FACE EQUALITY INTERNATIONAL

Beauty is a tricky word. For all of us. Whether you have a facial difference or not.

There is an entire industry attached to this word, and it is the overarching concept that so many of us within the visible/facial difference community struggle to truly connect with. I guess you could say that we're in a toxic relationship with beauty. One where we get reeled in by the glossy allure of it all but later triggered and rejected when we're told we're not the one and we don't belong here.

Because in no part of history to date have our disfigurements (a word that I personally like to reclaim) been defined as beautiful. The words we have attributed to us are, as such, inherently negative. Inherently medical. Inherently dehumanising. Our 'defects' (a word I totally reject) are there only to be fixed or hidden from sight. Something I know anyone who has ever picked up a concealer will have some insight into, and so I know this isn't just a visible difference thing.

But for someone with a mark, scar or condition affecting appearance, looking in the mirror, we don't get to see the movie star, the model, the love interest. The reflection we so often see of ourselves out there in the world, on our screens, is the villain, the vulnerable person, the outcast.

Well, I for one am happy to be part of a modern-day revolution which is calling bulls**t on all of the above.

Things are changing. They're especially changing in the UK, with thanks to trailblazers in inclusive advertising and TV. Sephora UK are just that, trailblazers, and it's been a joy to make magic with them in recent years, with so much more to come. It is my great wish, that this ripple transcends trends and leads to a global tidal wave, transforming the conception of modern beauty. As an industry of course, but more importantly as a concept.

That would make my life as CEO of Face Equality International a whole lot easier. We're on a mission to create a world free from barriers, where the facial difference community are thriving and proud to be themselves. That last part about being proud to be yourself is crucial. Because for me, and so many others, we want to use beauty to express our unique selves. A bold lip to accentuate a cleft, blusher to bring out birthmark, a gold sparkle to highlight a scar. This alone feels like a defiant act of social change, in a world which is yet to truly embrace the idea that different is beautiful.

We campaign for face equality as a human rights issue. Heavy huh? So you might assume that we think campaigning for inclusive beauty is frivolous in comparison. You might even assume that we as a movement reject beauty entirely. Well, hopefully if you stick around long enough to get through the rest of this report you'll see how we need both. Creativity and self-expression are vital routes to social change. So we hope you feel inspired to come along on this journey with us.

Phyllida Swift

CEO FACE EQUALITY INTERNATIONAL

Creating Beauty Spaces Where *Everyone* Belongs: Advancing Face Equality in the Beauty Industry

Beauty is a powerful form of self-expression, identity and confidence. Yet for many people living with a scar, mark or appearance-related condition, beauty retail environments can feel exclusionary, uncomfortable or unsafe. This research, conducted by Face Equality International (FEI) in partnership with Sephora UK, explores how people with lived experience of facial and visible differences experience beauty retail and what the industry can do to create more inclusive, welcoming spaces.

Drawing on responses from more than 1,500 beauty consumers, including 46% who identified as having lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-related condition, the findings reveal significant opportunities for the beauty industry to improve customer experience, strengthen trust, and demonstrate leadership in inclusive practice.

KEY FINDINGS

The research found that people with appearance-affecting conditions are **consistently less comfortable** shopping for beauty products and services than consumers without this lived experience. **This discomfort increases as the visibility of the condition increases.**

Customers with facial differences reported **greater difficulty seeking advice in-store**, lower confidence that products would meet their needs, and reduced trust in the expertise of beauty advisers. Intersectionality also comes into play, and many participants described feeling **overlooked by mainstream beauty guidance**, product ranges and retail environments.

A recurring theme throughout the research was the **importance of representation**. Participants expressed a desire to see people with facial differences represented not only in advertising, but also among beauty advisers, educators and industry leaders. Representation was viewed as a signal of belonging, understanding and authentic inclusion.

The study also found **widespread support for face equality training**. Around **90%** of respondents agreed that beauty advisers should receive training to better understand appearance-related conditions and how to support customers respectfully and effectively.

What Consumers Are Telling the Industry

THE RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS **FOUR** CRITICAL CUSTOMER NEEDS.

1. Expertise and Tailored Guidance

Many participants reported struggling to find reliable advice relevant to their condition. Generic beauty recommendations often fail to address practical concerns such as scar tissue, skin sensitivities, rosacea, eczema, acne, burns, craniofacial conditions and other appearance-related differences.

CUSTOMER'S WANT ACCESS TO:

- Evidence-based product recommendations
- Ingredient knowledge and condition-specific expertise
- Real-world testimonials from people with similar experiences
- Product samples and testing opportunities
- Tutorials and beauty content tailored to their needs

Importantly, participants were looking for *facts* rather than marketing claims, seeking trusted, informed guidance that enables confident purchasing decisions.

2. Respect, Dignity and Psychological Safety

Many respondents described experiences in which staff or other shoppers commented on their appearance without invitation, made assumptions about their condition, or focused immediately on concealment and correction.

Nearly one-third of respondents with lived experience reported receiving unsolicited comments or questions while shopping, and more than one in ten had experienced this from retail staff.These experiences can undermine customer confidence, create anxiety and discourage engagement with beauty retail environments altogether.

CUSTOMERS CONSISTENTLY EMPHASISED THE IMPORTANCE OF:

- Being listened to rather than judged
- Not having their appearance discussed unless they choose to raise it
- Being asked about their goals rather than having assumptions made on their behalf
- Receiving support without pity, curiosity or unwanted advice

3. Inclusive Retail Design and Customer Experience

The physical retail environment emerged as an important factor in customer comfort. Many participants reported feeling exposed during consultations, shade matching, treatments and product testing conducted in busy public retail spaces.

There was strong support for quieter consultation areas, private spaces and alternative testing options. Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents expressed support for private consultation areas, suggesting this improvement would benefit a broad range of customers, not only those with visible differences.

CUSTOMERS ALSO EXPRESSED INTEREST IN:

- Better product signposting
- Condition-specific product curation
- Interactive product-finding tools
- Gentler lighting and more comfortable consultation spaces
- Expanded access to take-home samples

4. Representation Beyond Marketing

While representation in advertising was valued, respondents made clear that inclusion must extend beyond campaigns.

CUSTOMERS ALSO WANT TO SEE PEOPLE WITH FACIAL DIFFERENCES:

- Employed within retail teams
- Visible in leadership positions
- Included in education, tutorials and product demonstrations

For many participants, representation communicates that they belong in beauty spaces and that their needs have been considered throughout the customer journey.

Strategic Implications for the Beauty Industry

THE FINDINGS DEMONSTRATE THAT FACE EQUALITY IS BOTH AN INCLUSION ISSUE AND A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY.

People with a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition buy

70% TO CONCEAL

66% TO CARE

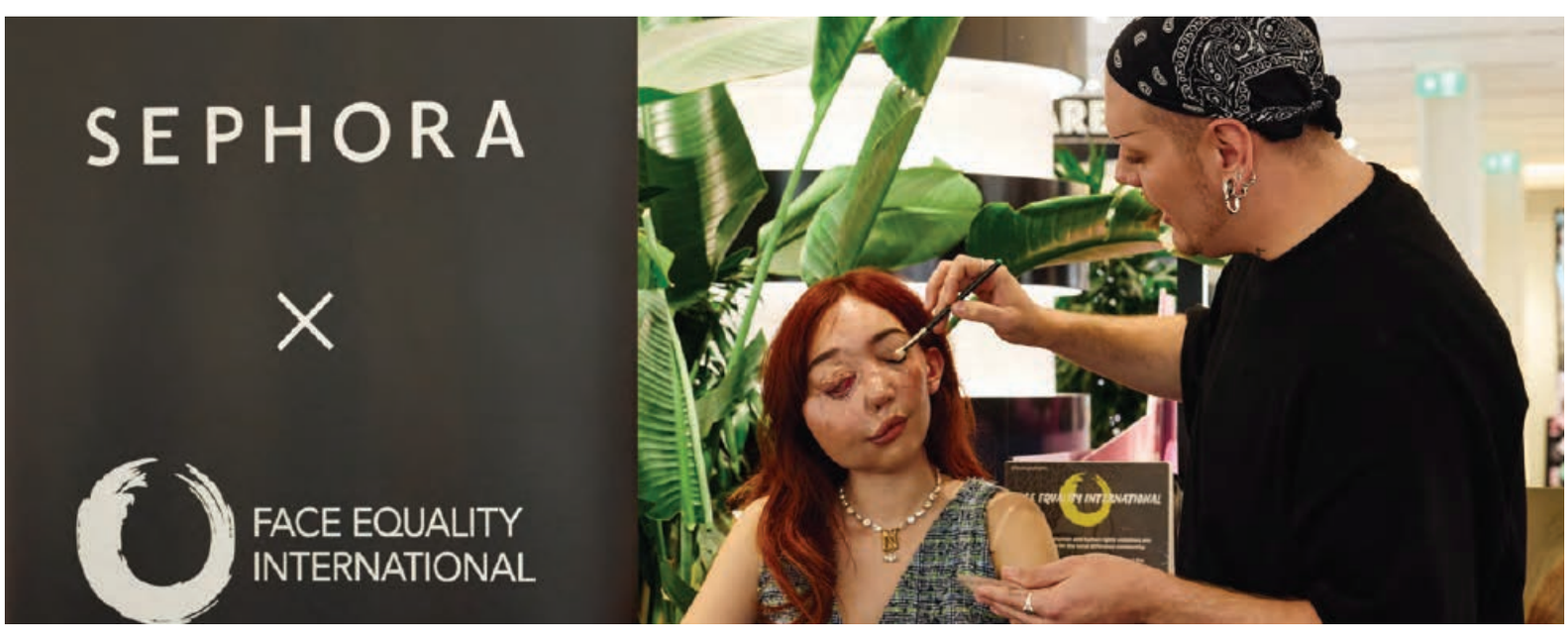
6% TO CELEBRATE

Purchasing is largely driven by practical needs or the desire to conceal rather than celebrate. This reinforces both the importance of supportive product guidance, and **a gap for more inspirational make-up tips to celebrate difference.**

Consumers with appearance-related conditions represent a substantial customer segment whose needs are often underserved. When customers do not feel understood, represented or supported, they are less likely to seek advice, engage with services or purchase products with confidence.

Conversely, organisations that invest in inclusive retail experiences can strengthen customer trust, improve service quality, increase loyalty and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive beauty market.

The research also suggests that many of the improvements sought by people with facial differences, such as privacy, knowledgeable staff and personalised advice, would enhance the experience for customers more broadly.



Recommendations for Industry Action

'A scar or visible mark isn't something that needs to be "fixed," and it helps when staff approach it with sensitivity rather than curiosity. Gentle communication is key: asking whether I'm comfortable with certain steps, explaining products before applying them, and not drawing unnecessary attention to the scar.'

To create truly inclusive beauty environments, organisations should:

EMBED FACE EQUALITY TRAINING

Equip frontline teams with practical knowledge about appearance-related conditions, communication skills and customer-centred consultation techniques.

DEVELOP SPECIALIST ADVICE

Develop face equality champions or specialist advisers who can provide informed guidance and support customers with more complex needs.

IMPROVE RETAIL ENVIRONMENTS

Review store layouts, consultation practices and testing experiences to increase privacy, comfort and accessibility.

EXPAND REPRESENTATION

Ensure people with facial differences are visible across marketing, recruitment, education, leadership and influencer partnerships.

PROVIDE CONDITION-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Support customer decision-making through evidence-based content, ingredient transparency, tutorials, reviews and product recommendations tailored to different appearance-related conditions.

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS

Move beyond a beauty culture centred on correction and concealment. Recognise that some customers seek care, some seek confidence, and others seek self-expression and celebration.

This research demonstrates that while progress has been made, many people with facial and visible differences still encounter barriers within beauty retail environments. The industry has a significant opportunity to address these challenges by embedding face equality into customer experience, workforce development and business strategy.

Creating beauty spaces where people with facial differences feel seen, served and celebrated is not simply a matter of representation. It requires systemic change, informed practice and a commitment to ensuring that every customer feels they belong. Organisations that embrace this challenge will be better positioned to deliver inclusive experiences, build lasting customer trust and help redefine beauty for a more diverse and representative future.

Themes identified in the research

1 Finding products and techniques that work for me can be hard

TIPS & ADVICE ARE OFTEN NOT SUITABLE FOR MY CONDITION

Participants with lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition feel **less confident about beauty and grooming products** meeting their needs. This indicates potential gaps in information, guidance or tailored products.

A lot of people want to be able to talk to someone in store who has detailed training and knowledge in different appearance-affecting conditions and what to use for comfort, care, and aesthetics. Ingredients matter – not just how it looks - and trust in the brand can be important.

There is a desire for **in-store knowledge**; people with lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition are more supportive of the need for an expert face equality champion in store. And around 90% of participants - both with and without lived experience of facial difference - agreed that beauty advisers should be **trained about face equality.**

IN THEIR WORDS:

'More education on face structures/conditions etc. I don't want to be the shop-floor case study for beauty floor staff, they should be exposed to different faces and needs from day 1 and not treated with sympathy, this is really important!'

'Have a clear visible section in a store designed for products related to scars and skin conditions. Sometimes it's difficult to find what you need amongst all the other products, as they're never clearly displayed. It's like you have to dig high and low between all the other products to find what you need, and often I've left stores because I can't find the item, despite the fact I know it's stocked there. This would make life so much easier, as I'm too self conscious to ask an assistant for help and I like to take my time browsing and reading labels. Also, if I'm browsing in that section, I wouldn't want to be approached by an assistant, I'd like time and space to explore the products without feeling watched or judged, but have an assistant nearby should I need to ask for help.'

'I think it is important, especially with more serious scarring to understand that the texture of the skin is different, often tighter than healthy skin. Some products simply will not 'sit' very well on certain types of skin. Please stock more cosmeceutical type brands, which may be more appropriate.'

'Shop assistants (beauty stores) are trained to sell skincare products, make up, perfumes and not to help customers to solve problems. They hardly ever understand the damage that skin products with certain ingredients, strong smell or heavy texture can cause to sensitive skins, they want to sell, they are paid to do that. They don't know that rosacea burns, acne can be painful, psoriasis hurts...'

'I did not trust any shop assistants when I had visible acne and still have very limited trust. I do a LOT of research before I buy incl. ingredients.'

I WANT FACTS, NOT FLUFF

People are wary of taking tips at face value. They want factual evidence of product suitability.

This can mean:

- Images of how products react with different conditions and scars;
- Reviews from other people with the same condition;
- The option to try it on their skin through samples or testing;
- Recommendations with enhanced credibility (e.g. derm-approved);

THEY TOLD US:

'My scar on my hand is actually super useful for me to test cosmetics on as it shows how the product interacts with "imperfect" skin.'

'...testimonials (especially from genuine customers) in marketing those products. So, having pop ups saying "People with eczema love this product".'

'I would very much appreciate seeing realistic results on real people. I still have some scars and experience rosacea flare ups. I want to know what kind of results to expect on skin like mine.'

'It's extremely hard to find the right products for rosacea especially when it's new to you, as all skin reacts differently, I have tried many rosacea products that just made my skin worse, what would really help is if I could order just a small sample to try rather then spend £40 plus on products that don't work for my skin type, and I'm sure I'm not alone in this.'

'I never know how to get advice or what products to use. If the brand uses people with scars then I would know they have experience.'

I WISH STORES WOULD MAKE IT EASIER FOR ME TO FIND AND USE THE RIGHT PRODUCTS

Many participants wanted clearer signs or shelf-sections or an interactive product finder for particular conditions. Some participants would also welcome sessions linked to particular conditions (e.g. scarring) which showcase relevant products or techniques.

More tailored beauty tips are sought. 28% of people with lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition have seen no beauty tips tailored to their lived experience, and only 9% have seen lots. Many wanted more tailored tips. This reveals a need for more beauty advice tailored towards people with facial differences.

'Tutorials about using a particular product and what it does for the appearance-related condition etc. Also sign posting consumers to the help tool'

'They could offer a master class to show how to help heal and best look after scars and maybe how to properly cover a scar.'

'Have curations of products for different conditions, including cancer.'

2 I am more than my condition

Some participants mentioned intersecting aspects of their life – perhaps an appearance-affecting condition, a dark skin tone, sun damage, or age. They sometimes felt that this changed their needs and experiences, and sometimes that stores could do better catering for all aspects of life, or helping them adapt their self-care routine over time.

THEY TOLD US:

'Whilst my scar is from childhood chicken pox I have found the menopause has impact skin so notice more discolouration and difficulty covering'

'Training on treating melanated skin is vital as people of colour scar differently in some cases and our skin will react differently in some cases or look different with certain scars! Just telling us 'I can't help you' is not good enough'

3 Representation Matters

People with lived experience of scars, marks and appearance-related conditions are particularly keen to see more people with facial differences working in and leading the beauty industry and represented in **beauty advertising.**

While diverse representation in marketing imagery is often appreciated, it is not always enough to make someone buy it.

'Whilst I appreciate diversity within the beauty world it wouldn't necessarily make me buy a product. I would also have to be sold on a product. If there were two identical products I would swing towards one that incorporated body positive advertising'

'I often feel like we don't matter or that people don't understand so it puts me off approaching staff members'

'All in store advertising is geared to supermodels and young skin! Nothing there for anyone with a skin related condition who is also getting older!

'I have a background in beauty so I'm familiar with ingredients and textures, I prefer to shop online as I've [never] had anyone with a cleft lip be a server and when I have gone in they either want to cover it up as a priority or not recommend bright lip colours or they've been uncomfortable about doing my lipliner and not getting it even'

'I have very bad eczema and psoriasis. I've never seen a single makeup look/beauty routine either online from influencers or directly from brands about how to still feel beautiful & wear make up.'

4 I would like to feel safer in beauty stores

I WOULD FIND IT EASIER TO TALK TO STAFF WHO GET ME

Many participants felt that they weren't reflected in beauty staff; people with visible conditions, people who don't wear make-up, and older people in particular often feel unrepresented. For some, this translates into feeling unwelcome, misunderstood or like I am not their target audience.

IN THEIR WORDS:

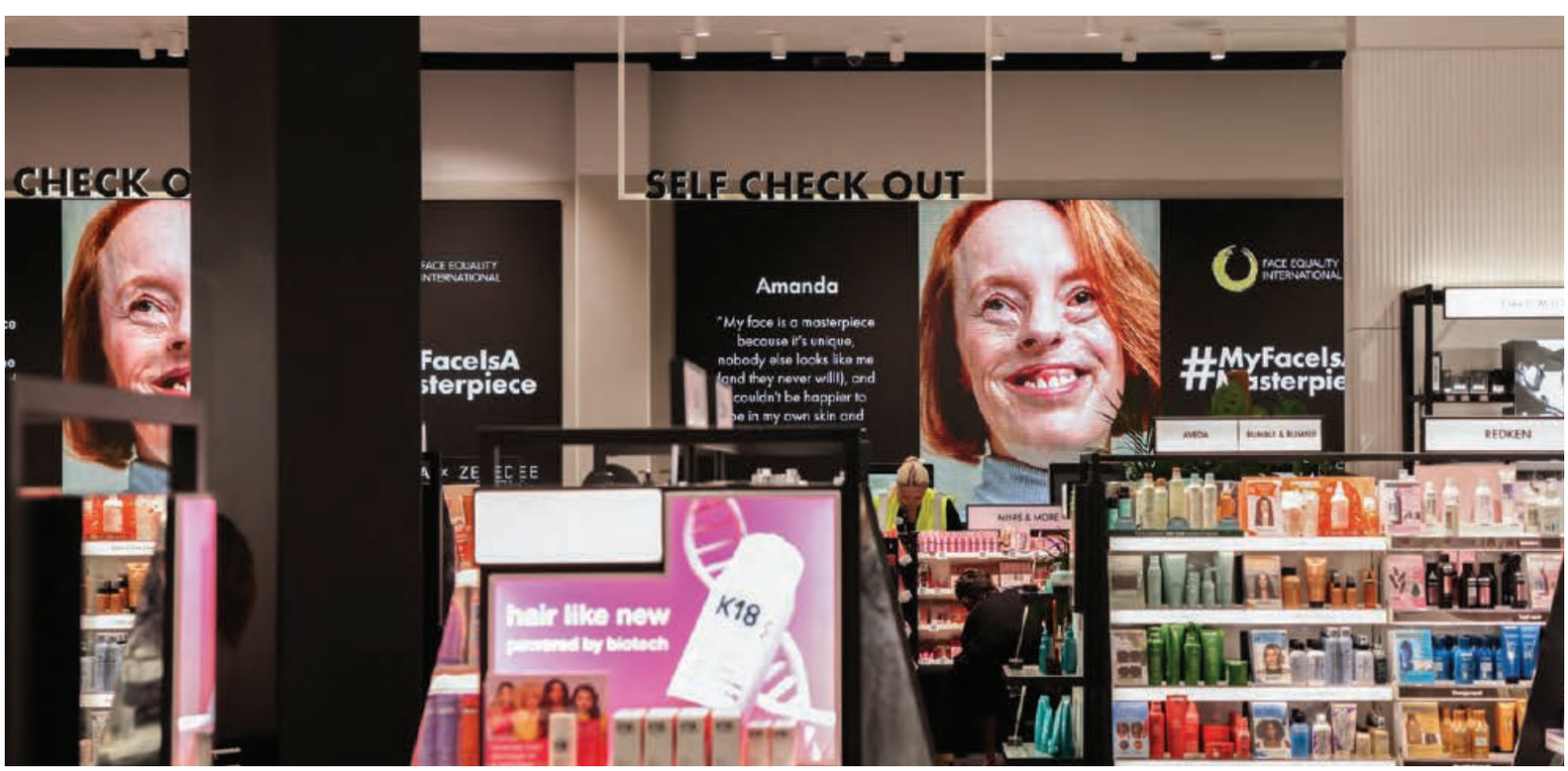
'I have moderate acne and in the Liverpool One store there was a worker who had struggled with acne and she was really helpful and helped me find my new favourite toner'

'99% of the staff are young and have no problem skin... that does not help'

'Others have over exaggerated makeup that is too much for normal day to day wear. I once had a guy come up to me with purple spiky hair, 4 piercings, young, caucasian trying to give me advice. I'm asian, older mature skin with an olive tone that is always difficult to match. Needless to say I didn't take his advice because he offered me a pink foundation. Completely not my shade.'

'Just older more experienced advisors, who understand the difference between looks and tips for every day life rather than how it will look on a photo on social media'

'I do agree that the sales representatives have to look sharp. But I often see thin, lean, well-groomed women; not all are friendly. I sometimes feel they are judgemental too. Not everyone walking into the store can have perfect skin. Some of us have facial hair too.'



MY DIGNITY IS AT RISK

Some participants feel at risk of having their confidence trampled on by upsetting comments or behaviours from staff.

THEY TOLD US:

'When I was in boots once, the lady who was trying to sell her product very loudly said to me that whatever is on my face can be cured with this product. It was the most embarrassing moment I've ever felt in boots.'

'When I was shopping for skincare to help plump back my pitted skin on my [face] the deep chickenpox scars left behind someone commented that I should wash my face more. Another occasion someone asked if I'd suffered with severe acne - when in reality I was almost hospitalised with severe adult chickenpox and was bedridden for two weeks.'

'I went to a clothing store with my friend to try on a few things that I had interest in, and as soon as I walked through the door a young staff assistant told me "You can't try anything on with that weird stuff all over your body, because it's a bio hazard" and that made me feel so uncomfortable because everyone else including more staff and other customers were looking at me as if I had a contagious and deadly disease when I hadn't.'

'I have some huge birthmark on my hand, and during manicure,
I received a comment that person is scared to catch something from me'

'I've been told by a sales assistant that was able to serve me 'Blimey, you look like you have done 10 rounds with Frank Bruno!' I turned around, left all the items I was going to purchase at the till and walked out of the shop crying quietly'

TRYING A PRODUCT IN-STORE MAKES ME STAND OUT WHEN I LEAVE

Seeking advice in-store is harder for participants with lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition. Again, this is more evident among people who rate their facial difference as being more visible.

Although many people were keen to test products before buying, people sometimes worried about the 'after-effect' once they leave the store without the protection of their chosen make-up coverage:

IN THEIR WORDS:

'testers in everything so you can try it at home to see how your skin reacts, I don't want someone trying things on my face then me having to wipe it off as my face will likely be red underneath due to the rosacea'

'Whenever I want to be colour matched the sales assistants always insist on taking some of my makeup off which is in the middle of the store and I feel exposed and insecure. Then when they put makeup on so I can leave the store it's always really thin and doesn't cover the redness like it does when I do it myself so I spend the rest of the day feeling insecure my rosacea is on show.'

'I've been told by a sales assistant that was able to serve me 'Blimey, you look like you have done 10 rounds with Frank Bruno!' I turned around, left all the items I was going to purchase at the till and walked out of the shop crying quietly'

LISTEN TO ME AND DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Many highlighted the challenge of staff who assume that they must want to cover up a visible difference. Staff who listen to the customer's priorities, are friendly and empathetic (without pity) were singled out for praise.

THEY TOLD US:

'Maybe have shopping assistants assume less that if someone has a scar and they're in a makeup store it means they're there to buy something to cover it up. I might be there just to buy a blush'

'Do not assume people want to hide everything - I accept my scar have no issue showing it (but I do like to cover my acne).'

'I buy makeup as a form of art and self expression, not to coverup or hide my imperfections as they are what makes me.'

'Training for staff in how to properly apply products over scars etc and understand which products to use. If having a treatment, asking the customer where they are comfortable/not comfortable being touched, if they experience any pain upon touch and explain products/ingredients before applying to skin.'

SHOP FITOUTS DON'T ALWAYS WORK FOR ME

78% of people - including those without lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-related condition - would welcome private areas in store for beauty consultations. Discussing sensitive personal issues or trying products in a busy store can be difficult for many people. And many shoppers – both with and without lived experience of a scar, mark or appearance-affecting condition - wanted more digital tools or physical samples to try products, too.

Comments demonstrated an overwhelming preference for a little privacy in store when seeking advice, having a treatment or trying a product. Whether in private rooms or just a quiet area to the side of the store – many people felt 'exposed' in the middle of busy stores. Bright lighting and tall seating areas also made some uncomfortable.

IN THEIR WORDS:

'Having consultations or queries out in the open often on uncomfortable stools and in ear reach of others is quite overwhelming. Some privacy is appreciated and would give the feel of a 1-2-1 experience.'

'More private area for make-up trials. Lighting key thing. Doesn't need to be a private room, but something more sectioned away from the walkway'

'Having privacy spaces for consultations, would make me less anxious about coming in store to shop. My last experience I was soo nervous, uncomfortable and embarrassed trying to get a shade match. I couldn't relax or focus and had to leave.'

'She pointed it out loudly then recommended me a product that may help I understand her point of view of wanting to help but I was uncomfortable at how loud she was'

'As I am very very image conscious and conceal and the leave the house to strip back and show my scars is very hard so to do that in a private consultation area would be a game changer to seek advise'

'I have had a few discussions women my age on the brain tumour charity support group regarding facial scars, facial scar healing, and skull/forehead bone regrowth and plates post surgery and how they cover scars or if they chose to or not. I've seen no mainstream make up tips for facial scars and I'm not entirely sure how I feel about people without facial scars giving advice about it to be honest.'

Your call to action

There is a real opportunity here for a seismic shift in the way the beauty industry approaches facial and visible difference. Here are some reminders of how we can all make change to redefine beauty:

1. Embed Face Equality Training

2. Develop Specialist Advice

3. Improve Retail Environments

4. Expand Representation

5. Provide Condition-Specific Information

6. Challenge Assumptions

This is where we at Face Equality International can help

TRAINING BY THE FACE EQUALITY INTERNATIONAL TEAM

We doubt any of the findings above are hugely unexpected for you. But we suspect you might still feel anxious about 'getting it right' and saying the right thing? More so, avoiding saying the wrong thing. This is what we've found in delivering retail training so far across five Sephora UK stores along with face equality training to their head office teams.

The trick is, it's all about practice. Leading with good intentions and an openness to take someone else's lead will out shadow any awkward mishaps.

Our bespoke training for the beauty industry brings all of these findings into real life, with plenty other practicing time built in to get super comfortable with it all.

We love getting to see you all embrace our mission and become champions for face equality, so drop us a line and we'd love to come and work with you.
faceequalityinternational.org

MORE ABOUT OUR MISSION AT FEI

Face equality might seem like a niche issue, but around 1 in 111 people live with an appearance affecting condition. We don't need to convince this audience that we live in a world that prizes appearance, and so life with a facial difference can often come with barriers to thriving. Be it at school, work, or out on the street.
We run a worldwide alliance of charities and community-led groups to accelerate the global movement for face equality. Through our supportive education programme, worldwide campaigns and collective advocacy, we position face equality as a human rights issue.

We work together to ensure the global facial difference community is seen, protected and respected.

About the survey:

We were thrilled to work with Sephora UK to better understand how having a scar, mark or appearance-related condition affects the experience of shopping for beauty products and services specifically.

Our 2025 survey had over 1500 responses from customers on Sephora UK's email list. 46% of participants self-identified as having lived experience (past, current or sporadic) of a scar, mark or other appearance-related condition. Of these:

- **25%** told us their difference was very visible to others
- **37%** said it was moderately visible
- **30%** said it was slightly visible and
- **8%** said it was either not visible or that it depended on the day.

We chose not to ask for a diagnosis or description of condition, but a wide range of conditions were mentioned, including skin conditions, craniofacial conditions, birthmarks, blepharitis, hair loss, burns, weight gain, moles, ptosis, facial ulcers, facial palsy, scars and short stature.

As an organisation we tend to use the term "facial difference" to refer to a scar, mark or appearance-related condition on the face. The term "visible difference" is also often used for conditions that may impact the face, body or both. Language is always evolving and often deeply personal, and so differences in language is present throughout the survey responses.

Mindset also differs amongst responses. Some participants were positive and accepting of their conditions, and others found living with a facial difference difficult. We understand and respect that everyone's experiences are their own, they may vary between people or fluctuate over time.

In order to more deeply understand individual and collective experiences, this survey used a mixture of multiple-choice questions (where participants choose an answer from a given list) and open text questions.

The closed questions were analysed as quantitative data with help from Northumbria University. This produced statistics about the experiences and preferences of participants.The open text questions were analysed by FEI using qualitative thematic coding to make collective sense of the open text answers offered by participants. Key takeaways for the beauty industry are summarised.

While some of the answers given relate to experiences at Sephora stores specifically, the survey encompassed experiences in other beauty stores too, so the findings are industry-wide.

The Face Equality movement is a mechanism for anyone to make change. By collating and highlighting the experiences of those with facial and visible differences, we hope to ensure beauty spaces are more inclusive for all.

We are stronger together.