



Why Babba Rivera Wants to be in Charge of the Concept and the Execution

She helped launch Uber in her native Sweden, then served as Away's Director of Brand Marketing before opening her own marketing agency. There, she learned the limits of being a consultant (good ideas without good execution are meaningless), and decided to focus her efforts on something she could lead from beginning to end. Babba shares how her journey led her to found Ceremonia, a clean hair care line rooted in Latinx heritage, and the pitch that earned her a \$10 million Series A.

Alicia Menendez: Babba Rivera spent the early part of her career working for startups. She helped launch Uber in her native Sweden, then she worked at Away in New York City, all before launching her own marketing agency. Once Babba realized she wanted to be in charge of something from concept to execution, she got to work figuring out what it was she wanted to be in charge of and where there was a need. That process led her to launch Ceremonia, a clean hair care brand for Latinas. We talk about beauty as a form of self-care, unique experience of being a Chilean raised in Sweden and immigrating to the United States, and the importance of focus grouping every product.

Babba, my girls love you, so thank you so much for doing this.

Babba Rivera: Oh, I'm so excited. Thanks for having me.

Alicia Menendez: Your mom is a beauty queen, your dad a hairdresser. What were the lessons you were receiving about beauty growing up?

Babba Rivera: So many. I think most importantly though, I feel like I grew up with a very healthy approach to beauty. In my household, we practiced beauty as a form of self-care and a form of self-love. My dad was a hairdresser back in Chile, but I grew up in Sweden. So when he immigrated there, due to the language barrier, he was never able to get a job in the field. But that didn't prevent him from spending a lot of time practicing his passion for hair on me, and I have so many fond memories of receiving scalp massages from him, and hour long sessions of braiding my entire hair. And my mom, she had this interesting approach to beauty where, we didn't have a lot of money growing up so we would buy whatever hair mask or shampoo, conditioners and stuff at the grocery store, but my mom would then boost them with oils from our kitchen.

Now looking back, it really set the foundation for this relationship that I have to beauty today, which is about nurturing myself and doing it as a form of self-love versus self-hate. Because there's so much of beauty today that is about changing who you are, and I think from my parents, I really learned that beauty was about enhancing who we are and not the other way around.

Alicia Menendez: Growing up Chilean in Sweden, I have heard you talk about the pressure to assimilate. Can you give me a story or a specific example of a time growing up when you felt that pressure?

Babba Rivera: I think I learned early on that I was different. I was the only one with black hair in my class, and I had hair on my arms and my legs, and all these sorts of things that most Swedish young girls did not have to deal with. And my hair was also thick and frizzy, so I was not able to just step in and out of the shower and call it a day. So I subconsciously started on this journey of assimilating. I don't think it was like a strategy, it was just this... I think when you're fed a certain message over and over again, your body starts to compute it and starts to believe it, and I think I had a limiting belief that good hair equaled straight, thin, blonde hair. I started straightening my hair and I started bleaching my hair, and I did this for over a decade. So yeah, today, I've been on a journey of dismantling a lot of these limiting beliefs, and also on a journey of rebirthing my natural beauty.

Alicia Menendez: In your early twenties, you were a part of the team that launches Uber and Stockholm. You're working on the marketing side, and you hit this moment, and I've never heard it articulated quite the way that you articulate it, but I think it's a pretty common experience, which is that you want to be closer to where the decision-making is happening. What did it take to propel yourself from what was already a pretty successful career into that next phase where you could actually be in a position to be making decisions, or at least be in proximity to the people who are making those decisions?

Babba Rivera: Yeah, so I was super early on at Uber and I was definitely hired on potential, and they got a bit of a heart attack when they realized I was 22. In Sweden, you're not allowed to ask for age in the interview process. So it was something they had to learn after the fact. But as I poured myself into this job, everything I didn't know, I compensated with effort. What I did not have an experience, I compensated in with effort and passion, and it came to a point where I started to really grow into the role and master it. And then I realized I got bored, and I realized that for me, I am really meant to be in a growth phase. I am a student of life. I don't think I will ever get tired of learning new things. And that's when I started to feel this urge to get closer to the HQ where actual strategy was being set in place and not just execute on the strategy.

Alicia Menendez: You launch your own marketing agency and you very quickly learn something that I also learned, which is I did not like consultant life. I did not like having multiple clients, all of whom thought they were the only client. And I didn't like the idea that I could give feedback, but then it was feedback that you could take or you could leave, and I had to proceed along with you on the journey, regardless of how that were to shake out for you. Do you remember the moment or the experience where you thought, "I understand why I started this, but this is not the thing."?

Babba Rivera: Yeah, I relate to what you're talking about so much because for me, a huge realization was how much lies in the execution. Ideas are only worth so much, but if they're not executed correctly or they're diluted, they're actually worthless. And that was the success with Uber. We were so good at execution and I learned a lot of my operational skills from my time at Uber because Uber was not a place of participation trophy. No one got a gold star for having an idea. People got praised for actually doing the work. And when you're in an agency setting, there's only so deep you can go with each client because ultimately you're hired for a certain scope and then, to your point, they take it or they leave it, or they take it, but they do it in a different way, and then it did not gain the same results.

So it was this ongoing frustrations that led me to this idea of what if I controlled something end to end? What would be something that would excite me to wake

up every day and work on tirelessly? And it embarked me on this research journey, and I played around with so many different ideas, but one that just really stuck with me-

Alicia Menendez: Wait, wait, wait.

Babba Rivera: Okay.

Alicia Menendez: I want to hear about some of the ideas that got left on the wayside.

Babba Rivera: I have a huge passion for fashion and everyone would always assume that I was going to do a fashion brand or I was going to do an eyewear brand because I used to work in eyewear and I love suits, but I love fashionable suits. I had this idea of doing a fashion brand that was really focused on only suiting and empowering the Latin American craftsmanship. So having all the factories in Latin America and making the factory workers be owners in the business, a little like Ben & Jerry model, which I still think, as a customer, I'm waiting for someone to start this because we need a really cutting edge suit brand. But the reality is, I did not want to go in fashion. I felt that just in my gut. I was like, "Oh, it's such a crowded space." And then my husband was like, "Well, what are some other industries where there is some crossover interests that are not fashion?" And beauty came up, and my immediate reaction was that actually beauty is also super crowded. And then I corrected myself.

I was like, "Beauty's super crowded in one area." There is a new serum launching every day. As someone who receives a lot of press mailers and packages, I get a new skincare brand introduced to me every other day. And I started to ask myself, as I had all these serums in front of me, that were all probably amazing serums for your face, but I only had one face, right? I was like, "Where are these exact botanical solutions, but for my scalp and hair?" And that's where Ceremonia was born.

Alicia Menendez: Part of your research that you just referenced was a deep dive on the Latina consumer. What do we need to understand about ourselves as consumers and the way that we are, I would argue, and I think you would agree, ignored in the market?

Babba Rivera: Hispanics, for some reason, just keeps being the forgotten category and that wasn't sitting right with me. And I felt this as a agency founder myself too, wherein I would be in conversations with our clients, it was not even a consideration. And when the Hispanic consumer would come up in conversations, the expectation or assumption was always that, oh, but that's a low income demographic. They shop at bulk. They don't understand luxury, they don't care about sustainability. That's my favorite one. I'm like, "Guys, Latinas are the OG sustainability queens. My mom has never thrown out a single ice cream pack. Those are now Tupperware and we store all sorts of thing in those." So there is just this insane misconception around who the Hispanic demographic is and that fueled a lot of my research where I was like, "I have a feeling it's different from what investors and retailers think, but I have to prove it because I can't just be talking out of my gut, right? I need to show the data." And my findings were incredible.

Alicia Menendez: Unpack that for me. What was it you were doing in order to seed the data that you knew you needed, to do what we'll talk about next, which is to raise \$10 million in a Series A?

Babba Rivera: So I started by looking at just the US demographic as a whole, and I found that, this stat is probably no news to people, but almost 20% of the US population are Hispanics. So we are the largest minority group in the United States. In addition, we are also the fastest growing minority in the US. We're expected to reach 30% of the US population within the next 10 years. It's also the youngest median age demographic, which tells you something about the future, right? 65% of all Hispanics in America were born here. So we're no longer talking about immigrants, actually. We're talking about the second generation or the third generation, and these are people that have gone to school here. They have preferences just like everyone else. They have spending power just like anyone else.

So I coupled that with some beauty specific stats, which are also fascinating. Hispanics are obsessed with beauty. We're actually willing to spend a larger ratio of income on beauty. Hispanics spend about 46% more on haircare products than non-Hispanics. And I just looked back at my parents' household, they barely had any money, and even when my friends would come over to visit, my dad would put on these scalp oils and my mom would put oils in the hair mask, and my friends felt like we were having a spa day. And I thought that was normal until I went to their home and I saw that they all shared these jumbo size two-in-one family pack shampoo situation. And I was like, "Oh, okay. That's weird. They make so much more money than us, why do they all share this one jumbo size thing?" So the Hispanic demographic is super powerful in the beauty industry and the biggest minority, fastest growing. This is the time.

Alicia Menendez: Talk about controlling something end to end. A big part of that is finding the funding for the thing you hope to control if you're not able to self-finance. What surprised you most in the course of raising your \$10 million Series A?

Babba Rivera: Lack of information. We are the fabric of this country, and somehow that has completely passed by most investors, or they think they know, but they think it needs to live at CVS and be priced at \$2, or they think that because there is one brand already that need has been covered. And I actually had a conversation with one investor where I asked him what car he drove and he said, "Oh, a Mercedes, so why?" And I was like, "Oh, is it because you have special needs? Is your body composition a very specific one that you need a Mercedes?" And he said, "What do you mean?" And I was like, "This is what you are asking me about the Hispanic demographic. You're asking why do they need a brand?" I'm like, "Why do you need a Mercedes? Why can't you be in a Nissan? It's called preference. We have the right to have preferences and we have the right to have more than one option on the shelf, and more importantly, we deserve to have shelf space that represents the fabric of the country."

Alicia Menendez: Your product is also so beautiful. It's like art on the shelf to me. You come at this not as someone who has expertise originally career-wise in beauty, but rather as someone who has expertise in marketing and in direct to consumer products. What then has the learning curve been at Ceremonia?

Babba Rivera: Huge, and that's what I love about it. I feel like, so I'm only 32, but I feel like started over in my career so many times. I first built my career in the eyewear industry and then I went to tech. What is that? A huge jump from eyewear. And I feel like in many ways I'm doing that again now, and what I'm realizing is that you have to

have a self-awareness for the things that you don't know and know when to seek expert advice.

So you have to apply a system thinking and applying learnings from one industry to another, and I think that's the most powerful thing you can do because that's usually when you're able to innovate, when you bring a new perspective. And it's been quite difficult, to be honest, to hire for our brand because, as much as I value beauty expertise, I also found that there are some people that have only been in beauty and all they know is the one playbook that they learned at Estee Lauder in 1900, '92. And that's pre-TikTok, pre-Black Lives Matter, pre-pandemic. So channel expertise is important, but you also need to know when to apply it and when to forego it in order to innovate.

Alicia Menendez: Babba, I'm not telling you anything you don't know about the fact that, while you have recognized this void in the market, there are others who have also recognized this void in the market, specifically haircare and then haircare aimed at Latinas. Thus, part of it becomes not just the integrity of the product itself, the branding, but also the community then that supports the brand, that becomes integral to the work. How have you done the work of building community around the Ceremonia brand?

Babba Rivera: Because the mission with Ceremonia has been to increase representation and really create a platform to share the richness of Latin culture with the world, I knew from the get-go that I needed Latinas around the table. So even before we had our first product, before we even had a name for the company, by the way, I started inviting Latinas into different focus groups.

Fast forward to today, this is now a huge part of our product development and go-to-market strategy. Before we launch any product, we send early samples directly from our lab to our community of 350 community members. They give us feedback, they try them, they ask questions. We see results on them, we get their perception, and then they're part of iterating on the formula with us. And I think that's such an important part in the beauty industry that's been missing, because many times these products that are aimed to be targeted towards us Latinas had nothing to do with us behind the scenes. So for us, it's really been about bringing the community into the lab with us and make sure that we're creating the products that they want and need, and making sure we're then delivering the results that they're expecting.

Alicia Menendez: So smart. I love that so much. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Babba Rivera: Thank you so much. It was so inspiring, and I love all the work that you do.

Alicia Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode.

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