

Cutting the Hair of Corporate America

Most people would use a really bad haircut as an excuse to indulge in a quart of ice cream, or justify their road rage on the way home. Software engineer and entrepreneur Kush Kapila used his bad buzz cut to start a new business. He says his bad haircut became an opportunity to show the hair cutting industry how to do it right—by designing, creating and putting a barber shop into a renovated 28-foot Airstream Excella.

"I want to disrupt the industry," he said. "By not having to pay rent on a brick and mortar store I can offer my employees health insurance and a better working environment, a better culture. There's not the turnover that's so prevalent in this industry. Companies who use us as a perk help their employees too."

Building better workplaces is a great goal, but Kapila has the standard entrepreneurial motivation dreams too—living the dream. He wants a successful business that allows him to control the shots, work for himself and be the boss. At the same time he wants to make a good living for himself and his software engineer wife.

A mobile barbershop wasn't something Kapila had considered until the day of his own bad haircut. "I went to a pretty well known franchise salon and then waited for 45 minutes to get a hair cut. I asked for a short cut, but ended up with a buzz cut," Kapila recalled. On his way back to his office, still upset with his haircut and the time and money he'd just wasted, he passed several mobile food trucks and thought, "Somebody ought to put a barbershop in one of those." Then he thought, "Hey, I could do that."

When he told his father about his plans he was met with a lot less enthusiasm. "My dad said, 'You have three degrees, you're studying all the time and now you want to quit your job and cut hair?'" Kapila laughed at the memory.

"I said, 'No dad. I want to run a business that cuts hair.'" Kapila has a business degree in addition to a bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science. The mobile barbershop would be his first entrepreneurial venture.

After researching his idea and testing his concept, he entered and won first place with his plan at the 2011 UC San Diego Entrepreneur Challenge (UCSD). After that he was pretty confident that he had truly discovered an unmet need. Now it was time to actually create the business. So, he contacted Timeless Travel Trailers



By Becky Blanton

Entrepreneur Kush Kapila uses models dressed in 1960s fashions and an Airstream to set the theme for his mobile hair salon. He could have used any white box, but only an Airstream could give his new business the proper image.



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in Denver for help. His plan: a retro themed mobile barber shop called “Sterlings Barber Shop and Salon.”

Inspired by “Mad Men,” a television show about an advertising firm named Sterling Cooper Advertising, and set in the 1960s in Manhattan, Kapila decided on a mobile barber shop with the same sort of retro theme. But he also wanted some high tech touches — like iPads for each chair to facilitate scheduling and payments, and a website where customers could schedule and pay for their haircuts online.

Timeless Travel Trailers (TTT) didn’t just do the renovation, he tasked them with finding and buying a used Airstream, as well as co-creating the design and implementing the concept. They not only captured the look, feel and ambiance, but figured out how to make the Airstream work as a business that shampooed up to 48 heads of hair a day.

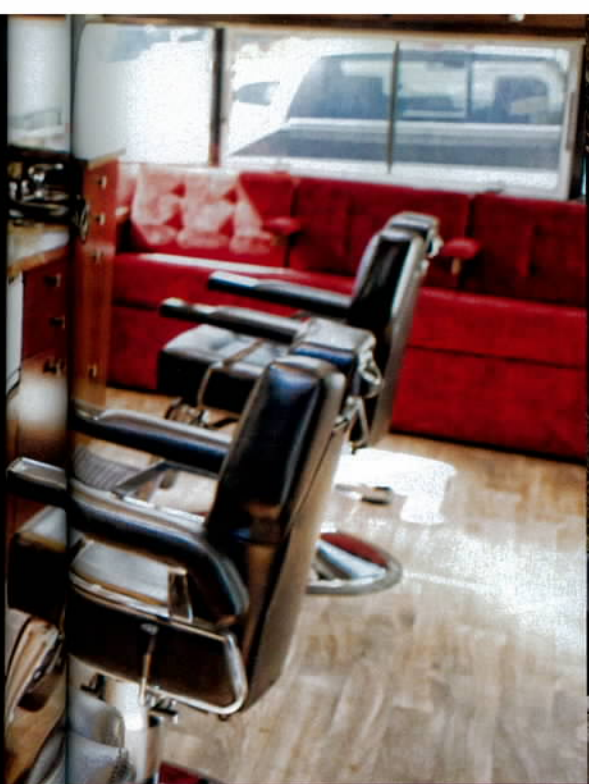
“We knew that the trailer would be on the move and need to self sustain for as much as a full day’s worth of haircuts and shaves,” TTT project manager Danielle Garrison said. “We worked with the client to calculate the number of cuts and shaves that three stylists would aim to accomplish in a day in order to ensure that the unit would carry the power as well as the water capacity to do so. We also designed the electrical system to manage heavy loads that items such as blow dryers draw.”

The trailer ended up with a total of three fresh water tanks, one per chair, for a total capacity of 100 gallons of water. Powered by a 6.5KW propane generator, as well as two 12 volt batteries, the trailer can be used with or without shore power and hookups.

The trailer also has the other things Kipila wanted: three stations, three chairs, three sinks, and a waiting area. It’s also fully climate controlled with both heating and air conditioning.

Simple, retro, classic and inviting is what he got, along with leather barber’s chairs with red accents; wood veneered walls and wood look vinyl flooring. He even uses models dressed in 1960’s attire for his advertising and website, keeping the theme consistent. He’s very happy with how it looks, but it was a nail-biting few months while he waited to see the finished trailer.

“I was always worried about how it was going to feel, if it’d be spacious enough or if it would work like I imagined,” he said. “The day I picked up the trailer I didn’t eat all day. I was that excited,” he said. He didn’t have to worry long. After flying to Denver from California and seeing it for the first time he knew the designers had totally nailed it.



Once he had the trailer and the website, all he needed was customers. But even he was surprised at what he discovered.

"I was a little naïve. I thought, this is so great, everyone will want to use us," he said. "And it is a great idea, and people do love it, but nobody wants to be the first to use it. We'd hear, 'Oh, great idea. Let us know when you get rolling,' but nobody wanted to be the first one."

Eventually someone was the first and now the trailer is booked five and a half days a week. By having a great website and making sure his collateral materials and image were as professional as possible, he was able to convince businesses that the mobile cuts idea wasn't a risk. Companies came around to the idea and only a few months into business Kapila is calling major corporations like Sony, Intuit, Alumina and Online Entertainment his clients. Not only that, they make sure he has prime parking for the trailer when he's there.

"They see the mobile haircuts as an employee perk," he said. "Most high-tech or busy professionals don't have a lot of time. It helps with production and productivity. People aren't leaving early or taking long lunches to get a haircut. They walk out to the parking lot and we're there," he said.

"Most mall franchises are walk-ins," he said. "So you don't know how long you're going to have to wait, or how long it will take." Sterlings Mobile services are primarily by appointment. Although they will take walk-ins, the cost is a little bit higher to encourage people to schedule their appointment online. Overall the rates are slightly higher than the mall walk-in price, but half the cost of a brick and mortar salon.

The journey from bad buzz cut to business owner took less than a year. As of September 2012, Kapila had been open for only three months and was already getting requests to turn his business idea into a franchise, something he planned to do all along. He envisions a nation of Airstreams, equipped with barber's chairs, making one of life's little tasks more of a fun adventure, especially for the cubicle dwelling worker.

"The goal was not to have one of these trailers. It was to have many of these trailers. I think it's a great franchise business. I can see these everywhere," he said. "There are 3,000 Great Clips, 2,000 Supercuts in the U.S. alone and I can see a few of ours. When we go to a company and there are 2,000 people there (who need haircuts), it just makes sense."

The trailer was made over by Timeless Travel Trailers to be fully self-contained and now travels to corporate locations.

*A high level of
gravity
to get the same level
of handling*