

# Money & Careers

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE MARCH 27, 2011 | BOSTON.COM/BUSINESS



## ON THE HOT SEAT

He's also a client

Boston's first Hair Club franchisee says his business is about restoring confidence. **G3**

## ON THE HOT SEAT

# Restoring hair, and self-esteem

**Steven Barth,**  
Hair Club franchise owner

Steven Barth is not only the owner of eight Hair Club franchises in New England, he's also a client. A few years after Barth started losing his hair in college, he had a fateful meeting with Sy Sperling, president of what was then called Hair Club for Men. After borrowing \$800 from his brother for a treatment, Barth opened the company's first franchise in Boston in 1981. Reporter Katie Johnston Chase spoke with Barth, 56, at his headquarters in Downtown Crossing.

**You've said it was traumatic when you started losing your hair in the early 1970s. How so?**

You have to remember that it was all about hair — I think the preeminent Broadway show was "Hair." There was a lot of tension on a guy losing his hair to do something about it.

**The experience led to some philosophical insights about hair loss.**

Back then for a guy to sort of come out of the closet to confront hair loss with somebody else was really, really difficult. This was a very emotional first step. I was writing poetry at the time, by the way.

**About hair loss?**

No. About life. Although it might have been somewhat tainted by hair loss. I understood a lot of the internal drivers, the inhibitions, the anxieties, the lack of self-confidence, the deterioration of self-esteem, the discomfort about competing in the singles market. I became [worried] about anything that would accentuate my hair loss — being under the wrong light, being into wind.

**Did you resort to any extreme measures, like spray-on hair?**

My extreme measures were that I invested an unusual amount of

time to get my hair ready in the privacy of my bathroom.

**What was the impact of your first Hair Club treatment?**

Immediate and profound. Not only did I now have these insights about what losing hair meant to me as a young man, I now was able to sort of break down to language the feeling of getting hair back. What did it mean to me? It meant a rebirth, almost.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

**The most popular of your three treatments is Bio-Matrix, a nonsurgical procedure in which human hair is woven into a network of nylon monofilaments and attached to the scalp with medical adhesive. It costs \$1,800 to \$3,600 upfront, and then from \$200 to \$650 a month for maintenance after that. That's a lot of money. It is a lot.**

**And this is for a lifetime, right? You can't just stop.**

Well, you always have the option. But you know, hair loss is lifetime. It would be nice if somebody didn't have to spend any money, but that's not going to eliminate their discontent or what's happening inside their head.

**What happened to former Hair Club president Sy Sperling?**

Sy's living in Florida, in Boca Raton, and he's still very involved as a private investor as well as a marketing consultant.

**Does he still have a full head of hair?**

He does. And he goes into the Fort Lauderdale center for service.

**What is the market share of Hair Club, now owned by Regis Corp.?**

We're somewhere around I'd say about 24 percent.

**Some accuse companies like Hair Club of preying on people's insecurities. How do you respond to that?**

I would say absolutely, profoundly no. We are responding to a very deep and very compelling need. And so if for any reason you want to go ahead — and especially with somebody who has not experienced hair loss — and see that as an exploitation because you don't have the empathy to know what it feels like to have a deteriorating level of self-esteem, or to be a young guy who doesn't want to go out because he's not confident about the way he looks. . . . Those are emotions — right, wrong, or indifferent — and they require some call to action.

**I notice your signs here don't say Hair Club for Men and Women, as the company is now referred to. They say HCMW.**

Confidentiality and anonymity is key, even in 2011.