

Sitting pretty in Tulsa: Downtown barber and beauty shops enjoy large customer base

by Kirby Lee Davis

Published: February 22nd, 2012



Barber Elic Ghazal cuts Mickey Michael's hair at the Elephant In The Room Men's Grooming Lounge in downtown Tulsa. (Photo by Rip Stell)

TULSA – A desire to join in downtown Tulsa's growing momentum led Tucson, Ariz.-based Together We Can LLC to open a Supercuts franchise last July in the Atlas Life Building beneath the Courtyard by Marriott.

The same reason spurred Marquita Owens to establish her Knip2Pink Salon and Photography shop in downtown's Transok Building.

"I've always wanted to be downtown," she said Wednesday while a customer's hair dried. "Growing up as a kid, whenever your parents went downtown, it was to handle something important. I wanted to be there."

The inverse of this also appears to be true – downtown Tulsa loves its barber and beauty shops.

The Tulsa Metro Chamber's most recent survey of downtown businesses identified 15 operating hair servicing shops. That 2010 tally outnumbered the area's automotive repair shops, photography studios, electrical contractors or doctor's offices, and only trailed downtown's drinking establishments by two. It proved 50 percent more than downtown's dental or plumber offices, twice the number of employment agencies or national banks, almost three times its day care facility census, five times its chiropractor offices.

One reason for that reflects downtown Tulsa's daily workforce – some 37,736, as estimated by DecisionData of Birmingham, Ala.

"There's just a lot of business people downtown and they love the fact that they can go and get their hair cut at lunchtime rather than do it in the evening or weekends," said Michelle Elbert, the owner of Shear Perfection.

That points to why Justin Moore chose to establish Elephant In the Room Men's Grooming Lounge last week at 1609 S. Boston Ave., Suite 200: all the better to tap that 20,000-plus male customer base working regularly in the central core.

"I think there is enough downtown people now that they can support several (shops), because everybody is so different," said Vikki Williams, owner of Mid-Continent Tower Barber Shop.

Competitive turf factors seem more removed in this hair-styling sector. Walking through the skyscraper district suggests that just marginally healthy towers may support one barber shop or salon. The Reunion Center actually boasts two.

Seven months ago Elbert moved her shop from a street-front lease in the Reunion Center to a spot on the second floor. That opened the door for April Cannon to relocate her shop from central Tulsa to Elbert's old space.

While Watanzee Salon has flourished there, Shear Perfection continues to shine in its new

digs. Elbert doesn't mind the competition.

"We didn't get a whole lot of walk-ins anyway," she said. "A few here or there, but not enough to support our business."

Instead she relies on repeat customers and referrals drawn from a decade's service downtown. So does Williams and Carla Marler.

"They're almost like family," said Williams, whose shop operates in the Mid-Continent Tower basement, facing the pedestrian tunnels.

"You get to know them and you see them sometimes once every two weeks, sometimes once a month," said Williams, a 32-year industry veteran who's owned her own downtown Tulsa shop since 1999. "You may not know everyone in their family, but you know their illnesses and their triumphs. You get to know them like family."

In many ways customers may bond with their barber like they used to their family doctor, even taking off work to make an appointment. It marks one of the few retail and service areas still very driven by relationships.

"I've had some of my clients for 20 years," said Marler, who last month moved her downtown staple Hair on the Square from Kanbar Properties' Oil Capital Building to the First Place Tower. "I stay real steady because I've been here so long."

Some of these executives pinned the sector's strength on the more frequent business more customers bring their way, coming in every week to two weeks to maintain their hairstyles.

"It stays pretty steady," Marler said of her cash flow. "Everybody's going to get their hair cut no matter what. They might wait a little longer in between."

Owens credited her consistent recession traffic on a customer's need for self-esteem.

"Getting your hair done, it makes people feel better about themselves," she said. "When you look good, you feel good. Sometimes people will sacrifice something else to make them feel better."

Another sector strength comes from the lower overhead barber shops face over operations with perishables or inventory to turn over.

"You don't need too much space," said Moore, whose five-station Chicago-style shop squeezes in a number of customer services in just 600 feet. "It's all about the experience."

Marler downplayed those cost factors, noting that she pays roughly the same rent per square foot as other operators, but Williams said the economics fit.

"We're still feeling our ways," said Janar Green, who owns two downtown Tulsa style shops less than two years old, The Color Groove in the Pythian Building and Janar's Spa and Salon inside the Hyatt Regency Hotel. "We haven't really started severely profiting yet. We're just breaking even. Usually you start making a profit between year three and five."

Two operators pointed to individual or signature services, such as hot towels or vibrator rubs, that not only help separate them from competitors, but also create revenue streams.

"That Saturday we launched I had three stylists and barbers working," Moore said. "We did in services about \$2,000 that day, just in services."

But most operators still pinned their bottom line on consumer hair traffic. Williams said her shop reaches profitability when she and co-stylist Glenda Rice – who pays for her booth space – each see 10 customers daily.

"They're your employer," Owens said of customers, "so if they're not doing well, your business is not going to do well. When it's good, it's real good, and when it's bad you can feel the plunge."

That makes the relationships paramount, and that detailed attention to customer likes.

"We have found that men don't want to come in and find a woman in the chair," said Williams, whose shop focuses on the male audience. "They won't want to smell that foo foo, curlers

and all that. It's definitely a man's cave down here.

"Glenda and I both, we love to pamper men," she said. "That's the one advantage we have. We really enjoy it. We'll spoil them rotten. And if we don't see one of our regulars awhile, we get worried about them."

Complete URL: <http://journalrecord.com/2012/02/22/sitting-pretty-in-tulsa-downtown-barber-and-beauty-shops-enjoy-large-customer-base-general-news/>