

A GOOD HAIR DAY

Blow dry is what gets noticed

PAWEL DWULIT/TORONTO STAR

Bad news for the economy is good news for salons, especially those that have set up blow-dry bars. Clients are welcoming the 'affordable luxury'

Feb 05, 2009 04:30 AM
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Do bad times bring on good hair?

Could be.

Some salon owners are blown away that January, traditionally a flat month in the hair biz, has been curiously busy. And others are cashing in on the trend to blow-dry only bars, a concept that comes to Toronto by way of mane-manic New York, London and L.A.

"If you are looking for a job, you are not going to stop spending on your appearance," declares John Donato, who runs salons at Square One and Yorkdale Shopping Centre. Donato claims a "very strong January" both in salon and spa services. "My spa does really well when people are not going away because they are treating themselves. And even if you are unemployed, are you giving up having your colour done? No way."

"My clients may not be travelling, and they may not be picking up a new outfit, but they are here getting their hair done," says veteran stylist Robert Gage, whose salon is at 14 St. Joseph St.

Gage admits, "nobody who comes here works at GM." But he points out that many of the surgeons, judges and CEOs he tends to have lost massively on their investments, "including one who is down \$100 million."

But Gage isn't surprised business is brisk. "My grandparents were hairdressers here during the depression and they were quite busy. You can let your hair slide a week or two, but really, what's the point?"

Gage is also seeing another recession phenomenon – big hair.

"The Breck girl is back," he notes. "People want more hair. We're using rollers a lot more and we're doing hair that's a lot more finished. That usually happens during recessions – people want to know they are getting their money's worth."

That may explain the rise of the on-demand blow dry. The luxury of no bad hair days, ever, was once reserved for the Anna Wintours of the world. But the advent of the blow-dry bar has put perennial volume, curls or pin-straight locks within the grasp of the average gal.

"It's something you want everyone to experience, not just the socialite going to the ball," says Beni Sicilia who opened the Blowdry Lounge at 1343 Yonge St. last fall. Sicilia spent years tending to the city's elite at Salon Jie and Tony Chaar salons.

"That's where I found a passion for blow dries, doing clients who attend a lot of events," Sicilia says. "Not a lot of hairdressers like to blow dry because they find it monotonous. But I find it one of the most rewarding parts of the job. It's the blow dry that people notice."

His blowouts run \$35 to \$45 depending on hair length and texture. Flat ironing or curling is extra. Cuts are available by request.

Like blow-dry bars in New York and elsewhere, hours are extended both morning and night to catch women on the way to work or dinner.

But clients also view the blowout as a cost-effective way to stretch the life of a haircut.

"If hair is being taken care of professionally, it will always look polished," Sicilia points out. "This economy is actually helping the business, because it's an affordable luxury. Women who were going for a \$65 blow dry once a week are coming here twice a week and paying \$35."

Luis Pacheco has experienced the same phenomenon at Blown. Pacheco slashed his blow-dry fee from \$60 to \$29 when he opened a blow-dry bar within Hair on the Avenue, the salon he co-owns at 112 Avenue Rd.

Clients can choose from a menu of four different looks, including the Barbara Dares, a poker-straight style named after two clients – Holt Renfrew vice-president of fashion direction Barbara Atkin, and designer Jennifer Dares. The service is performed by a blow-dry specialist trained to have clients in and out the door in 30 minutes, he explains.

Rather than spending less, Pacheco has found his clients are visiting more.

"At \$29, they can justify it even if they'll be washing it out the next day."

It's part of a general trend to keeping up appearances, he says.

"Our clients tell us we're the last thing they would give up."