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BW SMALLBIZ -- FIRST PERSON

Heads, You Win

Girl on the Go! Helps chemo patients put on their public face

*In early 2000, Sheril Cohen thought she was at the top of her game, having recently been named a vice-president of branding and relationship management at J. P. Morgan Chase (**JPM**). A few months later, Cohen was found to have cancer in her lymph nodes. After suffering through 13 months of treatment, including a bone marrow transplant, Cohen has become an entrepreneur. She launched New York-based *Girl on the Go!*, which provides in-home wig consulting, shopping, and styling for women undergoing chemotherapy.*

THE DECISION

I rushed back to work as soon as my treatment was finished. Everything was the same, but I was different. My colleagues got all fired up about the minutiae of marketing materials, and I'd think: "Wow, that used to be me." I felt I could make a bigger contribution, but I wasn't sure how.

People often asked me to talk to their family members or friends who had cancer. One of the first questions people asked was: "What about my hair?" I had worried about that, too, and wondered if that made me shallow and vain. But when you're healthy, hair is just hair. When you're ill, it is something else entirely. It's the moment you take a very private struggle public.

I cautioned people about wig shopping by sharing my own experiences, which were terrible. Salespeople rushed, tried to push me around, and didn't want me to bring a friend for advice. I started my company so others wouldn't have to go through that.

JUMPING IN

I immersed myself in the wig business. I met with wholesalers, retailers, and stylists in Brooklyn's wig district and spoke to women who wore wigs. I hired four part-time stylists, each of whom had a connection to someone with cancer. They bring wig samples into people's homes and style them as the client likes. My prices -- anywhere from \$50 to \$5,000 for a wig, depending on the hair -- are comparable to those in wig stores because I have no overhead.

My three oncologists placed my brochures in their offices on Dec. 17, 2003. I got my first client on the 23rd. I had helped 100 clients by the time my business became full-time in October, 2004. Now, I'm setting up agreements with other women to expand into a handful of states.

This is not the kind of business that people scribble down the name of in case they ever need it. You won't know about the company until you need it. I rely on word of mouth from doctors and service providers. I knew I'd arrived this November, when my business made it onto Oxford Health Plan's preferred providers list.

Soon I started getting calls that were way out of my geographic area -- women in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and West Virginia -- which led to a new service called Look Just Like You. Women send us pre-chemotherapy pictures with their hair styled as they like it, and we recreate that style and color in a wig.

THE PAYOFF

I'm often asked if it's depressing talking all day long to women who have just been diagnosed. Well, you never know who's going to make it and who's not, and I give everyone hope. Nothing depressing about that.

One man contacted me because his mom was about to start chemo and she refused to shop for a wig. He thought this meant she was giving up. So he sent us a pre-chemo picture of her, and he surprised her with a custom-made wig. He told me that was the first time he had seen her smile since the diagnosis. How could I trade anything for that?

Every cent goes back into the business. I no longer have my nice New York City apartment or corporate lifestyle, and that's O.K. The way I see it, I got to have one kind of life already. I'm having an entirely different one the second time around.

As told to Kate Hazelwood

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