

Emma puts a beauty expert in a mobile app

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Nannearl Brown and Nicole Hollis both attended USC, and they have backgrounds in technology. Photos by Jason Lewis

By Jason Lewis

Nannearl Brown and Nicole Hollis are extremely tech savvy, and they used their abilities to launch a tech company that helps women, specifically women of color, find their holy grail of beauty products.

The two entrepreneurs created the mobile app Emma Beauty Expert, which helps women select beauty products that will work well with their hair and skin.

“The app is based on artificial intelligence,” Hollis said. “It’s used to help all women find the best beauty products for their needs. A lot of times when you look at recommendations from magazines, everything is usually geared toward a European standard of beauty, but they are never talking to Black women. Our app is created for all of us to be able to find things that will make us look more beautiful without the trial and error that leaves us disappointed and frustrated.”

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Hollis points out that there are billions of beauty products on the market, and since there is no one size fits all when it comes to hair and skin products, it's difficult for women to find the right products that will fit their individual needs. This is especially true for Black women.

“The app is designed for all women, but as Black women, we understand our needs, and that beauty is very local and cultural,” Hollis said. “We are making it for all women, because all women have their challenges, but we are absolutely putting our hearts and our experiences into what we know Black women need.”

While at a beauty supply store, women can scan a product’s barcode into the mobile app and they will get a recommendation on the product. The app can save women time and money, as they will be steered away from products that will not work for them.

“We’re always searching for what is going to work better, have longer lasting results, and maybe is a little cheaper than the last thing you bought,” Hollis said. “So there is always a search in improving what you’re already doing. But what happens is that if you don’t have guidance and you end up with this pile of stuff, some of it is just collecting dust. We’re trying to help women make that pile smaller with products that are really working.

“When you get home and try a new product, that’s the first time that you get any sense of whether or not it’s something that you would want. If you hate it, you’re kind of stuck. If you have the Emma app, you can scan it at the store and get a prediction of whether or not it’s going to work out for you. So that will save you time and money.”



As a tech startup, Emma Beauty has been successful in it's early stages. One of many ways that Brown and Hollis are working to grow their business is by attending tech conferences, especially conferences that are designed for people of color. They have attended Plug In South L.A.'s Urban Tech Connect, which was held at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center, and they attended AfroTech, which is held in Oakland.

"If you're interested in design or development, they have specific tracks where you can learn the 101 stuff, such as getting started in development," Brown said. "They have other tracks that talk about entrepreneurship and raising funding."

Brown and Hollis have also performed user testing at Vector90, a tech co-working space and incubator in South Los Angeles.

Brown and Hollis have an angel investor, and they have entered pitch contests to raise more funds. Recently they participated in the Convoz app pitch contest. Convoz is a video discussion app that was created by hip hop artist and tech investor Chamillionaire.

Brown and Hollis' backgrounds have helped them succeed. Hollis is from Los Angeles, and she attended USC, where she earned a bachelor's degree in communications. Her father is a mathematician, and her mother works in information technology, so Hollis was heavily influenced to enter the tech industry. She has also worked in corporate sales, as she has worked for cosmetics companies such as L'Oreal. Hollis named the company after her 97 year old grandmother, Emma, a former beauty professional.

Brown is from Virginia, and she has a background in system engineering and management consulting. She earned a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Virginia in engineering science and systems engineering, respectively. She also earned a master's degree from USC in nonprofit leadership and management with a focus in social entrepreneurship. Brown chose to join Emma Beauty after graduating from USC because of her desire to remain in tech while making a positive social impact and because of the company's mission to help all women feel their most beautiful. She feels strongly that beauty is a source of empowerment for women and technology gives her the opportunity to impact millions of lives at once. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the National Society of Black Engineers.

The beta version of the Emma Beauty Assistant app can be downloaded from the Apple App Store. The Emma technology will also be available to beauty e-commerce websites later this summer through the Shopify platform. For more information, visit their website at www.emmabeauty.co and follow them on Instagram.