Keeping Up With Kendall Jenner

When it was announced last week that Kendall Jenner would be the new face of Estée Lauder, a coveted contract that in the past has gone to actresses like Gwyneth Paltrow and Elizabeth Hurley and supermodels like Joan Smalls, the company did not promote the news by way of the usual public-relations machine, with news releases or email blasts.

Instead, after Vogue broke the story on its website, in anticipation of a 13-page spread in the magazine, Ms. Jenner was encouraged to tell the public herself, on her own Instagram account. That post quickly garnered more than a million "likes," 50,000-plus comments and many, many heart-eyed emoji.

It was the latest plum appointment for Ms. Jenner, 19, a daughter of Kris and Bruce Jenner, and a half sister to Kim, Khloé and Kourtney Kardashian. Her seemingly meteoric rise over the last few years has taken her from a sulky minor player on the sometimes cringe-inducing but highly successful reality show "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" to a tentative career as a teenage model to the runways of the major fashion shows (Chanel, Marc Jacobs and Givenchy, among them). Along the way, she has all but redefined what it takes to become a high-profile model.

Ms. Jenner is tall, dark-haired, doe-eyed and beautiful. But so are hundreds of other girls who walk the runways of New York, Milan and Paris and thousands more who dream of one day doing so. What they don't have are Ms. Jenner's 16 million followers on Instagram, 9.1 million on Twitter and 7.3 million likes on Facebook (numbers that will surely have grown by the time you read this). Like many other 19-year-old girls, she uses these accounts to share photos of herself, her family and friends. Unlike many 19-year-old girls, she also uses them to plug her many partnerships and commercial projects.

"I think what's so exciting about her is that she has this social media influence along with a fashion credibility in a distinct way that speaks to millennials," said Jane Hertzmark Hudis, the global brand president of Estée Lauder. "There is really no one else like her out there."

Like her older siblings, with their retail stores, fragrance lines, nail polishes and more, Ms. Jenner juggles multiple brand extensions premised on her family fame. With her younger sister, Kylie, she is marketing a collection of clothes and accessories for PacSun, one of shoes for Steve Madden's Madden Girl line and a science-fiction young adult novel set in a dystopian future colony called Indra.

But the Kardashian affiliation that first brought her to the world's attention has put her on a peculiar perch: followed by millions but navigating aversion in a cloistered industry accustomed to minting its own stars, and a historically wary - but steadily warming - relationship with the Kardashian family. (Ms. Jenner's agent and several of her clients, including Ms. Hudis, claimed not to watch "Keeping Up With the Kardashians," now filming its 10th season.)

"It's definitely two different worlds. I feel like Hannah Montana. But it's fun," Ms. Jenner said, referring to Miley Cyrus's character, who navigates a double life in and out of the spotlight, on the Disney sitcom that began her career and pop stardom. (Of course, both of Ms. Jenner's worlds are squarely in the public eye.)

For modeling purposes, and with a touch of wishful thinking, Ms. Jenner prefers to go by simply "Kendall." In person, she is charming but terse, with a daffy sweetness if not necessarily the gift of gab.

When she presented at the 2014 Billboard Music Awards, she famously muffed her lines, dissolving into giggles and admitting, "Guys, I'm the worst reader." At a fitting at Marc Jacobs's office - during which a crowd of teenage girls gathered outside of the building, hoping to catch a glimpse of her - she was taken with a publicist's striking eye color. "Are those your real eyes?" she asked.

She arrived for a recent interview at her agency's office dressed model-casual: Céline slip-on sneakers, a black T-shirt and skinny pants (tag still on) by which designer she wasn't sure. They had shown up unbidden at her house, like much else, a perk not every model enjoys.

She is the first to acknowledge that she was not always interested in style. "On Season 1 of our show, I would wear, like, neon green jeans and a white polo shirt, the craziest things," she said, though in her defense, when "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" premiered in 2007, Ms. Jenner was 11 years old.

She called modeling a lifelong dream. "I would literally sit at home and have my friends take pictures of me on my little Canon camera that my mom gave me for Christmas," she said. "Obviously, the show was me being in front of a camera. It's just something that I've kind of always been around."

Initial forays into modeling were small in scale. In 2011, Ms. Jenner appeared in the New York Fashion Week show of Sherri Hill, a designer from Austin, Tex., who specializes in event and prom dresses.

Earlier that year, Ms. Jenner's appearance at a shoot of Ms. Hill's dresses had been a plot point on an episode of "Keeping Up With the Kardashians." But Ms. Jenner's role on the show had largely been as a sidekick to her scenery-chewing sisters.

With a new agency, The Society Management, specializing in high-end fashion bookings, behind her, Ms. Jenner is now working to rebrand. "We had to be very strategic and specific," she said, "to really have people take me seriously and not mess around."

The perceived divide between commercial and high fashion is so wide that, when asked whether Ms. Jenner's well-documented Sherri Hill appearance had been her New York Fashion Week debut, a Society representative declined to confirm, writing, "we recall her as still being in school during that period."

With a name like hers, fairly or not, there have been detractors for as long as there have been supporters.

"It always comes as a shock when I tell the story of how I casted Kendall," Riccardo Tisci wrote in an email about his decision to use Ms. Jenner in his Givenchy show and ad campaign. "I didn't do it because of my links to her sister or to Kanye, as everyone seems to believe. I only chose Kendall because I thought she was amazing, a striking, dark, edgy beauty, exactly the way I like them."

Even with prominent advocates, Ms. Jenner's rise was freighted with uncertainty. "Her agent was very aware that she had one shot at being a credible model," said the stylist and Love Magazine editor Katie Grand, an early champion, who in February orchestrated Ms. Jenner's return to New York Fashion Week by placing her in Marc Jacobs's show.

When The Society first asked her to consider Ms. Jenner, Ms. Grand was reluctant. "I didn't even really know who she was other than someone I thought went skiing with Harry Styles once," she said, alluding to Ms. Jenner's alleged former beau. (The rumor mill has linked Ms. Jenner to Mr. Styles, of One Direction, and Justin Bieber, among others.)

Ms. Grand said her first reaction was "underwhelmed." Ms. Jenner's shyness can read as standoffish, and she is still developing the presence that can distinguish a top model. Even today on the runway, she can often blend into the endless parade of willowy but indeterminable young women, without the identifiable prowl of a model like Karlie Kloss, or the seasoned charisma of one like Naomi Campbell.

Ms. Jenner's agent begged for one more appointment. On a follow-up visit, Ms. Grand found her less shy, more spirited and ambitious. "There's lots of people that I've worked with at a time before they kicked into the fashion world or fashion consciousness," she said. "Marc is very aware of that, because we've worked together for so long. He kind of humors me a bit. It's always a bit of an eye glaze and 'Really? Are we really going to do that?' "

They did. Mr. Jacobs, initially skeptical, came around, largely because, Ms. Grand said, "she looked really good in the clothes." The reaction, thanks in no small part to the look Ms. Jenner wore - which included a breast-baring, sheer top - was immediate. "I was in a car on the way to the airport immediately after the show to go to London," Ms. Grand said. "I was just looking through Twitter and it was everywhere. I think I didn't really realize it would be such a thing."

But despite the ensuing cacophony (not only from fashion blogs, but also The Daily Mail, Fox News and more), Ms. Jenner kept a limited schedule that season, walking only for Mr. Jacobs, Mr. Tisci, Giles Deacon in London (another Ms. Grand client) and Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel.

More followed. She appeared in Chanel's Couture show in July and on the cover of Ms. Grand's Love Magazine. During the Spring 2015 season in September, she expanded her show list to add Diane von Furstenberg, Tommy Hilfiger and Dolce & Gabbana, among others. She is one of a handful of models in the new Karl Lagerfeld spring ad campaign, and is said to be in spring ads for Marc Jacobs as well. (Michael Ariano, a representative for Marc Jacobs, said he could neither confirm nor deny this.)

Although she said she was happiest to go unrecognized at castings and shows - even, in one case, being asked by a makeup artist, "Did you know Kendall Jenner is here?" - the media has noted her every appearance, and stoked rumors.

In Touch Weekly reported that other models, threatened by Ms. Jenner's ascendancy, taunted her by putting out cigarettes in her drink. (Ms. Jenner's representatives dispute this.) OK! Magazine splashed a runway shot and a photo of a weeping Kim across its cover under the headline, "Kendall: 'I'm the Hot One Now!' "

There are those in the industry who resent the intrusion of celebrity into the hermetic runway world, though Ms. Jenner's high profile largely ensures that they complain privately rather than publicly. Ms. Jenner is not the only model to make the leap - her friends Gigi Hadid, a daughter of the "Real Housewife of Beverly Hills" Yolanda Foster, and Hailey Baldwin, a daughter of Stephen Baldwin, have, too - but she is the most famous.

Photo

Ms. Jenner. Credit Bon Duke for The New York Times

Ms. Jenner's dual citizenship, as it were, in the realms of fashion and celebrity is a decisive factor in her appeal.

After the announcement of her Estée Lauder campaign, social media responded, both in favor of Ms. Jenner's appointment and opposed to it. "@EsteeLauder Have you lost your mind..." asked one user on Twitter. "Do you really understand your customer base... Where did you pluck Kendall Jenner from"?

But its executives know both who their customers are - in the United States and Europe, women as close to Kris Jenner's age as to Kendall's - and who they hope new ones might be. According to data provided by the company, on the Saturday of the announcement, EstéeLauder.com received six times the number of unique visitors as on an average Saturday. Within 48 hours of the announcement, 90 percent of visitors to the site were first-timers, 71 percent viewing the site on a mobile device.

"It speaks volumes to where we are right now in terms of nontraditional media," said Chris Gay, the general manager of The Society, of the Estée Lauder campaign. "Millennials are not into traditional media. How they're getting their media is completely fractured."

As models have gone from muses to marketing partners, their social presences, global reach and audience engagement have become a more important part of their appeal. "There's no Q ratings for models," Mr. Gay said, referring to Q Scores, a measurement of consumer awareness of and favorability toward brands, characters and personalities. "That was never part of the equation. But now you have real analytics."

(The Q Scores Company does in fact track a number of models. Ms. Jenner has an awareness percentage of 33 among the general population, which puts her in line with actresses like Kerry Washington, and only 2 percentage points below Gisele Bündchen, the world's highest-paid model. Her Q score, measuring the percentage of respondents who called her one of their favorites, is 10 to Ms. Bündchen's 13.)

Ms. Jenner's friend Olivier Rousteing, the creative director of Balmain, depended less on analytics than personal experience when he decided, after spending time with her at Kim Kardashian and Kanye West's wedding, to cast her in his spring show. But he was not insensitive to the pull she exerts on young women worldwide.

"She's really communicating to a lot of girls," he said. "You know, like those models in the 90s, Claudia, Naomi - young girls were dreaming of being a model. I think Kendall is bringing these things. Girls are dreaming about how to be her."

Ms. Jenner did not care to parse the various interpretations the world has offered on her rise.

"Some people are hesitant with me, and they just worry or wonder for a second," she said. "But then when the chance gets taken . ..."