

Talent Scouts

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For Finer Salons Only

In response to regional low unemployment and a shortage of new recruits, Austin's Avant Salon took its recruitment and hiring system back to the drawing board.

By Stacey P. Soble

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Roy Fredericks didn't worry about recruiting new talent for his edgy Avant Salon in Austin, Texas. He didn't have to. They were flocking through the front door.

"We were constantly being voted 'Best in Austin' by the *Austin Chronicle*, and we'd developed quite a reputation for our wild work," explains Fredericks. "But in the last few years, the supply of new recruits has been dwindling. Several beautiful salons have cropped up in the area, and although their reputations and their training programs aren't as strong as ours, too often, new recruits don't see past the beautiful décor."

Fredericks and staff responded to the trickling talent supply by making recruitment a new mission in the salon's strategic plan, and building a program that marketed Avant as a great working environment and a salon that offers strong educational opportunities.

Back to School

In Avant's strategic business plan, Fredericks committed his salon to visiting cosmetology schools four times a year. While the visits do help introduce Avant to prospective recruits, Fredericks' key purpose is to help educate students on how they should 'interview' a prospective salon.



Avant Salon owner Roy Fredericks and Director of Operations Daphne Busch.

"For example, I advise them to ask lots of serious questions about the training program to determine how often classes meet, how much of each week is spent on education and how long it typically takes a student to complete the process," says Fredericks.

To further impress the technosavvy Generation Y crowd, Fredericks has put together an introduction to Avant on CD-ROM. The program includes video clips of Avant staff on stage at educational events and hair shows, a gallery of photos of finished styles and information about the salon and its educational program. Each cosmetology student goes home with the Avant CD-ROM.

"These kids grew up on this technology, and they really relate to it," says Fredericks. "We use it to showcase Avant as a learning organization—and not just learning about hair, but photography, multimedia, etc."

Then, twice a year, Fredericks turns the tables and throws an in-salon

party for a group of 30-40 students. The students are treated to a buffet table, a presentation on Avant Salon, and a mini hair show that displays the talents and creativity of the staff.

"Sometimes, prospective recruits can come into a busy, working salon, experience the energy of it and feel a bit intimidated," explains Fredericks. "We show them that our people are accessible, friendly and fun to work with. We make Avant sizzle. Once they are interested and come in for an interview, then we can tell them what we're looking for and what it takes to get through our program."

Clear, Consistent Communication

Interested recruits are invited in for an in-depth interview with Daphne Busch, Avant's director of operations. In the interview, Busch asks a series of questions to help her determine if the candidate is a fit for the Avant culture. For example, she'll ask: 'Do you have a need for structure? How do

you define success? Why are you attracted to the salon business? And, what brought you to us?'

"There are no right or wrong answers, but the questions are designed to get the candidate to tell us a story that helps us learn about him or her as an individual," says Busch. "We hire for attitude and train for skill—we can train them technically, it's more important that we hire people that are great to be around."

Throughout the interviewing process, Busch is looking for individuals who are team-oriented, progressive, passionate, comfortable with change and lifelong learners. "And, they have to like to read," laughs Busch, since Avant protégés are required to read three books throughout the training program, including Deepak Chopra's "The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success," Steven Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," and Ken Blanchard's "Raving Fans."

Throughout the initial interview and subsequent interviews with Fredericks, both Busch and Fredericks insist on clear, consistent communication stressing what Avant is all about, what is required from staff members every step of the way and exactly how members are compensated for their achievements.

"It's like Monopoly. Everyone plays by a slightly different set of rules—some people put the money in the middle, others don't," says Busch. "Throughout the interview, the orientation and the training program, we're clear about the rules. We show them their career path because we want them to understand the big picture."

Stressing the One-to-One

Part of Avant's clear, consistent communication is explaining to recruits why the salon's management places so much importance on one-to-one marketing used to increase the number of services and products sold to each client. Using a detailed chart, Busch and Fredericks show recruits examples of three salons with the same number of retained and new clients. Then,

they illustrate how small increases in client retention, average ticket sales and the frequency of visits mean huge increases in the bottom line.

Recruits need to understand the interaction between all these factors, says Fredericks, because they are critical factors used to assess each staff member's performance and advance them through the system. Busch and Fredericks' next step during the interview is to explain how the salon's performance-based pay is calculated and exactly what educational, performance and competency requirements are necessary to reach each of the salon's five skill levels.

For example, the chart maps out the exact requirements necessary for a staff member to reach a senior skill level.

An accompanying detailed salary chart clearly illustrates to recruits precisely what salary they can expect at each step of the Avant career path.

"Austin is a booth-rental kind of town, and many recruits are hesitant about performance-based pay—but when we clearly illustrate how they can build up to a \$50,000 salary just three years after graduating, they are intrigued," says Fredericks.

"Of course, I have friends who own salons that say these people are too young to make that kind of money, but I say why not accelerate their growth if they are talented, intensely trained and I'm getting that kind of performance from them."

Both Fredericks and Busch believe the added focus on the recruitment and selection process has helped them attract more quality recruits to the salon and filter them for the best employees. Currently they are expanding these efforts beyond the Austin borders, by visiting schools in other states and attending as many business-building programs as possible.

"Hiring for culture and growing staff members from within helps keep our entire team happy," says Busch. "Next year, I hope to be able to report our ultimate goal of 100 percent retention of our internal customers—our staff members." **ST**

profile:

Avant Salons & Spa

location: Austin, Texas

owners: Roy Fredericks and Connie Strang

established: 1984

salon setup: Avant Salon & Spa—14 styling stations; 5 treatment rooms (one with steam tent); 1 aromatherapy steam shower; 2 pedicure stations; 2 manicure stations; 5 shampoo bowls; spa relaxation area. Avant Salon (central location)—13 styling stations; Protégé Center; 4 shampoo bowls; Call Center; Photography Studio

square feet: Avant Salon and Spa: 3,100; Avant Salon: 1,300

employees: 4 salon coordinators, 1 retail advisor, 7 stylists, 3 colorists, 2 stylist protégés, 2 colorist protégés, 2 massage therapists, 3 estheticians, 2 nail technicians

prices: cut, dry & style: \$40-75; Single Process Color: \$50-75; Highlights: \$80-125; Manicure: \$25; Spa manicure: \$35; Facial: \$65

employee compensation: performance-based salary

benefits offered: paid vacation and holidays, comprehensive medical and dental insurance, 401(k) retirement, profit sharing, acclaimed education program, incentive programs and photo shoot opportunities

year computer automated: 1984

salon software used: SalonBiz

industry associations: TSA

primary retail line: Aveda

primary chemical line: Aveda

growth in past six months came from: "Spa services, hand-in-hand with gift certificate sales."

growth in coming year will come from: "Projecting an overall 30 percent growth."

most pressing business objective: "We're continuing to work on all the technology—developing a CD-ROM educational program, and rebuilding our retail area with interactive kiosk centers."