

# SheaMoisture CEO Cara Sabin isn't just marketing to Black consumers—she's investing in them

## At the Fast Company Innovation Festival, the Sundial CEO shares what it's like to be a Black executive in the beauty industry.

The beauty industry is changing. It's still a breeding ground for creativity and artistry, but it's also more socially aware than ever before, thanks to consumers who are demanding more from the brands they know and love.

Shoppers today respond to brands that are socially engaged—and whose leadership understands their concerns, says Cara Sabin, CEO of Sundial Brands, a leading maker of skincare products for Black consumers with a portfolio that includes SheaMoisture, Nubian Heritage, and Nyakio. “For businesses to really future-proof themselves,” she says, “it’s going to be a requirement: [They] have to reflect their consumer base.”

During a panel at the [Fast Company Innovation Festival](#) on Tuesday, Sabin spoke with *Fast Company* senior editor Amy Farley about being a Black executive in the beauty industry and her current role leading a company that engages with Black consumers.

Before becoming CEO of Sundial, Sabin held positions at Clinique, Nars, Neutrogena, and L’Oreal haircare. “From code-switching to imposter syndrome, I came up in an age where it was normalized for people of color to almost compartmentalize their differences in a way to assimilate,” she said, reflecting on her career. “What is different [today] is that I lead with my difference.”

Sabin’s tenure at Sundial came during a difficult time. She joined the company in December 2019, just a few months before the world went into quarantine and before the protests over the murder of George Floyd put racial justice in the spotlight.

She responded by leaning into SheaMoisture’s long-standing “community commerce” model, which aims to bring economic independence to local communities by investing in them. Since its cofounding in 1991 by Liberian refugee Richelieu Dennis, SheaMoisture has worked closely with women-led cooperatives in Ghana, where its ingredients are grown. (SheaMoisture grew into Sundial Brands before being acquired by Unilever in 2017.) It also invests in Black communities here in the United States—a priority for Sabin amid the pandemic.

While COVID-19 impacted small businesses across the board, Black-owned businesses were hit the hardest, and many had to close their doors permanently. To help, Sundial launched a million-dollar COVID-19 relief fund to support Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs.

“We saw the impact of COVID on communities, businesses, and the health [of] our community,” Sabin said during the festival. “We pivoted some of our programs so that we could support entrepreneurs during this time, and there are over a hundred new businesses that we have brought into the fold through [the New Voices] Fund.” In addition, SheaMoisture is providing funding for [Shots at the Shop](#),

a partnership with the White House in which barbers and stylists are trained to address vaccine hesitancy among their customers.

Sabin discussed what it's like to lead a formerly Black-owned business that's now part of Unilever. When Sundial was acquired in 2017, some people believed that the 30-year-old, family-owned brand was selling out. The acquisition came on the heels of a [misguided SheaMoisture ad campaign](#) that featured mostly white women—and led to accusations of whitewashing. Last summer, the conversation emerged again, when people looking to support Black-owned brands discovered that SheaMoisture, technically, wasn't one.

“I welcome that conversation,” Sabin said. “I think it's important for us as a community to really establish” where generational wealth can come from. “It can come from entrepreneurship. It can come from the maturation of that business [and] it being acquired, and then reinvesting those funds in other areas that can make an impact.” She noted that Dennis has used the proceeds from his sale to Unilever to acquire [Essence](#) and launch ventures like the [New Voices Foundation](#), which invests in women of color entrepreneurs.

Sundial Brands is further putting its money back into the community that it serves. Last fall, SheaMoisture launched a new ad campaign, [It Comes Naturally](#), to reintroduce the brand—and reiterate its focus on Black consumers by highlighting the work of Black women creatives.

“We were developing and producing this [campaign] in the middle of COVID, so we couldn't do live action. Instead, we commissioned six incredible artists and illustrators,” Sabin said. “Through their work, we were able to tell the story of the impact that Black women have made on the world.”

The campaign was cocreated by BBDO and [Joy Collective](#), a Washington, D.C.-based agency with a Black female founder, and features Black women behind the scenes, “from the copywriter and voice-over [artists] to the music composer,” Sabin said.

While many mainstream brands played catchup during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and tried to demonstrate their commitment to racial equity, SheaMoisture has had a decades-long head start.

“If I take my business hat off and I'm just a consumer, there was a lot of performative allyship that was going on, and a lot of promises that were made,” Sabin said. “I think many people want to know, are you holding true to those commitments?” She's on a mission to show consumers that Sundial has.