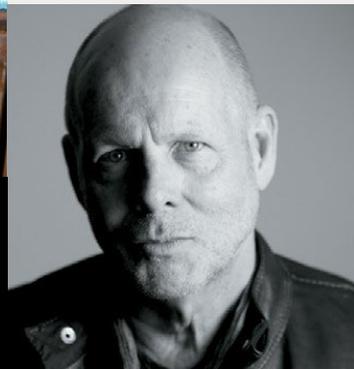




Glen Ellyn, IL's Oak & Steel has implemented Kurt Kueffner's strategies.

KURT KUEFFNER WANTS HIS NEW EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT TO DO FOR MEN'S GROOMING WHAT LEEDS DID FOR ARCHITECTURAL SUSTAINABILITY.



Collective Soul



BARBERING—also known as the men's grooming industry—has more energy today than it has had for the past 50 years. A road trip I took in 2015/2016, when I toured more than 50 of the most influential men's shops in North America, underscored that fact. I witnessed lots of excitement and innovations, and made some surprising realizations, too. Chief among them was that today's men's grooming business feels an awful lot like the full-service salon businesses of the '70s and '80s—in other words, its evolution is unequivocally in its infancy stages.

Those who are considering or have recently jumped onto the barbering bandwagon as new owners have much to consider. Will they go the barber route or stick with a cosmetology license? Will

they opt for the extra training and license required to offer shaving services? Will they have a receptionist? How much time will they allot for clients' haircuts? How will the haircuts be priced? Will they invest in software systems? Will the business model be commission or booth rental? How will they recruit staff? How will they onboard new hires and integrate an apprentice training? How will they create and ensure a consistent brand standard?

If the truth be told, people in the hair industry are brilliant at creating beautiful, interesting environments. But, the reality is that not everyone is as good at putting the engine on that beautiful chassis, primarily because the systems and expectations of the men's business are vastly different from those on the salon side.

The biggest pitfalls I encounter in the emerging professional men's grooming market revolve around recruitment, training and creating a solid point of difference. Simply put, placing a classically trained barber next to a cosmetologist without a foundational technical standard who may have learned techniques from YouTube can represent a huge variation in the services being offered.

By the same token, understanding

your unique place in the market is critical for businesses to consider. Many new male-focused establishments operate under the assumption that they're going to be worth more because of the uniqueness of their environment. To be frank, that's a dangerous notion to pin faith on. While I recognize that a men's shop can demand service pricing of \$100 per hour, that's not going to happen if it's doing the same work or delivering the same experience as the shop up the street.

What's more, I've found that a lot of shops have overlooked or haven't resolved creating a clear and achievable career path. There are several legitimate paths to making \$100K a year in the salon business—however, most of those don't exist in the men's business. If you have a one-price shop, and the only way a team member can make more money is by booking more haircuts, you are going to max out your team.

These insights—gleaned throughout my years as a master barber, stylist, educator and entrepreneur—were the impetus for creating The Grooming Collective (thegroomingcollective.com), which is dedicated to raising the bar of the modern men's grooming industry. The

**New Orleans’
Parker Barber routinely
consults with Kueffner.**



organization currently consists of a group of North American shops and salons; a few primary schools (both barber and cosmetology programs) that understand our program and help to recruit new designers into our network; and a handful of educators that work inside our network, helping to develop the technical and service delivery standards to support our growth. We understand that the men's

business is going to develop a host of different business models, service offerings and pricing, so the focus is on developing systems and best practices to support the prestige end of the business. The Grooming Collective's objectives encompass:

- Building a community of schools, shops and salons dedicated to developing energetic, sustainable and profitable business models
- Clearly elevating the standard of craft and service experiences
- Aggressively recruiting viable candidates into the modern men's grooming industry
- Offering a clear path with benchmarks and accountabilities to ensure success to anyone genuinely committed to a career in men's grooming.

Shops that become part of The Grooming Collective work from the same foundational training rigor; namely, two workshops (Design Tech One and Two) that teach six standard haircuts that serve as the Apprentice Training Program. Beyond that, The Grooming Collective offers workshops to support menu offerings

such as Shave, Grey Blending, Facials and so on (attendance is on an as-needed basis dependent upon the shops' service offerings); Scripting (soft-skill training) on key touch points, including consultation, styling tutorial, product prescription, pre-booking and referral initiatives of the service experience; and Bench Marks and Sustainable Business Practices. The flip side of the program falls squarely on the shoulders of the grooming shops to execute:

- Identify, train and support a mentor who is responsible for implementing an Apprentice Training Program and coaching team members to reach their potential. This program is taught in two three-day workshops (Design Tech One and Two), and a one-day workshop to help mentors effectively download the training for the team (Implementation and Coaching).
- Agree on a common menu and service delivery standards that best suit the brand and can be understood and supported by The Grooming Collective. Although we share a common set of training materials, each shop makes decisions about service timing, as well as pricing that best supports each market and business strategy.
- Commit to a career path that takes a new team member from apprentice to master to mentor to potential partner. We offer a pay schedule that ensures an income over \$65K per year—obtainable inside of three years for every committed designer that works toward and realizes the benchmarks. The potential exists to earn more, but coaching new designers to become solidly established inside of

a reasonable amount of time is essential to long-term staff retention and the well-being of the brand.

■ Submit performance information weekly to help The Grooming Collective understand each establishment's strengths and weaknesses against a baseline. This has been an incredible undertaking. New and beautiful men's grooming environments are attracting a ton of attention right now, and we're seeing new shops in the Collective that service between 80 to 200 new guests a month. The focus is on keeping those guests coming back by virtue of delivering a higher quality and more consistent service experience. Based on the performance parameters, the systems are working.

In the near future, I'm sure we'll see many of the best practices and proven development benchmarks from the full-service salon sector trickle down to the men's grooming industry. Of course, we need more new-talent shops and dependable advanced education systems to act as a foundation for quality and consistency. Our initial mantra—"Start where you are; use what you've got; do the best you can"—has evolved into a new one: "Never use the words 'simple' and 'easy' in the same sentence." As with most things, the simplest behaviors are often the hardest to perfect.

For now, the secret is in harnessing the excitement and enthusiasm in the industry, while ensuring brilliant service experiences for customers, quality career opportunities for staff and profitable business models for owners.



Kempt: By the Book

OWNED BY MELISSA SPROUT, who comes from a Vidal Sassoon-influenced cosmetology background, Kempt opened just last year in Irvine, CA. In May 2017, Sprout left her cosmetology business, where she was charging \$95 per haircut, booking two months in advance and averaging \$4K a week in sales, to open her men's business.

Sprout faced many challenges, not the least of which were recruiting, developing and promoting a team. Since implementing The Grooming Collective Apprenticeship Training Program, as well as a system of benchmarks and service protocols, she now has five full-time designers, two apprentices-in-training and some equally impressive stats:

- 94 percent existing guest retention
- 87 percent productivity
- 45 percent pre-booking (online booking is on top of that)
- Haircut pricing at \$45-\$55.

The most important part of her business is that it's capturing and keeping new guests, and Kempt has seen month-over-month increases since opening. The Harvard School of Business says the only true indicator of any business' sustainability is, "Do your customers come back, and refer their friends?" The Grooming Collective thinks that's the best way to keep score, too.

Sprout wholeheartedly agrees. "The Grooming Collective has become an essential asset to our business," she says. "Implementing the education and benchmarks at Kempt creates a true career path for our stylists to be successful and support our brand standard."

KURT KUEFFNER is a master barber, stylist, educator and entrepreneur in the prestige salon industry. He began his career in classic barbering before moving on to study cosmetology as an apprentice for Aveda founder Horst Rechelbacher. Kueffner has spent the past 20 years educating and inspiring hair professionals worldwide on the unique design, service and technical considerations involved with men's grooming, including technical and business education, curriculum development, and editorial work.



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