

A CUT ABOVE

Sterlings Mobile doubles down with a new outpost in Seattle.

BY JARRETT HALEY



Four years ago, Kush Kapila, M.B.A. '10, got a haircut that launched a thousand mobile stylists. Well, not exactly a thousand, but with fellow Triton Kevin Yuen, Warren '11, opening a location in Seattle, the concept could redefine the salon experience nationwide. Triton magazine is proud to have brought these two together—and not just for this interview.

LET'S HEAR FROM THE FOUNDER FIRST. KUSH, WHERE DID STERLINGS COME FROM?

KK: I was working full-time with a life-science software company and also doing the executive program at Rady (School of Management). So naturally I was busy, just like all of us—and I hated waiting in line in a chain salon. After a particularly bad experience where I waited for an hour, then asked for a service and got the wrong one, I was driving back and saw a food truck, and that sparked the idea for me. Mobile services were exploding—food trucks, pet grooming, spray tanning; but I hadn't seen anyone do it with haircuts.

THAT MUST HAVE BEEN A PRETTY BAD HAIRCUT.

KK: Well, I like to think that good ideas come out of personal problems. I didn't know the first thing about hair-cutting, but I knew what I liked and didn't like. And it was more about innovation, really; taking a very established industry and adding a new angle to it. I do like the fact that it's a simple concept to understand, with very classical roots. As we build this business, and as Kevin builds the business in Seattle, unless they develop a robot that can cut hair, we'll be around for a while.

SO KEVIN, I UNDERSTAND TRITON MAGAZINE PLAYED A PART IN GETTING YOU IN THE BIZ.

KY: Right, I read the article about Kush and Sterlings in Triton magazine, thinking how great the idea was. I also have a high-tech background—aerospace for five years—and knew nothing about hair salons, but I thought: it's so simple. And those simple ideas are usually the most rewarding. I sent Kush an email and we started talking about collaborations and opening a location in Seattle. One year later, the trailer is here.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE TRAILERS LIKE?

KK: It's a total state-of-the-art airstream unit—three styling stations, a restroom, waiting area, fully climate-controlled, self-contained with water and electricity. And that's just the physical side of Sterlings; the digital process is just as streamlined. You can go online, find bios of our barbers and stylists, book a service, then they're right there waiting for you. Or we also partner with corporations who subsidize the services as a perk for their employees.

KEVIN, WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE UNIT WHEN IT ARRIVED?

KY: It's incredible, and a little intimidating. I consider myself a pretty good driver, but man—I was in the parking lot for a good 40 minutes before I said, 'All right, let's get on the road.' That first night, Kush and I were troubleshooting a dry run over Facetime with only 10 percent battery on my phone. It was intense. But there's nothing more hands-on than that. Running a business though, I know you have to get your hands dirty and actually understand the core of the business before you can become successful.

HOW DID UC SAN DIEGO PREPARE YOU FOR ALL THIS?

KY: For me, what carried through from my undergraduate years is analytical thinking. In aerospace engineering we always plan for the worst case, and that analytical mind goes a long way.

KK: There would be no Sterlings without Rady. I learned business fundamentals there, but also how to think like an entrepreneur and how to build the confidence to go start something. And the continued support, of course. This is a perfect example—Kevin read about us in Triton; I can't think of a stronger connection than my first sale being to another fellow alum who found us through the magazine.



Kush Kapila, M.B.A. '10,
Founder and CEO of
Sterlings Mobile



Kevin Yuen, Warren '11,
Owner of Sterlings' latest
location in Seattle



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