

John Kang and Julia Kang-Reeves (Bill Wadman)

Alumni

Columbia Entrepreneurs Changing the Beauty Business

From moisturizer to pimple patches, alumni are using their cosmetics smarts to tap into a multibillion-dollar industry.

By

Julia Joy

|

Fall 2024

John Kang and Julia Kang-Reeves (Bill Wadman)

Earth Therapeutics

Bringing K-beauty innovation to essential spa products

John Kang '88CC, '91LAW had virtually zero experience with skin care when he began selling loofah sponges to Bed Bath & Beyond under the name [Earth Therapeutics](#) in 1993. He certainly didn't see himself becoming a leading beauty entrepreneur. But after quitting his budding law career to focus on the brand (an offshoot of his parents' importing business), the two-time Columbia graduate found an unexpected calling. "This was a total accident," Kang says. "There wasn't a lot of intention at the time, but here I am over thirty years later."

Today, Earth Therapeutics sells not only sponges but a variety of home-spa items, from hand cream to hair towels to "anti-stress" pillow mist. The brand, a mainstay of Ulta Beauty, Walmart, and other mass retailers, is especially known for its natural foot-care products. "I like to think I came out with the first foot lotion," says Kang, the company's president and CEO. "When I designed it twenty-five years ago, people were like, who the heck is going to buy foot lotion? But it turned out to be one of our absolute bestsellers."

Since launching that first moisturizing foot cream, Kang and his team have introduced an array of other pedicure products. “My personal favorites are the Sole Scrubber foot-wash mat used together with the foamy foot shampoo,” says Julia Kang-Reeves ’94GSAS, Kang’s sister. Kang-Reeves, who earned a master’s degree in classics from Columbia before joining the family business, currently serves as Earth Therapeutics’ marketing director.

As the Long Island-based company has evolved, Kang and his team have remained focused on the utilitarian nature of their beauty brand. “When I first started out, a lot of the products out there were based more on color and fragrance,” says Kang. “I didn’t want to do that. A product has to do what it says it’s going to do: if it claims to heal cracked and dry feet, it’s got to do that. How it looks and smells is secondary.”

In recent years, Earth Therapeutics has integrated more Korean innovations into its product line, whether through ingredients (seaweed, milkweed) or accessories (sheet masks, under-eye patches). “Korean beauty is all about the ingredients: using less-harsh chemicals with an emphasis on healing,” says Kang, who, along with Kang-Reeves, was born in South Korea. “We’re focusing now on the K-beauty segment of foot care with cutting-edge products like foot masks.”

Kang-Reeves echoes the brand’s ingredient-driven philosophy in her marketing and promotes Earth Therapeutics as high-quality but affordable and appropriate for a wide range of customers. “Over the past few years, beauty has become even more of a red-hot industry, fueled by trends and the influencer frenzy,” she says. “But Earth Therapeutics is about more than beauty. We’re a wellness brand offering reliable products for the entire body, yoked together by an ethic of quality self-care for all.”



Scarlett Johansson and Kate Foster Lengyel. (Carin Backoff)

The Outset

Giving clean, gentle skin care a celebrity glow-up

It's a problem familiar to many: dry, blemish-prone skin often made worse by creams and serums — even the expensive ones. For those with sensitive skin, finding the right cosmetic products can be a challenge. [The Outset](#), a New York City-based beauty startup founded by two sensitive-skin sufferers, Kate Foster Lengyel '11BUS and actress Scarlett Johansson, aims to help solve this dilemma by making skin care cleaner, simpler, and less irritating.

"Sensitive skin is reactive," says Lengyel, a veteran of the cosmetics and fashion industries with an MBA from Columbia. "It's often the result of having a disrupted skin barrier, which is what keeps in moisture. Stress on that barrier can come from too many products, too many harsh active ingredients, or allergens like fragrance, gluten, or nuts. We're trying to remove as many sources of irritation as possible with a less-is-more approach."

Since launching in 2021, The Outset has captured the attention of skin-care enthusiasts for its gentle ingredients and cruelty-free testing approach. “The secret sauce is our approach to hydration,” explains Lengyel. “We use a proprietary botanical complex called Hyaluroset sourced from the seeds of cassia flower that’s been proven to outperform hyaluronic acid.” Earlier this year, the company introduced a mineral-based sunscreen called Hydrasheer. “That was really important for me, because I have a half-inch scar on my forehead from skin cancer,” says Lengyel. “Plus, 80 percent of our skin’s aging comes from UV exposure, but only 29 percent of people are wearing SPF every day.”

Lengyel, who started her career in beauty marketing at Victoria’s Secret over twenty years ago, has had a front-row seat to the cosmetics industry’s evolution. “There used to be a top-down approach of big brands dictating the trends, and now it’s the consumer voice doing that,” she says. The Outset, whose products are sold by Sephora, Goop, and other retailers, taps into today’s digital-consumption habits through [TikTok](#) (500,000+ followers) and [Instagram](#) (300,000+ followers) and oversees an online platform of superfans who the company calls “Skinsiders.”

While The Outset undoubtedly benefits from Johansson’s star power, Lengyel believes that the quality of products is what primarily drives loyalty and growth. “We operate with a ‘Startup 101’ mentality that I learned at Columbia Business School,” she says. “The brand has to be able to stand on its own; it has to deliver on and exceed expectations with or without Scarlett’s attachment. There’s a demand now for ‘better-for-you’ products, and we pride ourselves on clean ingredients that are efficacious, safe, and a joy to use.”

Hero Cosmetics

Popularizing pimple patches in the United States

Ju Rhyu ’08BUS was an expat living in South Korea when a common skin problem inspired a dramatic career move. It was 2013, and “I was breaking out, and I didn’t know why,” says Rhyu, who was then working for Samsung. “Maybe it was the different environment or different lifestyle stress, but it was really frustrating.” Around that time, she had begun noticing an odd skin-care trend on the streets of Seoul: people wearing small, round stickers on their faces to treat pimples. “I bought

some and was blown away by how well they worked,” says Rhyu. “I have sensitive skin, so a lot of creams and ointments would turn my skin red, flaky, and dry. The patches did not do that.”



Ju Rhyu (Courtesy of Hero Cosmetics)

Rhyu, who grew up in a Korean-American household in Seattle, wondered why such a simple and effective zit solution hadn’t gained traction stateside (“Why was I learning about this now and not when I was a teenager?” she recalls thinking). So the Columbia Business School alumna came up with an innovative idea: marketing the popular Korean product in the United States under her own American brand.

In 2017, Rhyu officially cofounded [Hero Cosmetics](#), a skin-care company known for its Mighty Patch stickers. “They’re made with hydrocolloid, which is a fluid-absorbing gel,” says Rhyu. Although hydrocolloid adhesives have existed in the US for many years, they’ve historically been used on wounds, not acne. “When applied to an inflamed pimple, they absorb the gunk and promote fast recovery,” Rhyu explains. Since introducing the original Mighty Patch through Amazon, Hero has added

stickers specifically for daytime and overnight use, for dark spots and early-stage blemishes, and for the chin, nose, and forehead. The brand also produces cleanser, moisturizer, and other products designed to promote clearer skin.

Hero was acquired in 2022 by consumer-goods giant Church & Dwight for \$630 million, and its products can be found at retailers like Target, CVS, and Ulta Beauty. The brand is also expanding internationally; its growth, Rhyu says, has a lot to do with its appeal to adults with mild or moderate acne, like her. “Hero is talking to an ignored audience,” says Rhyu, who in addition to running the New York City-based company as CEO, supports other entrepreneurs as an angel investor. “Traditionally, acne products have been for teens and folks with more serious acne. The formulas are quite harsh and focused on drying the skin. Hero offers something for anyone and everyone who has that occasional breakout and wants control over their skin.”

13 More Alumni Beauty Brands

AbsoluteJOI skin care, founded by Anne C. Beal '93PH

AMP Beauty cosmetics retailer, cofounded by Angel Lenise Pyles '11JRN

Delvaux hairstyling clay, founded by Filipe Delvaux '22SPS

Emilie Heathe makeup and nail polish, founded by Emily H. Rudman '14BUS

Glow Recipe skin care, cofounded by Christine Chang '10GSAS

IT Cosmetics makeup and skin care, founded by Jamie Kern Lima '04BUS

Olfactory NYC custom fragrances, founded by Joseph Vittoria '21BUS

Peach & Lily skin care, founded by Alicia Yoon '04CC

Prakti skin care, founded by Pritika Swarup '21GS

RéVive skin care, CEO Elana Drell-Szyfer '91CC

Shespoke custom lipsticks, cofounded by Kelsey Groome '19BUS

Soko Glam cosmetics retailer, cofounded by Dave Cho '15BUS

Sundays nail polish, founded by Amy Ling Lin '16BUS

This article appears in the Fall 2024 print edition of Columbia Magazine with the title "The Business of Beauty."

Read more from **Julia Joy**



[Guide to school abbreviations](#)

[All categories](#) >

[Read more from Julia Joy](#)