

# In the post-COVID era, Kirschner Group delivers

The Kirschner Group is the largest manufacturers' sales and marketing agency in the professional beauty business. With national and international representation covering all territories in North America plus six continents around the globe, the California-based agency has 34 sales reps in the United States and 23 salespeople internationally. **Beauty Industry Report**

recently sat down with founder and CEO **Harlan Kirschner** for an update on his agency and how they are maximizing beauty business sales in a post-COVID era.

**BIR: Welcome, Harlan. Please share your story**

**with our audience. How did you and your company get to where you are today?**

**Harlan Kirschner:** Most people in the beauty business don't know that I went to college with the goal of attending medical school. In fact, I earned a degree as a respiratory therapist and worked at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital for a number of years. To earn money while in college in 1979, I started working for a master distributor in the beauty industry in the warehouse, picking, packing and processing orders, as I worked my way into management. In 1984, we acquired a sales rep company called **The Powers Group**, which had two sales reps. We became **Harlan Kirschner & Associates**, with the three of us covering the 13 western states.

**BIR: Did you call on your own customers?**

**HK:** Yes. I serviced all OTC stores, retail accounts, full-service customers and nail distributors big and small in five states for over 15 years. I learned the business, including the needs and challenges of each class of trade, from the bottom up. I was responsible for Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and Southern California. In those days, we drove



Harlan Kirschner

the territory, visiting customers every six weeks. Servicing customers in the field was fun and I enjoyed those early days in the beauty business!

**BIR: What happened next?**

**HK:** In 1998, we had the opportunity to acquire the **Perlman Group**, which was the largest sales agency in the Midwest/Southwest, and that was our catalyst into becoming a national agency. **Ray Perlman** started his sales organization in the early 1950s, so they were very well established and had seasoned sales representatives.

**BIR: How did you become the beauty industry's first national sales organization?**

**HK:** Next, we acquired **Rogers and Jones Sales** in the Southwest and the **Hass-Ury** sales organization in the Southeast territory. A few years later, we acquired the **Wild Company** in the Northeast, along with other smaller groups along the way to bolster our coverage. In the world of sales representation, guys like **Stanley Wild** and **Ray Perlman** were legends and represented most of the best brands in the beauty business. We then acquired **David Wickes Agencies** in Canada. Our goal has been to hire the most talented salespeople in our industry, pay them well and grow our customers' businesses.

**BIR: Tell me about your team today.**

**HK:** We have 34 professional sales representatives in the United States and 23 salespeople internationally. We have 12 full-time support staff and customer service people in our California offices. We also have 71 store support personnel and educators, most of which are licensed hairdressers. During this COVID era, we partnered with **Beauty Barrage** and have turned our educational department over to them, as the experts in store support.



Jay Halaby

**BIR: Speaking of personnel, how is your company structured?**

**HK:** We pride ourselves on our strong management team and infrastructure. I am the founder and CEO. **Paolo Rezzara** is the president of The Kirschner Group and responsible for global sales and daily operations.



Paolo Rezzara

Paolo is much younger than I am, so he will lead our future management team for many years to come.

**Jay Halaby** manages and directs our domestic professional business and has done an incredible job in taking our company to new heights. With his decades of experience, relationships and industry understandings, he is a blessing to our company, manufacturers and customers.

**Scott Viola** manages our retail division, which services the prestige, mass, drug store and grocery store business. Scott has a team of seasoned professionals servicing this business, as they are a growing channel for beauty manufacturers.

**Sally Remigio** runs our office operations and customer service. Sally has worked with our team for almost two decades. She has developed much of the infrastructure and office procedures that keep us functioning seamlessly. She keeps us on the leading edge of technology, efficiencies and world-class customer service.

**BIR: Tell me about your company's culture.**

**HK:** Being a leader is a responsibility, an honor and a challenge. Encouraging and educating our salespeople to be the best they possibly can be and utilizing all of their talents is our culture. We have developed a culture of excelling and desiring excellence with pride in a job well done. Values and honesty are engrained constantly. We expect everyone to



*The Kirschner Group's field and office teams are ready to serve beauty brands.*

contribute to our overall achievement, and we require success to be in our staff's DNA.

**BIR: How do you manage the 71 beauty industry educators and merchandisers?**

**HK:** Before COVID, we managed them in house, but this pandemic taught us all a lot about how to pivot and reassess. As mentioned, Beauty Barrage now manages our store support and educational programs, as we serviced over 500 **CosmoProf**, **SalonCentric**, **Sephora**, **Ulta**, **Target** and independent distributor stores every month before COVID. We do merchandising, in-store demos, education and provide a variety of other services that our manufacturer partners request. We have used this service to launch and grow many key brands in our industry, and now, as we exit this COVID era, we will reinstate this program to make sure we are touching and assisting as many customers in the field as possible.

**BIR: What key brands have you launched?**

**HK:** We have represented many companies over 30 years. In our world of representation, we sometimes build brands, and then they are acquired by publicly traded companies and we turn the sales efforts over to their existing sales teams. Examples of brands we worked with from their inception until they were acquired include **Nioxin** (bought by **P&G**), **Pureology** (acquired by **L'Oréal**), **CND**

(acquired by **Revlon**) and **Sexy Hair** when **Michael O'Rourke** owned the business (bought by **Henkel**).

On the other side of the coin, we have deep relationships with great companies like **Wet Brush**, **American International**, **Hempz**, **Bosley** and **Fromm**. In fact, we have represented **Fromm** for five decades, beginning with the **Perlman Group**, and have represented **American International**, which is one of our industry's largest privately owned companies, since 1984.

**BIR: Tell me about your international division.**

**HK:** We have 23 full-time sales professionals living in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Middle East and Canada. We have by far the largest international sales team of any company in our industry and the strongest relationships with distribution globally. We bring those relationships to the brands we represent from day one.

**BIR: I know you are very involved in volunteering for our industry's associations and causes and have been a City of Hope Spirit of Life recipient, board member and treasurer of Cosmoprof NA/Professional Beauty Association. Tell me more.**

**HK:** I am so very honored and humbled to have received this prestigious recognition. The City of Hope dinner was certainly one of the

highlights in my career. I have been the chairman for the City of Hope beauty industry campaign committee for many years. City of Hope is such a great institution and offers so many services and support to enhance people's lives. Cancer affects most families and to raise funds to fight this insidious disease is an honor.

It has also been an honor to serve the PBA as treasurer, board member and leader of the Manufacturers Leadership Council. I sat on the BBSI board of directors and then on the PBA/Cosmoprof NA board. I have formed such wonderful relationships and am truly grateful for the opportunity to serve our industry. I have also served as treasurer of the **International Beauty Exposition** for over 20 years. These are all opportunities to meet top professionals and strengthen my network.

**BIR: How is PBA promoting the industry?**

**HK:** I have been a board member of either BBSI or PBA for over 25 years and have enjoyed every minute. We have a great group of dedicated and talented board members, and PBA is making strong progress on many fronts. To have a vibrant industry, we must have a strong trade association. PBA is an inclusive organization that needs the input and support of its constituents from every facet of the industry. I urge everyone to get involved.

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**BIR: Tell me the secrets to your success, as CEO of one of the largest privately owned sales organizations in the nation.**

**HK:** Our goal was to have the best professional sales representatives in every territory we cover. I follow sports closely and generally the best players win, so our vision is, if we can get the most talented and well-connected sales people throughout all territories, most



Scott Viola

likely we will win for the manufacturers we represent. We represent many of the best brands in the beauty industry, and best brands attract top sales personnel. Top sales personnel ensure you maintain and grow the best brands. In fact, the average tenure of salespeople with our company is 16 years.

**BIR: How does the continuing industry consolidation affect your business?**

**HK:** We take all of the changes as opportunities to evolve our business. We must rise and meet the challenges of a different environment than what we are used to. As travel costs rise dramatically, with fares, car rentals, hotels and dining more expensive than ever, rep firms become more valuable. As it gets more expensive and less convenient for brand people to travel across the country or internationally, sales reps who live in their territories gain relevance and value to the manufacturer. Flying today is more difficult, costly and uncomfortable than ever. It's one of the few things in my lifetime that has gotten worse not better. In almost every case, we can service distribution more effectively and more economically than a manufacturer with a direct sales force can.

**BIR: How did COVID affect your business?**

**HK:** We have been very blessed through this COVID era. We were able to defy gravity and grow our 2021 sales over 20% from 2020 and in the year 2020 (COVID year). We grew just under 20% from our 2019 sales before COVID. Our sales team members live in their countries and states, so all this time during

COVID, our sales team did not need to fly but could drive over to customers and visit, if possible, or at the very least drop off products or samples. COVID gave us a strategic advantage over companies using their own in-house sales people, and I believe we will continue to have that strategic advantage over the next few years.

**BIR: Do you represent most brands globally?**

**HK:** We represent some brands globally and others in the United States only. The more important point is we are the only sales organization in the beauty industry that can launch a brand globally. With almost 60 sales representatives living globally in every major market, we can launch and support a brand effectively. We understand the markets internationally, we know who the best distributors are and have deep relationships with them. We do business with almost every significant distributor or customer worldwide. Plus, we understand competitive brands and different classes of trade and are able to determine which are the best partners for each brand we represent.

**BIR: What is The Kirschner Group's biggest attribute to your manufacturers?**

**HK:** Our strong relationships and importance to our customers. We constantly emphasize to our staff that we need to provide value and world-class service to our manufacturers and customers. It is our responsibility to help our customers drive and grow their businesses. We are very important to most of our customers, being one of their largest vendors of all brands combined.

**BIR: How do you drive your business and motivate your sales staff?**

**HK:** We have developed synergies through the many years of acquisitions by getting many of the best sales performers in the beauty industry. Most of our team would be stars working for any manufacturer in the industry. We also grow stronger every year from our ideas from our bi-weekly conference calls, sales meetings, small-group discussions and our Strategic Planning Meetings.

**BIR: It sounds like you expect a lot.**

**HK:** We are raising the bar on the level of service our sales force provides continuously. We ask for a lot but believe you only get back

what efforts are put forth. We are very good at setting high but reasonable expectations; we are good at sharing our vision and management, and instilling strong values.

**BIR: Let's talk about your travel schedule!**

**HK:** COVID certainly changed the way we have done business, and you don't have enough time to hear all the places I travel to. But I recommend that you buy stock in airlines, and I will give you three years' notice before I retire so you can sell for a profit!

On a serious note, I travel to almost every major trade show or event globally. That's important because it gives me an opportunity to talk to all the major players in each market to gain a first-hand understanding of the direction of our industry. I learn about and follow trends, up-and-coming products and services and the hottest new companies. I must be on the front lines to grow my business rapidly. I adore my wife and cherish every moment with my children, so if I am not with them, I am working.

The beauty industry is the best business in the world with some of the finest folks on the planet. We make people feel better about themselves. What greater opportunity can you ask for from your career?

**BIR: Any closing thoughts?**

**HK:** I want to thank our many wonderful customers for their loyalty and support over so many years. I have developed many deep, meaningful relationships with colleagues and clients, which have certainly enriched my life. I know many of their families, and am so honored to enjoy being a part of their businesses and personal lives.

I am also grateful to our loyal manufacturers, who have made The Kirschner Group successful and the industry force we are today. I could never express enough the immense gratitude I feel for the blessings I have received from the wonderful folks in our industry. I believe we have very good times ahead for those who put effort forth and look forward to many productive and rewarding years in the future.

For more information on working with The Kirschner Group, contact Harlan Kirschner at [harlan@kirschnergroupp.com](mailto:harlan@kirschnergroupp.com) or Paola Rezzara at [paolo@kirschnergroupp.com](mailto:paolo@kirschnergroupp.com). Visit [www.kirschnergroupp.com](http://www.kirschnergroupp.com).