

cover story

JUST LIKE LAST TIME, PLEASE

WHY DOES IT SEEM LIKE THE SECOND HAIRCUT IS NEVER AS GOOD AS THE FIRST?

By Beth Teitell
GLOBE STAFF

The sophomore slump. Athletes suffer from it. Authors do, too. It strikes TV shows, bands, and college students. But hair stylists? Who knew?

And yet, it's a problem so real that stylists from Newbury Street to Southie to the suburbs not only recognize it, but also specifically train new employees to avoid it. The phenomenon strikes when a client who was thrilled with a first appointment returns a second time — and leaves disappointed. "It's a very common complaint," said Naz Kupelian, a salon owner in Lexington, and master stylist and trainer with Rusk, an international line of hair care products.

With haircuts that can top \$100, and weeks of bad hair days on the line, the situation is painful to anyone who's ever felt the high of finding The One — only to crash back to reality when the second cut doesn't measure up. Some people spend

their entire adult lives going from salon to salon in two-visit bursts. "I was a woman without a country," is how Lisa Rothman, a mother of three in Needham, describes her journey. "I was looking for my place in the world."

"It's not brain surgery," she said, baffled at the challenge hair seems to pose. "Or maybe it is." Indeed, hair is so important, and so hard to get right, that when Michelle Obama got new bangs before the inauguration, President Obama sort-of joked that her haircut was "the most significant event of the weekend."

What causes the second-cut letdown? Stylists and clients have their ideas, but first let's talk to Daniel Weiner, an associate professor of math and statistics at Boston University. A man who's gone to the same stylist for years, the professor nonetheless recognized the situation when queried, which he says can be explained by "extreme value theory."

Continued on next page



Marc Harris at one of his three Boston salons. "The challenge is maintaining that [level of attention] in the second visit," he said. "But a busy stylist can see 40 to 60 clients a week."

Continued from preceding page

"If we propose that the first time the stylist goes out of his way to do his best job for the new client, you can say after that he reverts to his normal form," Weiner said, adding a bit of wisdom for those who might be tempted to hang in there. "The probability of achieving a new maximum at a given time, when you repeatedly sample something, gets smaller and smaller."

Here's the view from behind the chair, as seen by Marc Harris, the owner of three Boston salons. The problem comes down to focus, he says. The first visit is all about the hair. Because client and stylist don't know each other, there's no chatter about bad dates or dysfunctional family members. Rather, a photo of a coveted style may be shown, bangs debated, layers discussed.

"The challenge is maintaining that [level of attention] in the second visit," he said, noting that the client may think the stylist recalls exactly what he or she did two months earlier. "But a busy stylist can see 40 to 60 clients a week."

Kupelian, the Lexington stylist, says it all comes down to training. A stylist who doesn't know proper technique may come up with a great haircut the first time, but success will be hard to replicate. "It's almost like putting a destination into your GPS," he said. "Mapping out the haircut before you start is important."

Sandy Poirier, the owner of Shag in South Boston, says many stylists — not him, but many — are one-trick ponies. "They give it all away on the first date."

But who can blame them? As Helena Cohen, owner of Ardan Medspa + Salon, in Wellesley, put it: "When a new client comes in, some hairdressers get all excited and want to totally impress them," she said.

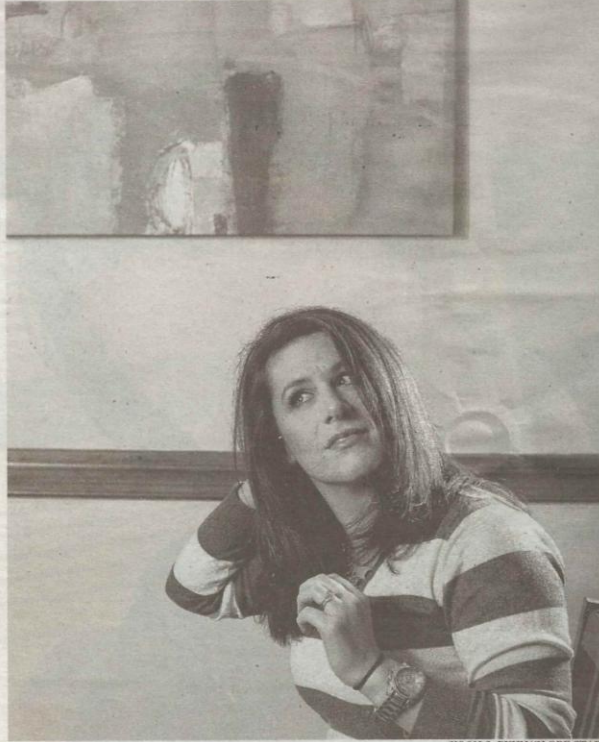
Alas, as many people in long-term (non-tonsorial) relationships know all too well, the drive to impress can diminish with time. "Sometimes [the stylist] gets into their comfort zone," Cohen said, and that can leave clients feeling ignored.

The attention gap is a problem Tabatha Coffey, host of Bravo's "Tabatha's Salon Takeover," addresses with the salons she's trying to fix. "Consistency and listening are keys to making sure clients are happy on every visit," she e-mailed the Globe.

But to borrow from Shakespeare, perhaps the fault is not with our stylists but with ourselves.

As BU's Weiner explained, the bar is lower at the first visit. "You are more likely to be pleased by whatever the heck you get if you're unhappy with your hair, which is likely since you've just switched hairdressers," he said. "But when you come back, it means you were pleased, so it's harder to re-achieve that same level of satisfaction. You are not starting from the same position."

Or, as Tiffany Anderson, 29, a high school history teacher, put it: "You get that va-va-voom moment the first time,"



YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

'You get that va-va-voom moment the first time, but then you get used to the haircut, so how can you be wowed the second time around? . . . I don't think anyone ever has perfect hair. Only Kate Middleton.'

TIFFANY ANDERSON (ABOVE),
a high school history teacher from
Jamaica Plain

she said, "but then you get used to the haircut, so how can you be wowed the second time around?"

Anderson, of Jamaica Plain, paused as she shopped at Target on a recent Sunday to consider the larger question: Is the life-changing haircut really out there — or is it a goal that remains always just out of reach? "I don't think anyone ever has perfect hair," she said. "Only Kate Middleton."

But what is perfect hair? And do we even know it when we see it? Laura Zigman, the author of "Animal Husbandry" and brunet, recalled the time she thought she got a great cut, only to catch sight of herself in the mirror. "I looked like Snape," the stringy-haired "Harry Potter" character played by Alan Rickman, she said. And her search for a stylist recommenced.

Jacqui Shultz, 37, a makeup artist from Allston, suffered a variation on the second-cut problem after visiting a high-profile Back Bay stylist. It was only after returning for the second cut that she realized she never really even liked the first one. "He was in all the magazines," she said of the hairdresser, "and everyone was telling me 'you look awesome.' But I didn't. It was too choppy. But who was I to judge his work?"

Meanwhile, as hair-related heartbreak continues, haircut customers everywhere might do well to think about this: There's only so much a hairdresser, even a great one, can do. As Shag's Poirier said, "It is hair. You've got to play the cards you're dealt."

Beth Teitell can be reached at bteitell@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @bethteitell.