets a consultation from Nathaniel Benson, president and co-founder of LAB21, at Valley Fair's Nordstrom, while her husband, Syed, ponders the technology.

LUCI S. HOUSTON — MERCURY NEWS

**By Candace Murphy**  
*Mercury News*

The LAB21 counter doesn't display its facial creams. Or lotions. Or anti-aging serums.

Instead, LAB21 features a row of gleaming computers. And not those Clinique "computers," clunkers that aren't even electric. Nope, LAB21 has bona fide computers, loaded with trademarked software and hooked up to the Internet.

"It's the future of skin care," says Nathaniel Benson, president and co-founder of LAB21, which makes customized skin-care products for women and men.

Established three years ago by a coterie of executives from Estée Lauder, LAB21 arrived at the Westfield Shoppingtown Valley Fair Nordstrom in the spring. Except for Bergdorf Goodman in New York, it is the only store offering LAB21 products.

"We wanted to be very careful about expanding," Benson said. "We knew that this would be a savvy group of customers because of all the technologically savvy people in the area."

Whether or not that's true — these days, technologically savvy people around here probably make employment a higher priority than skin care — LAB21 is a cool concept. It's the idea of creating skin-care products that are made fresh and are ideal for each individual, as opposed to mass-generated products that collect dust on the shelves for up to a year and aren't ideal for anyone.

The 21, by the way, refers to the 21 mil-

lion possible formulations.

The deal is this: A customer, with the help of a consultant (yes, with the fancier title, LAB21 employees earn more than the average Nordstrom cosmetics employee), boots up the LAB21 SkinProfiler and answers 21 questions, including whether you smoke and how much water you drink in a day.

The consultant presses some buttons and shoots the answers out over the Internet. A report evaluating the customer's skin instantly comes back, describing the individualized \$50 to \$100 products that can be made and that can be delivered in 48 hours.

But that's not even the coolest part. It's when the consultant clicks the "FORMULATE" button: The instructions are sent to the State University of New York-Stony Brook and the mixtures are immediately created there to your specifications.

Is LAB21 any good? It is in theory, because dermatologists helped develop the skin profiler and products. But the answer may lie in LAB21's repurchasing rate, which shows 50 percent of customers coming back for more. And, while other Internet-related companies have floundered and floundered, LAB21 recently got an \$8 million venture capital cash infusion, largely because of its proprietary software.

Cosmetics may not be rocket science, but who knew it was computer science?

Contact Candace Murphy at  
[cmurphy@sjmercury.com](mailto:cmurphy@sjmercury.com) or (408) 920-5046.