

Salons trim client losses

Owners get creative to lure in customers. Some offer stimulus packages, others rely on social networking.

By Nedra Rhone
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Wednesday, June 10, 2009

It's the era of the DIY hairdo. From bang trimming and root retouching to mixing up a mash of egg, avocado and mayo as a deep conditioner, regular salon customers are cutting back on visits to the stylist in this sluggish economy.

But salons aren't letting go without a fight.

"Most salons are not losing clients, but clients are stretching time between appointments," said Stacey Soble, editor in chief of the industry publication Salon Today. "They are hurting because they are seeing those people less frequently, so it comes down to what can we do to get them in the door more often?"

How about a stimulus package? One East Coast salon offered to perform any client service for \$25 on slower days, while another offered "interview cuts" discounts for anyone unemployed who comes in for a haircut or color before a job interview.

Some salons are socially networked, said Soble, announcing via Twitter time slots for unbooked hair or nail appointments that can be had on the cheap by followers with flexible schedules.

Efforts to stimulate client visits began in earnest last year, Soble said, just around the time one Atlanta salon, Vivid, took the risky move of opening its doors.

Stylist and co-owner Liz Covin had a strong following, but she and business partner Jennifer Barry recognized the need for outreach. They sponsored a blow-out event, where 45 attendees received a free shampoo and blow-dry while nibbling treats and sipping champagne from local restaurants.

The stylists talked the women through the blow-drying and styling process and gave them advice on how to use the products they have at home. It may seem counterproductive to dole out salon secrets, but almost half the women who attended have become regular clients, Barry said.

At Vis-a-Vis the Salon, a referral program begun last year has yielded returns for owner Jeffrey McQuithy. Any client who refers a friend gets 15 percent off, as does the person being referred. "I think it is doubly important that we maintain and do it consistently," McQuithy said.

The salon recently became one of only seven in the country (and the only salon in Atlanta) to offer the shu uemura art of hair ceremony. The \$25-\$75 customized treatment is inspired by the Japanese tea ceremony and includes warming lap blankets, shiatsu massage and, of course, tea. It's just another way to add value to the salon experience, McQuithy said.

In May, Soren Loffler, owner of Soren Salon, took a more strategic approach to keep clients coming in. He extended salon hours — including Sunday. “A lot of clients that were [previously] able to come during the week such as lunchtime were now in a situation where they were like, ‘I should focus on keeping my job,’ ” Loffler said.

Sunday has since become one of the salon's busiest days. While most clients simply enjoy having more flexible appointment times, others have found an unanticipated benefit — Loffler has been quite successful linking unemployed clients with those who have positions to fill. He even gave himself a new title.

“Call me the job matchmaker,” Loffler said.