

The Importance of Aesthetic Leadership for Retail Shops Selling Aesthetic Products and the Role of the CEO

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ABSTRACT: Beauty retailers—covering cosmetics, skincare, fragrances, and medical aesthetics—hold a unique position in the retail landscape, as their offerings are tied to the promise of beauty, requiring store environments that embody this very idea. In these settings, elements like store layout, lighting, staff presentation, and overall organization play an immediate role in shaping customer perceptions, even before direct engagement with products. This creates a strong link between physical experience and brand perception, making aesthetic leadership essential. Rather than being superficial enhancements, sensory, symbolic, and emotional qualities become core components of business operations. For these retailers, effective aesthetic leadership enhances both customer experience and brand trust by ensuring the store atmosphere aligns with what the products represent. The article underscores the importance of this strategy and examines how CEOs can integrate aesthetic leadership into company culture to maintain consistency and authenticity across all customer touchpoints.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic leadership, retail shops, customer experience, brand trust, CEO.

INTRODUCTION

Retailers focused on appearance and self-image—such as those offering cosmetics, skincare, fragrances, medical aesthetics devices, and beauty tools—hold a unique place in the retail landscape. The products they sell make an implicit promise about beauty, and the stores themselves are inevitably measured against that same standard. A skincare shop with dim lighting, disorganized displays, or worn staff attire undermines its own offerings before any interaction with a customer even begins. In this sector more than most, the store is not just a backdrop for the merchandise; it actively shapes the customer's experience of the product. As a result, the idea of "aesthetic leadership"—an approach that places sensory, symbolic, and emotional elements at the core of organizational practice, rather than treating them as superficial additions—becomes especially significant for beauty-focused businesses. This article explores the meaning of aesthetic leadership, explains its particular importance for retailers in the beauty industry, and examines how CEOs can integrate it into their company's foundation.

METHODOLOGY

This article takes a conceptual, literature-driven approach rather than relying on empirical research. It builds on established academic and professional sources in the fields of aesthetic leadership, organizational aesthetics, sensory branding, luxury retail, and executive leadership to explore the role and importance of aesthetic leadership within retail businesses centered on beauty.

By synthesizing key theoretical insights and prior research, the article constructs a cohesive conceptual framework. It does not include original data collection, field studies, experiments, surveys, or statistical evaluation. Rather, its aim is to consolidate existing knowledge and clarify how aesthetic leadership can shape the strategic direction and internal practices of retailers whose offerings are closely tied to appearance, beauty, and sensory engagement.

Defining Aesthetic Leadership

Aesthetic leadership goes beyond simply bringing in a skilled interior designer. It represents a managerial approach that recognizes emotion, judgment, and sensory experience as valid and essential leadership tools—equal in importance to rational planning and analytical thinking, not subordinate to them. As early as 1938, organizational theorist Chester Barnard described management as fundamentally "aesthetic rather than logical," emphasizing intuition, perception, and feeling over pure calculation, even though the academic study of organizations later leaned heavily into scientific and quantitative methods (Vaill, 1989; Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007).

This perspective reemerged more explicitly decades later. In the late 1980s, education scholar Donald Duke suggested that leadership might be best understood not as a fixed set of traits or behaviors, but as an aesthetic act—something evaluated much like a performance is judged by an audience (Duke, as cited in SAGE Encyclopedia of Leadership Studies, 2023). During the 1990s, Antonio Strati expanded on this idea, noting that empathy, feeling, and intuition once played a central role in management thought, and arguing that aesthetics could offer criteria for assessing organizations that go beyond mere efficiency (Strati, 1999).

One of the most practical expressions of this concept comes from Hatch, Kostera, and Koźmiński, who observed that effective CEOs routinely use aesthetic practices—such as storytelling, dramatization, and mythmaking—in tandem with conventional managerial tasks (Hatch, Kostera & Koźmiński, 2008). In their view, leaders function simultaneously as artists, ritual leaders, and technicians—shaping meaning and fostering dedication through creativity and conviction, not just through data analysis and procedural design. More recent discussions place aesthetic leadership within the broader field of organizational aesthetics, which draws from sociology, philosophy, and arts administration. This perspective holds that judgments about beauty, appropriateness, or harmony are deeply intertwined with ethical and strategic decisions, and that organizational life is influenced as much by emotional impact and sensory experience as by formal hierarchies and systems. Leaders in this framework are seen using artistic techniques—such as staging, timing, and choreography—to engage people and assert influence (Psychepeedia, 2025).

The concept has also found relevance in care-based professions. Recent research in nursing frames aesthetic leadership as a way to restore humanity to patient care, weaving ethical, emotional, and existential concerns into practice instead of reducing caregiving to technical procedures (Moreno, 2025). The wide range of these applications indicates that aesthetic leadership is not a narrow or decorative idea, but a broader understanding of how meaning, trust, and commitment are cultivated within organizations.

Leadership for Aesthetics Retail

For a hardware store or an accounting business, strong aesthetic management may enhance operational efficiency. But for retailers focused on beauty, skincare, or aesthetic medicine, it's nearly essential to survival. Three lines of evidence clarify why.

First, the store itself isn't just a backdrop—it serves as proof of the product's promise. Studies on luxury retail indicate that consumers expect stores selling high-end beauty and fashion items to reflect premium quality through their design, reinforcing brand prestige. A well-crafted, inviting environment also encourages customers to stay longer and interact more deeply. Importantly, the store's image must go beyond surface-level attractiveness and influence the emotional and psychological aspects of the shopping experience, since perceptions of the space directly affect how products are evaluated (Shahid, Paul, Gila & Ansari, 2022). In simpler terms, when someone buys a serum promising glowing skin, they're subconsciously assessing whether the store itself appears vibrant and radiant. If it doesn't, the product's claim feels unconvincing—even before use.

Second, sensory elements aren't merely decorative—they actively shape customer loyalty. A comprehensive study of Chinese consumers revealed that five senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—play a significant role in forming a sensory brand experience, which then influences satisfaction, emotional connection to the brand, and what researchers describe as "customer lovemarks," a deep, emotion-driven loyalty surpassing rational choice. Design aspects like layout, signage, lighting, and comfort contribute to visual appeal, while product placement affects both purchase volume and category selection. Moreover, colour used in packaging and displays carries both sensory impact and symbolic meaning linked to brand identity—so the same red lipstick can appear luxurious or low-quality depending solely on how it's presented, regardless of its formulation (Zha, Foroudi, Melewar & Jin, 2024).

Third, beauty retailers operate in an environment where visual and sensory impressions are under constant scrutiny, making missteps costly. Retail research highlights that most shoppers now visit physical stores seeking inspiration rather than checking off a predefined list. As a result, brick-and-mortar locations are increasingly expected to function as experiential destinations, not just places to complete transactions—especially as they compete with the ease of online shopping (Mood Media, 2025). For beauty and aesthetics businesses, customers looking for inspiration are effectively evaluating the store's aesthetic credibility in real time, judging whether the atmosphere matches the promise on the label.

Collectively, this shows that in the beauty retail sector, weak or inconsistent attention to aesthetics doesn't simply result in a less enjoyable visit—it directly challenges the believability of the product's core claim. When leadership treats design, ambiance, staff appearance, and sensory details as secondary concerns, they inadvertently undermine their own brand message.

The Role of the CEO

If aesthetic leadership plays such a critical role in the retail of beauty and design-focused products, a logical follow-up question is who within the organization holds responsibility for it. The straightforward answer is that, ultimately, this falls to the CEO—even if daily implementation is assigned to others. The CEO shapes the overarching narrative that guides the entire company's actions. Drawing again on Hatch, Kostera, and Koźmiński's work with renowned CEOs, the executives they examined didn't hand off the creation of meaning to marketing teams. Instead, they actively engaged in storytelling, symbolic expression, and myth-building as essential leadership duties, not mere communication tasks (2008). In an aesthetics-driven retail environment, this has tangible implications: the CEO, whether directly or indirectly, defines the brand's message around beauty, personal care, or transformation—elements that are then either reinforced or weakened by every store design, employee interaction, and product presentation.

The growing presence of design leadership at the highest levels of corporate structure reflects the reality that this function can't be fully pushed down the hierarchy. Studies on the rise of chief design officers (CDOs) show that design has evolved from a narrow, product-specific concern into a strategic force embedded near the top of decision-making. Today's CDOs help shape brand direction, drive innovation, and craft customer experiences in a unified way, going well beyond surface-level visuals like logos or packaging (Greene, 2025). Observations from industry analysts also highlight that publicly listed companies emphasizing design significantly outpaced general market performance between 2005 and 2015—a success attributed to design leaders aligning aesthetic choices with business efficiency (Grokikipedia, 2026). Regardless of whether an aesthetics retailer formally appoints a CDO, the principle

remains: treating design and visual consistency as secondary often leads to weaker financial results, while CEOs who position design at the heart of strategy typically see stronger outcomes.

In practice, many leaders in the aesthetics sector already embrace this expanded role. Bob Rhatigan, CEO of Merz Aesthetics—one of the world's leading medical-aesthetics companies—is widely acknowledged for his influence in aesthetic leadership. His public role emphasizes building trust and credibility across a range of appearance-related products, demonstrating how, in this field, a CEO's personal reputation becomes closely tied to the brand's perceived authenticity and aesthetic integrity (Merz Aesthetics, 2023). The CEO's role, in practice, centers on several consistent responsibilities:

1. Establishing the aesthetic standard as essential, not optional. Since the store environment serves as tangible proof of the product's promise, cutting design and atmosphere expenses during tough times weakens the very foundation that supports the brand's premium pricing.
2. Supporting a chief design or creative officer—or stepping into that role directly in smaller organizations. These leaders are increasingly seen as vital for turning creative vision into measurable business results and aligning departments like marketing, product, and operations, which might otherwise develop conflicting visual and sensory approaches (Hein, 2023). In a small aesthetics-focused retailer without a dedicated design leader, the CEO naturally assumes this unifying function.
3. Embodying personally the brand's aesthetic values. Aesthetic leadership recognizes that a leader's appearance, demeanor, and presentation contribute to organizational performance (Psychepedia, 2025). Therefore, a CEO of a beauty or skincare brand who appears careless about personal presentation subtly signals that the company doesn't fully respect its own core mission.
4. Ensuring consistency in sensory and emotional experience across all customer interactions—whether it's packaging color, lighting in stores, or staff attitude. Research indicates these elements work together to build brand attachment and loyalty, rather than functioning in isolation (Zha et al., 2024). Allowing one element, such as online packaging, to sharply differ from the in-store experience can disrupt the cohesive brand narrative the company aims to convey.
5. Viewing employees as integral to the aesthetic experience, not merely as implementers. Studies on sensory branding highlight that staff empathy influences how customers perceive sensory elements (Zha et al., 2024), meaning that a CEO's focus on training and workplace culture directly enhances the shop's perceived aesthetic quality, regardless of physical design.

Tensions and Limits

Aesthetic leadership faces both criticism and practical challenges, which a fair assessment should recognize. Leadership studies have historically grappled with abstract and difficult-to-measure ideas, and some skeptics argue that introducing "aesthetics" into leadership theory doesn't necessarily result in a more precise or testable concept (SAGE Encyclopedia of Leadership Studies, 2023). In practice, measuring the tangible benefits of design choices remains a real challenge—even for organizations committed to the idea—because aesthetic value resists straightforward translation into financial indicators (Hein, 2023). For retail stores offering beauty, skincare, cosmetics, or similar "aesthetic" products, leadership centered on visual and sensory appeal is essential. The success of such business hinges on the customer's experience of how products and environments look, feel, and function. It falls to the CEO to translate this aesthetic vision into a unified strategy, organizational culture, and tangible business outcomes (Harvard Business Review, 2023).

There is also concern that the term "aesthetic leadership" may be co-opted as a trendy buzzword for standard branding efforts, rather than reflecting the deeper, more rigorous practice envisioned by its early proponents. A CEO seeking the advantages of aesthetic leadership without committing to the substantial effort of redefining organizational meaning, presentation, and sensory experience is likely to invest heavily in surface-level aesthetics while achieving minimal improvement in customer trust.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The article highlights that aesthetic leadership plays a critical role in retail sectors focused on beauty-related products, including cosmetics, skincare, fragrances, medical aesthetics devices, and beauty tools. In these industries, the physical store is far from neutral—it serves as a direct reflection of the brand's promise.

Customer perceptions are shaped by multiple factors:

- Initial impressions are strongly influenced by store layout, lighting, cleanliness, and how staff present themselves.
- Sensory aspects—such as visual design, sound, scent, texture, and color—play a key role in shaping brand experience and fostering customer loyalty.
- Modern consumers increasingly expect retail spaces to offer immersive experiences, not just transactional services.
- In beauty retail, any mismatch between what the product promises and what the store delivers can damage the brand's credibility.

The article further emphasizes that the CEO bears primary responsibility for integrating aesthetic leadership across the organization. This involves defining aesthetic standards, backing strong design direction, personally embodying brand values, maintaining consistency across all customer interactions, and recognizing employees as integral to the overall sensory experience.

These insights indicate that aesthetic leadership goes beyond surface-level decoration—it is a strategic imperative in beauty retail. Since customers evaluate both product and environment, leadership choices regarding design and atmosphere directly influence trust, loyalty, and how authentic the brand appears.

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Moreover, the article argues that aesthetic leadership cannot be fully outsourced. Even when creative teams manage execution, the CEO must define the brand's core identity and ensure that aesthetic decisions align with broader business objectives. In this way, aesthetic leadership becomes embedded in corporate culture, extending beyond mere visual styling.

At the same time, the article acknowledges challenges. Measuring the impact of aesthetic leadership can be difficult, and the concept risks becoming an empty term if not connected to real organizational transformation. Nevertheless, the central argument stands: in beauty retail, overlooking aesthetics undermines the fundamental value the company offers.

CONCLUSION

For retailers offering aesthetic products, the store environment and the products themselves aren't separate elements—they form a unified message to the customer. Any disconnect between the two is sensed quickly, even if not consciously. Aesthetic leadership provides a framework and practical tools to align them by positioning emotional impact, presentation, and sensory consistency as essential leadership duties, not just superficial touches added later. Research in sensory marketing confirms this isn't merely about personal preference: poorly executed atmospherics have a measurable negative effect on customer loyalty and satisfaction, while thoughtfully designed experiences significantly enhance them. Although much of this work can and should be handled by design or creative teams, studies of successful business leaders show that the CEO cannot entirely delegate the foundational role—defining the brand's narrative, ensuring consistency at every customer interaction, and personally reflecting the standard the brand promises. In an industry centered on beauty, a CEO who overlooks this responsibility isn't ignoring a small operational detail—they're undermining the core premise of the business itself.

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