

# Sophy Merszei: An eye-opening success

According to *Women's Wear Daily*, eyelash extensions were the only segment of the beauty industry that enjoyed growth in 2009. Recently, *Beauty Industry Report* (BIR) had the opportunity to chat with **Sophy Merszei**, the founder and president of **NovaLash**, the category leader, to learn more about both the category and her company.

**BIR: Welcome, Sophy. Please share with our readers why lashes have become such a hot category for salons.**

**Sophy Merszei (SM):** Lash extensions are quickly becoming the go-to service for estheticians who have seen a decline in the demand for skin care services due to the sluggish economy. Lashes offer beauty professionals the highest profit margin service in the industry, repeat clients and instant gratification for the customer. When done correctly, the service is so addictive that many women are choosing to give up their daily Starbucks in favor of the convenience of tossing their mascara wands.

**BIR: How did you get to where you are today?**

**SM:** I studied biology and cosmetic chemistry at USC and UCLA in the 1990s and entered a PhD program in molecular biology in 2003 at the University of Houston. My plan was to get as much education as possible with hopes that I could some day work for a cosmetic or pharmaceutical company in the field of cosmeceuticals. During my second year of graduate school, I started NovaLash. I stuck it out for two additional years while teaching genetics, working in the lab, taking a full load of classes and trying to grow NovaLash into an international company. Eventually, the pressure of running a quickly growing company and working and studying at the university became too much, and I had to take the plunge and leave graduate school and pursue my dream. I like to tell people I got my MBA the hard way—not in a classroom, but in the real world. It was a crash course in how to do business in a

global marketplace.

Back in 2004, we were the only company supplying the United States and Europe with lash extension products. Today, with the help of a fantastic team, we have created an entire industry out of thin air with scores of new competitors that did not exist prior to us.

**BIR: What is your vision for your company?**

**SM:** When I walk up and down the aisles at an esthetics trade show and see booth after booth of eyelash products, it's a bit overwhelming to remember back only six years ago, when lashes were not even on the radar and NovaLash was the only booth. At that time, my vision was to educate women about

how convenient it is to wear extensions in place of mascara.

My vision has always been to be a pioneer. We've succeeded in creating this industry, but now we need to focus on making sure that it grows effectively. The



*NovaLash offers products and marketing materials to help salons build their lash business.*

next path I am blazing is going to be with the State Boards and the beauty schools so that every professional can get the training he or she needs to be able to meet the needs of consumers. Our corporate headquarters is in Texas, so we have begun talks with the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, which governs The State Board of Cosmetology. Our plan is to put a bill before the State Legislature that will create a proper license of lash technicians.

**BIR: What is your company's mission?**

**SM:** Our mission is to empower women in our industry to build businesses that give them complete economic freedom and security. A full-time lash extensionist earns approximately \$100,000 to \$125,000 per year. Lashes boast the highest profit margin service in the beauty industry, because the cost of doing a full set is only a few dollars for four drops of glue and a few synthetic fibers, yet the service averages around \$250.00 per set.

For consumers, our mission is to provide

women with an easy, safe, effective and convenient way to feel beautiful, powerful and feminine without having to spend time coating, curling and combing their eyelashes every day. Women are so busy managing careers and family and so much falls on our shoulders. As a mother to two young children myself, I cannot think of a more precious gift than a few extra minutes to spare in the morning. Mascara is generally the most time-consuming cosmetic to apply and is often the one cosmetic that most women will not leave the house without. In addition, it's also nice to know that you can swim, laugh, cry, run a marathon or work a 12-hour day, and your eyes will look just as fantastic at the end of the day as they did first thing in the morning.

**BIR: What is your brand's point of difference?**

**SM:** Our customers are very loyal to NovaLash for many reasons, but I believe the durability of our glue, the quality of our lashes and tools, the efficiency of our customer service and our ability to stay innovative and fresh, have really set us apart.

We're also partnering with beauty schools across the nation in an effort to give students and professionals the education they need to succeed.

**BIR: What is your company's greatest accomplishment in five years?**

**SM:** Creating an entirely new category from nothing is what we're most proud of. Before NovaLash, hair, skin and nails were the only options for beauty professionals. We've now added a new career option for professionals and created a multi-million-dollar category that continues to prosper and grow even during such difficult financial times. Pioneers take more arrows than settlers, and that has been the hardest part of running a company like NovaLash. That said, being the first company to begin training and distribution for these products and paving the way for numerous competitors who have since followed, is certainly our most significant contribution to the beauty industry. From the beginning, we made the commitment to ourselves and the brands that have followed us to invest in R&D, innovation, additional safety testing, quality

control and education. I'm very proud of our dedication to making the necessary financial investments required us to allow the growth we've seen.

NovaLash was awarded with the ICMAD (Independent Cosmetic Manufacturers and Distributors) Innovation of the Year 2007 Award for product innovation, marketing, advertising and creativity. That award validated our achievement and contributions to the industry, and it was especially heartening as an acknowledgement of the ingenuity, talent and professionalism of our team and lash stylists.

**BIR: Who are the key members of your team?**

**SM:** The key members are **Beth Fetzer**, director of operations; **Karla Joffery**, projects and logistics manager; **Heather Hughes**, buyers' consultant; **Sophia Hak**, buyers' support; and **Ali Moon**, marketing and public relations.

**BIR: What is your target market?**

**SM:** Our professional marketing is geared toward salon/spa owners, licensed cosmetologists, estheticians and beauty school students. With our new training initiatives to incorporate our Lash Extension Curriculum into beauty schools, they have become a very large focus for us. Our consumer marketing focuses on women, upper 20s to mid 60s. We have recently expanded our marketing to the celebrity scene. You'll see even more glamour on the red carpet soon!

**BIR: What are some of your most popular products and why?**

**SM:** Our best-selling product is our **Platinum Bond Adhesive**. Our lash stylists build their entire business around the strength of our Platinum Bond Adhesive, because clients are happy with the durability of the extensions (4 weeks between touchups), and the minimal maintenance required.

The aftercare kit is also a best-selling item, because it protects the lash artist's work. When a client leaves the salon, she needs to know how to care for her new lashes. That information is included in the aftercare instruction cards. The kit also includes the nighttime conditioning pads, which clean the lashes of makeup or debris while moisturizing the lashes to maintain flexibility and maximize their life. The glycol- and carbonate-free mascara is specifically formulated for use on extensions and does not interfere with the

**“Lashes boast the highest profit margin service in the beauty industry.”**

adhesive. It is used toward the end of the third or fourth week when it is time for a touch-up.

**BIR: What is your long-term vision for education?**

**SM:** Since this is a stand-alone service that can be a specialized career, we want to see the appropriate number of hours spent in beauty schools on eyelash extensions. Most students today do not even realize how many professionals are building a career out of doing only lashes. All over the country, lash salons are popping up just like nails did in the '80s and '90s. This is not just an add-on service; it can be a very profitable career and we look forward to creating the proper educational support that future professionals need.

**BIR: Tell me how you partner with salons.**

**SM:** We have used social media marketing to build stronger relationships with our customers while expanding awareness to potential customers and consumers, as well. Our Facebook fan page is always buzzing and has become an effective form of communication for us. We encourage all of our customers to utilize social media marketing in order to reach out to their communities and cut back on advertising expenses. We keep in touch with our customers through monthly newsletters that feature salons and lash artists of the month, product reviews, marketing tips and a column answering questions pertaining to lash applications. Our website is undergoing some major changes—the new site will have stronger content, be more user-friendly and fulfill our

initiatives to serve all of our different target markets. We have enhanced our brand image—everything from colors, logos and overall personality of the brand. We have teamed up with singer/songwriter Jessie James to endorse our product and create overall consumer awareness about both NovaLash and the lash extension industry, as well.

**BIR: Who are your mentors?**

**SM:** **Rebecca James Gadberry** of YG Labs was the first woman I ever met who had created a fantastic career out of her love of skin care and cosmetics. She inspired me to go out on a limb and leave the safety of a career in science for a career in the cosmetic industry. She is such a smart, passionate and capable woman. People like Rebecca really make our industry something to be proud of.

**BIR: What is the best advice you ever received, and who was it from?**

**SM:** When I was a child, my father had a way of helping me put my troubles into perspective. Whenever something was bothering me more than it should, my Dad would say, "If this is the worst problem you have today, think about how lucky you truly are". A stained prom dress or a bad grade on a geometry test seemed inconsequential compared to all the real suffering that goes on in our world. While I have worked hard to get where I am today, I think most of us who live in this country are so very fortunate in so many ways. I try not to forget that whenever I feel overwhelmed with the normal stress we all experience in running a business.

**BIR: What inspires you?**

**SM:** I recently had the pleasure of watching a short documentary called "**The Beauty Academy of Kabul**." The lengths the women in Afghanistan had to go through to continue working as cosmetologists under the Taliban were unimaginable. This inspiring movie is a must-see for anyone in our industry.

*To learn more about NovaLash, its education and all of the business-building opportunities it provides for salons and beauty professionals, reach **Sophy Merszei** at 866-430-1261 or [smerszei@novalash.com](mailto:smerszei@novalash.com). Visit [www.novalash.com](http://www.novalash.com).*

