

Belson blasts past old image in turnaround success

When **Helen of Troy** acquired the **Belson** appliance business, it was in complete disarray. The brand had been operated with limited funds and was marketed exclusively to the multicultural market. The turnaround began when Helen of Troy appointed **Tom Gebhart** as general manager of the division and gave him the resources to resurrect the brand. In the past four years, Tom and his team have completely transformed Belson into a fast growing, viable appliance brand that appeals to both the multicultural and general consumer markets. **Beauty Industry Report (BIR)** was delighted to catch up with Tom, who is now the senior vice president/general manager, for this update.

BIR: Tom, the Belson Brand transformation is outstanding. How did you do it?

Tom Gebhart (TG): Belson has utilized the vast resources of our parent company, Helen of Troy. We have the ability to draw upon product design, features, quality and packaging that have made Helen of Troy's brands a success, enabling Belson to bring truly innovative and outstanding products to market. That has given us the edge we needed to accomplish our sales goals and marketing objectives.

Helen of Troy CEO **Jerry Rubin** and my boss, **Art August**, have allowed Belson to do more in our first four years than in the previous 10. They have allowed us to spend money where it makes sense. We have stepped up our presence at shows and in the media through our public relations efforts. We have carefully reviewed all of our brands and established what we feel are the right products for each market channel we target. In the next 6 to 12 months, you will see a big difference with Belson, as it continues to pursue greater market share.

BIR: In the past couple of years, the professional appliance category has evolved rapidly with regard to the types of products salon professionals and consumers need and want. How has Belson stayed ahead of customer demand?

TG: Belson has been focused on building products that solve problems. Our **Brazilian Heat** line offers high heat with complete

control. Our **After Dark** line takes that one step further and is aimed at supporting the keratin process. **Smart Heat** supports hair texture type and can even be used on synthetic hair—a must for anyone styling or using hair extensions. Then we have the **Gold 'N Hot** line, which continues to provide styling tools with high heat, a diverse product range and superior quality for all hair textures.

BIR: The Gold 'N Hot label continues to be a strong seller. Is it still primarily marketed to the multicultural market or has it become a crossover general market brand, as well?

TG: Gold 'N Hot is still the No. 1 brand in the multicultural market; however, the specialty segment has enabled us to sell in every sales channel. We feature the tool in a window box, enabling the customer to view it. We recently have integrated Smart Tags on our specialty items, allowing customers to scan the tags with their smart phones. It takes them to a video clip showing how to use the tool to create styles. That feature gives us greater flexibility in reaching our customer.

BIR: What are Gold 'N Hot's strongest features and benefits?

TG: Gold 'N Hot is all about heat. Our gold curling irons are the hottest in the market with temperatures up to 500°. Our new ceramic curling irons reach up to 460° and are dual voltage, allowing them to be used anywhere in the world. Our stand-up pole dryer (GH1053) is also the No. 1 selling pole dryer in the professional salon market.

BIR: Today, the major appliance brands have all gone beyond marketing basic flat irons. A number of specialty irons and curling irons address today's hair styling trends. What is Belson offering its customers?

TG: We offer crimpers, jumbo wavers, deep wavers, wavers, conical curling irons, jumbo curling irons and spiral irons. Many were

introduced to address the current style trends. Belson is always looking to determine the next trend in fashion and hair in an effort to introduce products that address those trends.

BIR: Another major advance in the salon appliance category has been the improvement in technology. What have been some of Belson's major technology advances?

TG: Most successful is our Smart Heat technology, which allows for precise style settings based on the hair texture type. It delivers the exact heat, airflow and ion output for each texture type selected on the control panel. You can select coarse hair, normal hair, fine hair or even synthetic hair, and you will always get the proper air and heat settings. This brand has had great success with stylists, since it is the only tool needed for all clients. We have also seen more and more requests for Smart Heat tools from Hollywood hair stylists, who like the fact that it can be used to style synthetic wigs and natural hair with ease.

BIR: Tom, looking forward to 2012, what is your vision for Belson?

TG: We will continue creating innovative products and develop our brands through marketing initiatives and promotional support. In addition, we plan to further establish Gold 'N Hot as the premiere brand for all hair textures.

BIR: How do you determine what the market needs?

TG: We send products to many different stylists and salons, who provide us with invaluable feedback and suggestions. A perfect example of this is **Derek J.**, a celebrity stylist based in Atlanta, who is also a platform artist for our brands. He is seen regularly on "**The Real Housewives of Atlanta**" and is in the second season of "**Hair Battle Spectacular**" on the Oxygen Channel. Derek has worked with us for many years. He tests a lot of our products to make sure that we're on the right



Belson's Brazilian Heat tools offer high heat with complete control.

track, which is a tremendous help.

BIR: With all of the new products you've been rolling out, clearly Belson has an efficient new product development process. What can you tell us about that?

TG: Our process evolves from first determining what the market needs. Once we know that, we go to our engineering team and discuss the requirements of the product. They design prototypes and build samples using our key factories. We tweak our in-house designs and put our finishing touches on what we want.

From there we have to produce it, make more samples, test the samples and make sure they live up to our high quality standards.

Michael Cafaro is the executive vice president of Helen of Troy and leads the engineering and new product team. His leadership and expertise have really given Belson the edge it had been missing.

If we don't like something, we go back to engineering and insist on changes until we have the right product for what we need. A great example of this is our Smart Heat line, which was entirely developed in-house based on input from Michael and our team. Our Brazilian Heat brand was also entirely invented here.

BIR: How does the Belson brand stay ahead of its competitors?

BIR: By the way we develop our tools. We work very hard to stay trend conscious by consulting with our stylists at every stage of development. We also travel extensively to shows and events and visit salons. That keeps us focused on what is trending in the category. Healthy, shiny hair is an important part of beauty, so we strive to develop products that do not damage the hair, and we work hard to educate stylists about proper use and technique in an effort to maintain the health of the hair.

BIR: Which are your best-selling products, and why are they hot right now?

TG: As the majority shareholder in the ethnic marketplace, a large portion of our business is driven by our **Gold 'N Hot hard bonnet dryer**, a portable, hooded dryer. That's the No. 1 selling product in the entire multicultural channel for us. The other strong pieces of our Gold 'N Hot brand are the curling irons, because they reach extremely high temperatures, up to 500°.

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The Smart Heat brand is also very hot. Nobody in the marketplace has the technology integrated into the product like we have. So we're benefiting by being first-to-market with it.

Third, the Brazilian Heat brand is selling very well, especially our **Brazilian ceramic tourmaline flat irons** and **ceramic thermal brushes**. One unique feature is that our flat irons are double-dipped in ceramic, as opposed to the ceramic being sprayed on, which allows the hair to glide through the plates with ease. They also utilize a mirror display control unit which allows the stylist to lock in the temperature setting. The brushes are ceramic-coated with orange thermal-activated paint that turns lime green when hot, to let the stylist know whether the brush is heated properly.

Additionally, in 2010, we launched **After Dark Titanium** to address the rapid growth of keratin hair straightening systems in the professional beauty market. The **After Dark Dryer** comes packed with an AC motor that adds power and longevity. The iron boasts titanium plates and a unique digital heat setting mechanism that enables the stylist to reduce heat gradually—an important attribute for

successful keratin treatments.

BIR: What is your flagship item?

TG: There are two items that stand out: our **After Dark 1-inch Titanium Professional Straightening Iron** and the **After Dark Professional 1900 Watt AC Motor Dryer**.

Those two items have won numerous awards and are quickly becoming the most sought after items for use with keratin systems. Our growth this year has been phenomenal.

BIR: Tell me about your online strategy, including social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and You Tube.

TG: Our marketing group handles all social media. Currently, our major focus has been on Twitter and Facebook. We have been utilizing those two networking sites with great success to promote our new items, showcase our public relations success and support our education. We have recently begun posting our educational videos on YouTube to expand our reach. We understand the importance of this emerging marketing venue and are embracing it.

BIR: Who are the members of your management team?

TG: Our director of sales is **John Lucy**. **Patrick Ratcliff** is our regional manager for the west, the midwest and the southeast. **Janette Morales** is our director of marketing, and **Janette Morales** is our senior marketing manager. They work closely with engineering to oversee the new product development process and gather input and feedback from the many trade shows we attend. They get in the trenches and figure out what we really need next. **Ana Maria Fematt** is our office manager and my boss is **Art August**, who is the president of Helen of Troy Professional and has been with the company for more than 20 years.

BIR: Any final thoughts?

TG: I would like to thank the many people at Belson whom I didn't mention who have helped make us the success we are today. We have created a great team who continues to work together to make Belson a recognizable name in the beauty industry.

To learn more about Belson, reach Tom Gebhart at 915-225-4899 or tgebhart@belsonus.com. Visit www.belsonus.com.



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