

WEEKEND JOURNAL

The Home Front -- details: Spa Gadgets Come Home

By Tatiana Boncompagni, The Wall Street Journal, 473 words
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AT FIRST, Michelle Mattila was a little scared of the Valentine's Day gift her husband gave her: a \$200 skin-cleansing device that uses sound waves and an oscillating brush. "I thought it was going to scrub my face off," says the order-management specialist from Memphis, Tenn. -- but a few tries later, she was hooked. "I was surprised at how good it feels."

A number of expensive new gadgets promise to mimic the results of professional facial and body treatments, using heat, vibrations and electrical shocks. Sales have been brisk. Late last year, Monaco-based Guitay released the Wellbox, a \$1,600 "tissular therapy" machine that targets cellulite. The company has sold 10,000 units so far in the U.S. and Europe; Bergdorf Goodman in New York had to institute a wait list the week of its launch. Since November 2004, buyers have picked up over 25,000 kits for the Clarisonic Skin Care Brush, which Ms. Mattila used, according to maker Pacific Bioscience Laboratories Inc. And Tyrell Inc. has sold more than 50,000 units of the Zeno, a \$225 heat-treatment acne zapper, since its U.S. debut last June.

The products follow a growing market for high-end facial skin-care creams and lotions, which expanded to \$40 million in 2005 from \$10 million in 2002, according to the NPD Group. At New York-based Bliss Spa, which added five skin-care devices to its retail inventory earlier this year, sales of devices now generate 6% of all Web site and catalog revenue, up from "negligible" last fall. "We've carried wax melters and professional tools like hair dryers for years, but until now these sorts of products haven't been available," says Claudia Ossa, a Bliss vice president. One recent addition: NuFace, a \$450 hand-held antiwrinkle device that administers low-level electrical currents.

For the most part, doctors say there's no harm in using these tools at home, but many disagree about their effectiveness. "You're not going to get the same results you would in a doctor's office, but they do deliver some benefits," says New York dermatologist David Colbert. Another New York dermatologist, Bruce Katz, is more skeptical. For the most part, he says, "people are wasting their money."

Others report bigger disasters. Mona Sappenfield, owner of the Mona Spa & Laser Center in Memphis, says she's fielded calls from customers who have big red circles on their faces from overuse of some devices. "We've had some panic situations," she says. (She recommends cold compresses.)

And some consumers are happy keeping their spa treatments at the spa. Sofia Perez has considered buying the Wellbox, but for now, she'd rather continue spending \$75 a week for professional cellulite treatments. She's afraid the machine will suffer the same fate as her electric massager, which sits mostly unused in a bathroom drawer. "Sometimes you forget you have it," says the retired pharmaceutical representative in Miami.

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