

Lather, rinse, remarket for hair care brand

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By Julie Jargon

Salon Selectives, the old Helene Curtis hair care brand, is poised to bounce back.

The shampoos and conditioners, which largely disappeared from store shelves in the years since Unilever N.V. acquired Helene Curtis, could reappear as early as yearend. Chicago brand-revival firm River West Brands LLC acquired the rights to Salon Selectives in December.

"Our interest in Salon Selectives is driven by a belief in the brand's strength, but we're also happy to be giving another chance to a Chicago brand," says River West President Paul Earle

When Salon Selectives was launched in 1987, it was the first hair care brand to offer customization. Numbers or letters signified the desired type of cleaning or conditioning. And it was the first line since Vidal Sassoon to market salon-quality products outside the salon. Commercials featuring its "Like you just stepped out of a salon" jingle solidified its image.

By 1995, Salon Selectives was Helene Curtis' No. 2 brand behind Suave, with sales of about \$300 million, or 20% of overall revenue.

But the brand's strong position started going down the drain after Unilever, the Dutch-British consumer products conglomerate, bought Helene Curtis in March 1996. Herbal Essences and Pantene began stealing marketshare from Salon Selectives, and Unilever decided to reposition the brand to appeal to younger consumers.

MARKETING 'MISCALCULATION'

"It was a fundamental miscalculation and misunderstanding of the brand heritage," says Gene Zeffren, former president of Helene Curtis USA, who stayed on with Unilever after the acquisition. "They made it more funky and lost the brand's connection to the salon entirely."

By 2002, sales of Salon Selectives had fallen to just \$70 million and Unilever stopped promoting the brand.

In the fall, Unilever approached River West about taking over Salon Selectives. A Unilever representative declined to comment, and terms of the deal are confidential.

Mr. Zeffren, who retired from Unilever in 2002 and is considering getting involved with the brand's relaunch, cautions River West against repeating the mistakes of his former employer. "They have to . . . understand what the brand's strengths and heritage were and which of those are relevant today."

Mr. Earle concurs. "We have to strike the correct balance between old and new, and if we get either wrong, we're in trouble," he says, declining to discuss specific plans for the brand.

If he gets it right, it will be a homecoming not only for Salon Selectives but for Mr. Earle. When he worked at New York ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi, Helene Curtis was a client, and the team that developed the Salon Selectives ad campaign was down the hall.

"I used to hear the Salon Selectives song 10 times a day," he says. "It's burned into my head."