

Blacks Lose Hair Business to Koreans



by Ashley N. Johnson
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Whether it is fried, dyed and laid or laid to the side; braided or loose; kinky, curly or straight; and even glued, sewn or bobby pinned, one's hair is essential to every look. According to the Black Owned Beauty Supply Association, the Black hair care & cosmetic industry is a \$9 billion industry and it serves millions of African-Americans.

But while African-Americans are spending most of the money in the industry, especially in regards to extensions, they are profiting the least. Most of the money being made in the industry is going to other ethnicities, the Koreans mainly.

"It is very hard breaking into the (hair) industry, being a Black owned business," said Nora Johnson, an owner of Sisters Beauty Supply, downtown. "They (Koreans) own it because they have the money. It takes a lot of money and a customer base to keep it going."

In the Pittsburgh and surrounding area there are approximately four Black owned beauty supply stores, such as Sisters Beauty Supply, Quik-It Beauty Supply Outlet, Nebby Beauty Supply and newly, Annette's Beauty Supply, but almost twice as many are owned by Koreans, the largest being Hair Day in South Side, Two Cousins in the Hill District and Hair Masters in East Liberty.

While they all sell hair care products and accessories, it is the hair (wigs, weaves, etc.) that are the moneymakers.

Bernard White, owner of Nebby Beauty Supply in Oakland, said, "Most products are able to be ordered easily, but there is not a large profit margin to be made. Hair is where the margin is. You can make \$3,000-\$5,000 a day on hair sales alone." He added, "It is not really a hard industry to get into, it is getting hair that is the problem. It is a cold business in terms of the hair game. The Koreans have this industry on lock."

Both Johnson and White agreed that getting hair is a huge hurdle, because the distributors are Korean and most times they will only sell to other Koreans.

White said, "I have to buy hair through exchange. It is rough, but if I don't increase my hair game, I won't be in business next year. It is a cold business in terms of the hair game."

Johnson said that some Korean distributors say they will not sell to stores within so many miles from their other clients, but when she tried to have hair sent to her Aliquippa location, which has no other beauty supply stores, they still would not let her purchase it. She said one distributor also told her the hair she wanted was no longer being sold, but when she

went to a local Korean beauty supply store, that same hair was there. When she inquired about it she was told that a local store had told the distributor that if he sold to her, he would no longer buy from him.

She said she agrees with location rules, "but there needs to be regulations. One Korean store should not be able to dictate the entire industry in one area." In order for Johnson to get hair for her shops, she explained that she has to have it delivered to other cities and then have it shipped here.

Every year there are several major hair shows and conferences all over the country, such as the Bronner Bros. Beauty Show, the International Hair & Nail Show and more, that cater to the African-American consumer. Johnson said she has attended several national conferences in regards to the Black hair industry and Koreans run a majority of them and the workshops are conducted in the Korean language, even the ones on how to sell to the Black consumer.

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