



Van Council of Van Michael Salon – an Interview

- *It was seeing the 1975 big screen smash Shampoo that had the Cartersville, Georgia native off and packing to cosmetology school.*
- *In 1984, Van and his brother Michael partnered and together launched the first Van Michael Salon.*
- *North American Hairstylist of the Year...*
- *His creative and technical expertise earned him recognition as one of the leading spokespeople for Aveda worldwide.*
- *World Masters Award for Lifetime Achievement, Aveda Corporation.*
- *Now owner of 8 salons in the Atlanta area (with 400 employees), with another 42 partner salons in Japan (with 600 employees), Van Michael does \$28 MM per year domestically and \$30MM in Japan.*
- *That's a lot of haircuts and hair products...*

- **How did Van Michael Salon get started?** *My junior year of high school I saw the movie Shampoo and Warren Beatty's character inspired me to get into hair.*

- **When did you know you were going to "make it"? When did the light bulb go on that said, "We really have something valuable here"?** *I have never assumed that I have it made...Along the way I figured that it was about the people not the profit. In fact, for the first 10 years I was in business I didn't have a P&L. I didn't have an accountant...I realized there was something missing in this industry. Nobody in this business was offering benefits and training. We created a business that offered both benefits and a training program that no one else had, nor do they have even today. We have 120 people with 10 years with Van Michael; 25 with 20, and 6 with 30 – all unheard of in our industry. It has always been a priority to help our employees have not only a career path, but well-rounded lives, including homes and solid families. We spend a ton of resources on recruiting. Just like college coaches. If you want to "win" you have to recruit and retain the best. Last year we had 550 people apply for jobs with our company; we hired 35. We provide both professional and personal mentoring from the time someone starts with Van Michael. This includes life coaching relative to housing, financial planning and personal health.*

- **When/how did you discover that you are an entrepreneur?** *In hairdressing, you're kind of always an entrepreneur. I've never worked for anyone. I never had a goal to have a bunch of salons. When I opened my first salon, we hired hairdressers who did well, and that led to a need for more space. We expanded our original salon. As the demand and opportunity grew we opened up another salon, and that led to more expansion as time went on. One thing we discovered was that we had to have a way to develop new talent. We have a "Triple A farm system" at each site now called, "New Talents." That's how we grow our people and then call them up...*

- **Technically, Van Michael is a family business. How has that been a positive? What has made that aspect challenging?** *My brother and I have been partners for 34 years. We get along. You're always better as a team. I wouldn't be where I am without family who have supported and worked hard to make us successful. Plus, I probably would have been wild-er (☺) without family in the business. The challenge has been separating business and home life. I wouldn't recommend husbands and wives working together. Know your role. Play that role the best you can. If you're the leader, lead. Practice drive-by happiness. Choose your battles.*

- **What are 2 or 3 "Van-isms" that might help other business owners?**
 - *I'm a big Purple Cow storyteller. Don't be average. You have to create value. Nobody pays for average. Average doesn't sell. It doesn't create raving fans. You have to stand out.*
 - *I'd rather be tired than poor.*
 - *You can't cheat the grind.*
 - *"What's your greatest expense?" ANSWER: The money you don't make. Ask, "How much does it cost to NOT do this?" People in our business don't answer phones on Monday. We pay for a call center to answer calls on Monday. As a result, we are booked when other salons aren't. (We are the busiest salon per square foot in the world. We do nearly double the business of retail malls per square foot.)*
 - *I take every new hire to dinner...And when they graduate from New Talents to Van Michael I take them out again. It's important that I know their names and their story.*

- **What are your hopes for the future of the business?** *I'm really focused on growing my men's business. Van Michael Men is a barber shop in the new Atlanta Braves stadium. We'd like to create a unique experience for men that can be multiplied in multiple sites and multiple cities.*

- **Any final words of wisdom?**
 - *Invest in your people. You could keep more of your profits, but in the end you'll have a better team if you re-invest some profits into your people.*
 - *Whenever I do a speaking engagement I ask, "What's the secret to the universe?" and I say, "Relationships."*
 - *Pay attention to life and the lessons it offers. Then, make use of those lessons in your business.*
 - *Picture the culture of your business as a swimming pool. If you pee in the pool, you gotta get out of the pool.*

- **Thanks Van...so much for sharing your wisdom and your experience with us!**