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Owners of No Grease barbershops look to expand outside Charlotte

BY CONSTANCE BROSSA

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The infamous logo that can be found at each location of the hair-and-personal-care enterprise known as No Grease is likely to get broader exposure somewhere else on the East Coast by year's end.

"We're still determining where first. We like the Atlanta area (for expansion)," says No Grease's Damian Johnson. "We're considering as far out as our hometown, which is Buffalo, N.Y." Damian and his twin brother and No Grease co-owner, Jermaine, are also considering opening shops in Rock Hill, S.C., and Durham.

Since the premiere of its location on North Sharon Amity Road in 1997 (which has now closed), **No Grease** has expanded its presence throughout the city. The enterprise consists of its newest location in Mosaic Village at Johnson C. Smith University (slated to open by early March), No Grease Exclusive-Uptown Charlotte at Time Warner Cable Arena, No Grease Unlimited-Concord Mills and the Park West Barber College on Central Avenue.

No Grease's expansion into various parts of town has exposed it to a more diverse customer base. Its core clientele consists of black men ages 18 to 35. At the uptown shop, however, the clientele is mixed, and the Concord Mills location attracts mostly white customers.

Among No Grease's clients are a growing number of women, who make up about 25 to 30 percent of its demographic. Damian Johnson has no doubt that the upscale décor at its locations, as well as the "presentation of the men (more about that later) who are providing the services, what's (airing) on TV and the music that's being played (R&B to jazz)."



PHOTO BY: FRED BRAZIEL

Damian Johnson

Currently, 24 independent contractors work for No Grease as barber-stylists and instructors. In spite of the recession, says Johnson, his company has kept all of its stylists quite busy.

"Whether you're looking for a job or got a job, you need a haircut," he notes. In fact, No Grease opened its uptown location in 2009, "smack in the middle of the recession." There's plenty of competition, of course, among those who render services at barbershops in Charlotte. So what sets No Grease apart from its competitors?

It's "not so much the services as the professionalism and the overall structure of our business," says Damian Johnson. "We definitely demand the highest level of service from our barbers. (But) their image is just as important" as their skills.

"Changing the Face of Business," the slogan on the company's website, speaks to the brothers' expectations for stylists who embody the polished image they want to project.

“Having these young black men represent the hair industry in such a professional way is something new to the industry,” says Johnson, and it’s crucial to helping No Grease differentiate itself from the barbering crowd.

The company also distinguishes itself by sponsoring events such as The Art of Hair that’s slated to take place in April, possibly on the rooftop of the Mosaic building at JCSU. The event is “a platform for artists of all types to showcase their talents and services,” Johnson says. “It’s like a market; it’s almost like a trade show with booths, and people are just presenting their art and their creativity with a dose of a hair show/fashion show.”

The importance of economics and building wealth are two messages the Johnson brothers want to disseminate more broadly in the African American community. “We have been able to use barbering (and events such as The Art of Hair),” Johnson says, “to get those messages out. “Our commitment to the community has allowed us to be successful in business.”

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