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SUCCESS STORIES

How Girl on the Go! Got Moving

The wig-service for chemo patients proved so popular, expansion offers started rolling in. Founder Sheril Cohen talks about her strategy

When cancer survivor Sheril Cohen was planning to start her in-home wig-shopping and consultation business for women undergoing chemotherapy, the former JPMorgan Chase marketing executive was met with skepticism. Mentors and business associates cautioned that such a niche business in an uncharted territory would be difficult to launch and staff -- and slow to expand.

When Cohen's initial success in New York's tri-state area proved them wrong, she intended to expand -- one day. That day arrived sooner than she anticipated, when calls starting coming in from people across the country who wanted to work for her company, Girl on the Go! (see BusinessWeek SmallBiz, Spring 2005, "[Heads, You Win](#)").

BusinessWeek SmallBiz contributor [Kate Hazelwood](#) recently spoke with Cohen about the challenges that come with managing a business that's growing faster than expected. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow.

Q: How did you convince your early critics that there was a market for your company?

A: Unfortunately, cancer is something that affects every family in every city, somehow. I wished [this service] had been available to me. It would have made a very painful process easier, more private. There was nothing like it out there.

Q: Why are you expanding so soon?

A: The first time expansion came up was in October, 2004, less than a year into the business. A woman from Canada had heard about my business and was interested in launching Canada. I spoke with her, but realized I just wasn't ready to expand yet.

Q: What was holding you back?

A: Well, for one thing, this woman -- and other people who contacted me soon after, from Pennsylvania, Alabama, West Virginia, Nevada, Missouri, and all over New England -- didn't fit the profile I had in my head of who I would hire to expand to new territories one day. I'd always thought professional wig stylists would be the ones to expand Girl on the Go.

Q: Why stylists?

A: My initial model, and the one I work under in the tri-state area, is that the stylists are the contact people with the clients. I go on many of the appointments, too. That allows me to keep costs low for clients. There are no separate territory managers, etc. I don't want to insert layers that would have to be reflected in the wig prices.

Q: So who's contacting you about expanding?

A: Mostly it's moms who used to be attorneys or social workers or the like, who left the workforce to raise their children and are looking to reenter now. I realized they might actually be a good fit, because I can't promise that anyone who opens a new territory is going to earn a salary. So if someone is in a two-income household or could balance another part-time job with this, that's great.

They're also frequently people who've been touched by cancer themselves, through a parent or a friend or relative who has dealt with it. The understanding and compassion they can bring to clients is crucial.

Q: What expansion models did you consider?

A: Briefly, we considered that the person would be the business manager of a territory they would own. They would have stylists working for them. But that had the whole rising-costs downside, so we discarded it.

Another was having national employees of Girl on the Go. But I don't want to create a new Corporate America, I just want to make peoples' lives better. If I need to expand to do that for more people, I'm excited to do that, but I can't see myself running a national company instead of working with clients and oncologists and nurses directly. That's what I do best.

With the franchise model, I could still do those things while growing the business. And my efforts would benefit franchisees, too, by boosting their profile and getting them national awareness. The franchisees, in turn, will run their company on their own, following our business standards and community standards.

Q: What are community standards?

A: Part of my philosophy is that any franchise has to give back to the medical community. All our business expenses are charged to credit cards that give 2% of case back to St. Jude's Hospital for Cancer Research. I also intend that one day we'll be able to contribute to cancer-research trials.

My business is all about service. I will not take on a franchisee who can't treat clients with the same level of compassion and care that we give them in our existing territories. That's a lot of work on our end -- interviewing prospective franchisees and their character references and work references extensively. We have to make sure they're excited about the impact they can have on others, not just about the business.

Q: What remains your biggest challenge?

A: Quite frankly, far and away the biggest is increasing awareness, letting people know this kind of service even exists. I often say that a client will not know about us until they have to. You don't file away the name of Girl on the Go so that you'll have it one day in case you need it.

A lot of our clients find us on the Internet and some find us on the American Cancer Web site -- the New York City chapter lists us. When people find out about us, they say they feel so lucky to have found out. I wish I had the funds to do advertising that would reduce the role luck plays in finding us.

Edited by Rod Kurtz

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