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ethnographic research

# Creating beauty at the base of the pyramid

## Brazilian hair care firm Beleza Natural thrives by keeping close to its roots

**D**uque de Caxias is a Brazilian city of over 800,000 just north of Rio de Janeiro city limits, right on the flight path into Antonio Carlos Jobim International Airport. Better known for its smoky petrochemical plants than for fashionable beaches, Caxias, as most people call it, is an orderly though gritty town whose working class and service economy are benefiting from Brazil's sudden surge of prosperity. Nevertheless, it is a place that Cariocas - as Rio's denizens call themselves - are likely to avoid as they speed through the city over its highways on their way to mountainside country homes. For even the most intrepid tourists, Caxias is invisible despite its Oscar Niemeyer-designed public library, which is justifiably a source of local pride.

The commercial center of Caxias features one of the most successful outlets run by Beleza Natural, a chain of beauty salons and related hair care products targeted to Brazil's women of color. More than 65 percent of Brazil's population has the wavy-to-kinky hair that reveals roots in Africa and this had always been an issue for black and mixed-race Brazilians.

That is, until Beleza Natural - which translates as "natural beauty" - began to promote products and services that gave its generally low-income consumer segments an alternative.

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### snapshot

On-site visits help researchers understand the icons and ideals used by a Brazilian hair care firm to both inspire and form a bond with its working-class customers.

“When a black woman enters a traditional salon, she feels discriminated against,” says Leila, the business school-educated sister-in-law of the company’s founder, who today heads Beleza Natural’s marketing and public relations efforts. (Note: We adhere to the Brazilian custom of using only the first name or nickname to show familiarity and admiration. For example, the country’s president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, is universally known simply as Lula.) “It’s not just a social thing but also a hair care issue.” This is the basis of Beleza Natural’s brand equity - delivering the most effective products in an environment perfectly suited to its customers’ otherwise unmet hair and beauty needs.

### **Bold challenge**

Numerous case studies have pro-

liferated in the academic literature following C.K. Prahalad’s bold challenge in his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*:

“If we stop thinking of the poor as victims or as a burden and start thinking of them as resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers, a whole new world of opportunity will open up.”

A good deal of this scholarship has described how useful and effective marketing principles can be as a tool for economic advancement among the poor. Whether on behalf of multinational corporations seeking to expand sales among what has become known as the “base of the pyramid” (BOP) or in support of indigenous entrepreneurs originating in developing segments, advocates of this approach have demonstrated that bottom-up

models of economic growth can augment or even substitute for top-down, government-driven programs.

These studies concur that citizens of modest means indeed represent a poorly-served but eager market for goods and services and they stress the importance of appropriately scaled financial, production and distribution units in product development and sales. Many also point to the advantages of engaging BOP consumers in co-creation and co-marketing of products targeted to their segment.

### **Latent power**

Beleza Natural certainly represents a model for how low-income entrepreneurs all over the world can use the latent power of the underclass to achieve marketing success. It aims to be more than a





