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Current Issue

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Tonic Salon owners have own management style

Special Publications

By Danielle Birkin

Search In Business

Ruben Fisher, co-owner of Las Vegas-based Tonic Salon, was an associate manager at The Gap when serendipity intervened and he swapped his sweater-folding proficiency for savvy with scissors and styling mousse.



Ruben Fisher, co-owner of Tonic Salon, laughs with client Kristy Sauter while trimming her hair at the salon on West Sahara Tuesday afternoon.

Photo by Tiffany Brown

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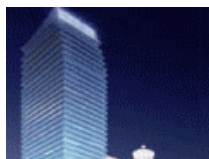
"A friend got her hair highlighted and cut and it was 250 bucks and to me it didn't look that much different because I didn't have the eye then, but I thought, 'I could do that'—besides, nobody retires folding jeans," said Fisher, a Minnesota native who was looking for a change of pace.

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Fisher subsequently perused a trade magazine in search of professional direction. A career as a plumber was out — "I don't like to get dirty" — and so was working as an electrician — "I didn't want to get shocked."

Cosmetology, however, captured his attention.

"At the Gap I always was around girls and they were always talking about their hair and I realized some of them were either make-up artists or stylists or were in the cosmetology industry somehow," Fisher said. "So I asked a few girls about it and they said 'if you're a straight guy you'll make a killing in this business.'"

Fisher went on to attend the Aveda Institute in Minneapolis, graduating in 2000 with a degree in cosmetology.

Hoping to pursue his profession in a more hospitable climate, he researched the fastest-growing U.S. cities, and selected Las Vegas over Atlanta, preferring arid conditions to humid environs.

He then researched the top salons in the valley, zeroed in on Diva Studios, packed up his belongings and drove to Southern Nevada with his then girlfriend, Kyla Fisher, who is now his wife and handles operations for Tonic Salon.

"I didn't even call (Diva Studios) or anything," Fisher said. "I just went in asked for a job. It was kind of intimidating because they were the top in town at the time, but I said, 'if you give me a job I'll be your top stylist' and two years later I was, and I was making a lot of money there."

But the entrepreneurial bug soon bit, and after three years with Diva, Fisher was getting restless — and the clock was ticking down to a deadline that held certain promise of snowstorms.

"I knew I wanted to open my own salon and do my own thing, and when we moved here I told my wife I'd own a salon in five years or we could move back to Minnesota, because she didn't like Las Vegas," Fisher said, adding that five Diva stylists agreed to join the new venture. "I went to work at Toxicity Salon for about a year-and-a-half

while I was developing Tonic Salon and looking for a location and the guy who owned Toxicity and the building said 'if you're leaving I'll sell Toxicity to you for a dollar if you'll sign a five-year lease.'"

Unable to secure a bank loan because he was not already a business owner, the Fishers got creative in opening Tonic.

"We were scared to take equity out of the house, so we had to pay with credit cards and financing and with the cash that we had saved and we cashed in our 401(k)," he said, adding that purchasing an existing salon was the saving grace of the transaction. "In a salon, so many things have to be done right. You have to have the plumbing for the shampoo bowls, and electrical so if somebody turns on a blow dryer and you don't pop a fuse every time. Lighting is huge, and so is ventilation and air conditioning, because it gets hot in salons. But in a preexisting salon they thought of all that and they built it for you. So instead of \$300,000 to do a build-out we paid \$100,000 to remodel Toxicity and we made money from the day we opened and had the whole salon paid off in 13 months."

Tonic, an upscale, high-end designer salon which carries exclusive Bumble and Bumble products, opened last year and now has 12 employees at its location on West Sahara Avenue and Valley View, with a second shop with 10 additional chairs slated to open in early November at West Sahara Avenue and Tenaya.

Tonic Salon

Owners: Ruben and Kyla Fisher

Year founded: 2005

Tonic's discriminating clientele includes Nathan Lorbietzki and his wife, who have been clients since Fisher was with Diva.

Address: 3801 W. Sahara Ave.

Type of business: Bumble and Bumble network salon

"My wife and I have been going to Ruben for the last four years or so," said Lorbietzki, an investment banker whose wife is in retail. "Ruben does all the girls who work under my wife and it's always trendy and up-to-date. My wife recently got extensions and everybody has been fascinated by the job Ruben did and thought they were her real hair. It's also definitely affordable and I've called the day I've wanted to come in and everyone has been more than accommodating to fit us in and work late."

Workforce: 12

Although Tonic is a rental salon, Fisher runs it as if it were a commission salon.

What's the difference?

"In a rental salon the stylists are all independent contractors and they rent a chair from you and pay for their own color and book their own appointments and are responsible for their clients and everything else," Fisher said. "In commission salons, the salon books appointments and buys the products and provides beverage service, and the stylists are employees who work for a commission. So I wanted to build a high-end rental salon with a commission atmosphere — which doesn't exist in Las Vegas — where we book your clients and have high-end products. Also, rental salons don't focus on education — they don't care what you do as long as you pay the rent. A lot of salon owners chase money and some chase talent, but if you find the stylists with the education and the training you will make money."

While education is of paramount importance to Fisher as a salon owner, his employees also appreciate the benefits of extensive training.

This includes Gina Ferraro, who has been a stylist at Tonic for about 18 months.

"When I got out of beauty school they always talked about education and I never saw results at other salons — nobody really grew," Ferraro said. "(A friend and I) went to Tonic fresh out of beauty school and Ruben told us about the program and we said we wanted to assist and see what it's like in a salon because school is nothing like it. We

assisted for about six months and were getting educated and are always learning. Ruben also provides our capes, smocks for our clients, beverage service, and our color bowls. It's just a really good crew with a warm feeling."

Fisher credits his success in part to his hands-on management approach.

"Because I'm a stylist and an owner I'm working right next to my staff — my chair is not any different and half the time people don't even know I'm the owner because I'm right there in the trenches," he said. "So if the music is bad or the magazines suck or we're out of soda I take care of it. Tonic was built by stylists for stylists."

Fisher said Tonic is also successful because it has three components any business must encompass to succeed: a brain, a heart and blood.

"My wife is the brain — she is operations and she makes sure the bills are paid and the lights are on and we have product," he said. "The heart is me and my art director and my manager — we're stylists so we love what we do and people can feel the passion.

The blood is the clients who just pump in and out of there. If a salon business starts to fail somewhere either the brain or the heart has stopped working and the blood stops flowing."

Although Fisher has plans to open Tonic Salon II — which will be a commission shop — he said business expansion is most successful when it comes naturally.

"I don't think about walking around the world, just around the corner and then the next corner," he said. "I don't want to be the one who grows too fast and can't keep up with my growth and the culture and caliber that I have, because the people who suffer are the stylist and the clients."

One additional piece of advice? Persevere:

"When I started beauty school I was in room with 56 people in my class and I was the only guy and I was 29 and all the girls were 19 or 20 and I thought, 'what the hell am I doing?' and I almost quit three times and I'm glad I didn't."

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