

10 THINGS APRIL 30, 2012, 9:35 A.M. ET

## 10 Things Your Hairdresser Won't Say

What customers need to know to get their fair shear at the salon.

By **QUENTIN FOTRELL**



### 1. "Money grows on you."

**H**airdressing is often described as "recession-proof" because it is one of the last purchases consumers give up during tough economic times. People will wear old clothes but find it difficult to skimp on a good haircut, says Nick Arrojo, owner of Arrojo Studio in New York and former star of TV's "What Not To Wear." Indeed, despite the recession of 2008, the number of mom-and-pop hair salons increased by nearly 8% between 2008 and 2009, according to the most recent data available from the U.S. Census Bureau. And, although the U.S. economy lost 1.6 million jobs between January 2000 and 2011, salons and spas added 75,000 jobs, according to the Professional Beauty Association. "It's a very resilient industry," Arrojo says.

Consumers may cut back on their haircuts but they aren't likely to stop visiting the salon altogether, says Kathryn Hawkins, a consultant for small businesses. "Someone who might have splurged on \$200 hair color in the past might switch to a do-it-yourself option, but they are still likely to come in for a haircut, which most people view as an essential service." Indeed, hairstylists say most clients view their treatments as essentials -- not luxuries. "A woman is not going to go on a date if her dark roots are showing," says Michael Duenas, CEO and founder of hairstyling service HairRoomService.com. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that consumers will need nearly 16% more hairdressers and beauty salons by 2020.

### 2. "Your hairline may be receding, but our prices aren't..."

The Federal Reserve has worked to keep inflation low over the past year, but Chairman Ben Bernanke -- who probably doesn't need many haircuts -- doesn't seem to be having much luck with the salon industry. The cost of a men's haircut and blow dry jumped 46%, to \$42, in 2011, according to an online survey of salons published by American Salon Magazine. A women's cut rose 29%, to \$56. In comparison, U.S. consumer prices rose only 1.9% overall. What gives? Duenas says the costs of commercial rents and raw materials for dyes and other treatments have been increasing in recent years. Others point out that despite the rising prices, most hairstylists aren't raking in the dough. The average hairdresser makes an annual salary of only \$22,700, including reported tips, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Hairstylists also point to the rising popularity of big hair -- curls and waves -- over straightened styles. While prices on straightening inched up only 2% last year, adding body through treatments jumped: blow-drying soared an average of 38% for men and women, while permanent waving (for women) rose 29%. Hair extensions and weaves spiked 18%, the survey said.

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### 3. "...except when we feel like negotiating."

Some hairdressers will advertise a high price to make them look like they're in demand, but when pressed will charge a lower fee. Even hair stylists that aren't doing a brisk business may start advertising and charging higher prices to make up for low volume, Arrojo says. When it comes to styles, industry experts say consumers typically believe they're getting a better cut, from a more established stylist, when they pay more, he says.

There's good reason to negotiate, especially in a neighborhood salon, experts say. These businesses want you back again and again. According to a recent survey by Atlanta, Ga.-based direct mailing company Welcomemat Services, hair salons are the third most patronized local businesses after pizza restaurants and car washes. The typical woman client will spend between \$800 and \$900 a year on cuts, styles and the occasional dye job, reports Welcomemat. There may be room to negotiate at fancier hair salons too. Many contract with independent hairstylists who charge their own rates, then give a percentage to the salon owner, according to Hair-Salons.com. They may have more flexibility to give a discount than hairstylists who work for salons with set prices.

Others say salons keep a strict control of their pricing policies. "There is room for some maneuverability from time-to-time, but we can't do a bunch of free services," says Carlos Rogers, owner of [Hush Salon](#) in Philadelphia. Brad Masterson, spokesman for the Professional Beauty Association, says stylists may be able to alter their prices, but says most would be put off by the notion.

### 4. "The hair products are the real moneymaker."

That pyramid of shampoos, conditioners and hot oil treatments most consumers must dodge before leaving the salon aren't there for decoration -- that's where salons earn the big bucks. And hairstylists and barbers are pushing them at an increasing rate: Around 57% of salon/spa owners reported higher retail sales between the first quarters of 2010 and 2011, according to the latest industry report by the Professional Beauty Association. The sale of hair-care products hit \$1.9 billion in 2010, up 2.3% on the previous year. "It's a big part of revenue," says Jennifer Loprete, master colorist and creative director at [Vito Mazza Salon & Spa](#) in Woodbridge, N.J. "But it's also about educating clients in aftercare." Clients who buy the products, she says, are twice as likely to remain loyal customers for six years or more.

Bottles of conditioner and shampoo are obviously one way for a salon to boost the bottom line, especially when they charge more for the products than bigger retailers. But experts say there's another reason the fancy shampoos are important -- when the bottles are empty, customers will have extra incentive to make an appointment. Some salon products do contain a higher concentration of expensive ingredients like Vitamin B and avocado not found in typical drugstore shampoos and conditioners, the Professional Beauty Association's Masterson says. And the steep discounts at big box stores do prevent salons for adding too high a markup.

## 5. "A cosmetology license doesn't really cut it."

Cosmetology licenses are given out based on hours spent cutting hair, and in some states, a written examination. Skill, and style, are not required. "It's a piece of paper that gives you the opportunity to practice legally, but after that you have to find your way in the business yourself whether it's a \$10 haircut or a fancy place," Rogers says. That someone has a license is no guarantee they won't mangle your hair, Masterson says. "Experience definitely weighs more over licensing." The hours required for licensing also vary from state to state. New York requires 1,000 hours of practice, while California requires 1,600 hours. Those hours are just a fraction of what's needed for someone to have a clue when they cut, experts say. Some states also require continuing education for hairstylists. A licensed stylist may have no sense of the latest fashions and technologies, Rogers says.

To be fair, Masterson says each state sets their own licensing rules and a graduate generally works as an assistant for one to two years. But licenses are also needed so people understand other issues like health and safety and, for barbers, the proper use of blades, he says. Some states also require hairstylists to make their education an ongoing program in order to renew their licenses after a certain amount of years. "There is a lot of passion and education to learn more about your craft," Rogers says, "but it's up to the individual."

## 6. "We sometimes gossip about you behind your back."

Salon chairs, like therapists couches, inspire people to open up about their personal lives. But hair stylists have no professional duty to keep your secrets. Haircuts create a false sense of intimacy, Duenas says. "I know so much stuff that I wish I never did," he says. "One woman told me she cheated on her husband. He was in my appointment book for the following day." According to a survey by Pivot Point, a company that creates educational products for hairstyling schools, some 52% of people have been seeing the same hairdresser over three years and over 38% of all respondents admitted to discussing their relationships with their hairdresser. People don't talk to their dentist or doctor about their relationships but they do talk to their hairstylists, experts say.

The bottom line: be careful what you share. If Naz Kupelian, who owns a [salon](#) in Lexington, Ma., overhears his staff discussing a client, he tells them to stop. "Clients shouldn't share too much with their hairdresser," he says. "I have a policy that a client is a client, not a friend, so I don't want my staff to socialize with clients." But policies obviously vary. Rogers doesn't have any hard or fast rules about his staff socializing with clients or "friending" them on Facebook. And he understands people will talk: "You can't stop people from being human. We all have skeletons in the closet."

## 7. "You depend on us for way more than your hair."

Hairdressers come armed with a pair of scissors and a crimper, but their real talents lie in how they manage their relationship with clients. Gossip aside, some 81% of people in the Pivot Point survey rated their relationship with their stylist as one of the most important reasons they choose their salon, with nearly 80% seeing the same stylist each visit. Ever since a soft-skinned Delilah bobbed Samson's hair, hairdressers have wielded a largely unseen power. Dean Bakopoulos, social commentator and author of "My American Unhappiness," says he once had a terrible crush on the woman who cut his hair. "I'd do whatever she told me to do. I almost left with a spiky head of blonde highlights after one visit. I'm glad she wasn't a tattoo artist."

There's a serious side to these relationships as well. Stylists are in a powerful position when it comes to recognizing problems like domestic abuse, depression or even skin cancer by spotting a suspicious or oversized mole, says Keith Anderson, assistant professor of social work at Ohio State University. In a 2009 study which he co-authored, Anderson found that 80% of stylists said their elderly clients shared their problems and 85% of hairstylists described their relationships with older clients as close or very close. "They can recognize signs of distress and point clients in the right direction for help," he says. Already, national campaigns like "[Cut it Out!](#)" aim to help stylists be on the look-out for signs of domestic abuse. Hairdressers are not under any obligation to report cases of suspected domestic abuse, but Anderson says he is working on an online educational guide, "Carestyles," to help stylists broach the subject with customers and point them toward relevant organizations.

## 8. "We're not sorry for the delay."

There's a reason why the salon is stacked with the latest edition of Vogue. Hairstylists -- keen to squeeze in as many customers as possible -- frequently run late. The trick for many busy hairdressers is to make customers wait -- without them realizing they're waiting. When hairstylists offer an extra special shampoo or conditioning treatment that lasts 30 minutes or more, that may well be because the salon is backed up, Loprete says. "Conditioners are used commonly in that fashion," she says. "There will be no love lost by giving a healthy dose of vitamins for your hair." However, other stylists may overbook on purpose in an effort to make more money and then juggle clients and make people wait, she says. "It's common practice to overbook." Loprete says she tries to be conscious of people's time. Any wait times over 15 or 20 minutes is unacceptable, she says.

Consumers are not prepared to sit around all afternoon: 94% of people believe a wait time of 5-10 minutes is reasonable, but 74% said anything over 10 minutes is not, according to a survey released last month by Great Clips, a salon with over 3,000 outlets in the U.S. and Canada. It's no wonder. Another survey by Toa Technologies, which produces mobile workforce management software, found that around one in four Americans lost wages by waiting for appointments. "In focus group after focus group, we hear that today's busy singles and families alike are stressed out, exhausted and short on time," says Rhoda Olsen, Great Clips CEO. The salon offers an app that allows customers to check in before they arrive and -- in theory -- reduce wait times.

## 9. "We screwed up."

Good hairdressers are trained to keep a poker face, experts say, whenever the stylist's and client's eyes meet in the mirror. You won't know from their expression that they've just given you asymmetrical bangs or used a blonde dye that's too brassy, Kupelian says. If the color goes awry, stylists will "do their best to fix it in the backwash," Arrojo says -- the final wash before the customer leaves the salon. Color can be an especially expensive mistake. The average cost of permanent hair color increased 35% to \$83 per treatment, while the price of temporary hair color increased by 87% to \$62, according to American Salon Magazine. For their part, hairdressers say they try to keep their clients happy -- even if that includes a free cut. In most cases, Masterson says the stylist will offer to fix the cut/color at no additional charge. "About 99% of the time I will make the time to see clients again and fix their hair for them," Duenas says.

## 10. "We get very sensitive about clients who stray."

Hairdressers admit they take client defections personally. They "are very sensitive and very competitive," Kupelian says. Last month, one hairstylist in Atlanta, Ga. became so upset when a client went to a competitor that he reportedly marched over to the other salon and allegedly shot a bullet into his rival's wooden floor. Stylist Conwin Pledger allegedly became enraged when his client, Neffe, the sister of R&B star Keyshia Cole, headed over to the J. Spot salon for a new do. Derek J., who owns J. Spot and appears on "The Real Housewives of Atlanta," told local television news station WSTV: "I'm upset because my floor is messed up now." Pledger was arrested on charges of aggravated assault. He is still awaiting trial. Neither Derek J. or Pledger's salons returned requests for comment.

Of course, this an extreme example of how things could go wrong, typically, customers quietly change salons with little fanfare. Kupelian says he has an open policy at his salon where clients can move among stylists and doesn't take it personally if they do. "A man could have the most beautiful wife and sometimes he will still cheat. In the same way, clients disappear and come back." Rogers encourages his staff not to take it personally if customers do try out a rival and wants his clients to feel free to come back after going elsewhere. At some salons, he says, "It's very common for a stylist to look like a deer in the headlights when they see their client go somewhere else." Bakopoulos, for one, understands why someone would seek out a second opinion. "Bad haircuts -- and I've had my fair share of them -- can really depress you," he says. "When you're walking around like you're sporting a crooked toupee, like some drunken game show host, you feel totally powerless."