

Advance Australia Hair: Yeah



Dean Ashton before



Dean Ashton after



John Ventura before



John Ventura after



Andrew Loucas before



Andrew Loucas after

Carl Howell has built a multi-million-dollar business out of hair replacement. And it is a business, it seems, that will continue to flourish as men discover there is a viable alternative to baldness. KATE DE BRITO reports

CARL Howell, chairman and founder of the Advanced Hair Studios, has shiny, healthy and immaculately coiffured hair.

So shiny, in fact, that one can't help suspecting that Howell may have stopped in for a bit of patchwork on his own pate.

"It's my own," he replied hastily in answer to the inevitable query. But don't expect to see much more "real hair" in any of the 60 Advanced Hair Studios around the world.

"As a rule we won't employ someone with a full head of hair," said Howell.

"All our people now have our hair — except the women."

Most would agree it's a fairly unusual employment policy but to Howell it makes perfect sense. And who is going to argue?

He was responsible for employing the follicularly-challenged NSW cricket captain Greg Matthews as the face of Advanced Hair Studios in Australia.

That savvy marketing move and Matthews' now distinctive, although somewhat daggly "Yeah Yeah" catchcry has effectively made the company the best-known hair-replacement firm in the country.

In fact, Advanced Hair is one of the biggest hair-replacement companies in the world, a leader in hair-replacement technology.

Incorporated in Melbourne in 1976, the company has grown to include 60 studios in 10 countries, with an estimated turnover of \$40 million a year. Not bad for a fellow who never had any intention of working in the rather specialised hair-replacement market.

Trained in business and accounting, it was quite by accident that Howell went into partnership with an American whose family had worked in the hair-replacement field for three generations.

By the time Howell was 23, the company had already grown into a chain of studios across the US.

A few years later he sold his share of the US business and returned to Australia to open an office in Melbourne with just one employee.

Because clients must return every six weeks for new hair replacement, Howell is still dealing with the clients he worked with 20 years ago.

The company now operates in the UK, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, Hungary, Hong Kong, Malaysia and is preparing to open an office in Japan.

"From the beginning it's been about marketing," said Howell.

"That's the key to business today — the quality of the product and the inventiveness of it and the way we market it."

In the early days of business in the US, Howell used a baseball player and an ex-boxer as spokesmen for the company.

Over the years, he has been approached by many celebrities happy to become an Advanced Hair face but he maintains that sporting stars are best at representing the product because of their active, healthy image.

"An actor's an actor, with this type of product with such a personal aspect about it, an actor could almost be construed as acting it and what we look for is credibility," said Howell.

"That's why we prefer the sports individual."

In the UK, the face of their campaign is the former English cricket captain, Graham Gooch. His trademark is "Howzat".

The now well-known "Yeah Yeah" Matthews tagged to the end of one television commercial is one of the smartest pieces of advertising for Howell's company.

Advanced Hair Yeah Yeah is now a registered logo.

Funnily enough the logo was suggested by another famous sportsman Mark "Jacko" Jamson who had his own silly saying — "Oi!" — in the Energiser battery commercials.

"In 1993 I was staying at Mark's place outside the hills in Melbourne," said Matthews.

"I run a lot of things past Mark and I talked to him about this opportunity (with Advanced Hair).

"We were driving into town to get a feed together and he was a bit uptight at my worries about joining Advanced Hair."

"He slammed on the brakes, half mounted the gutter, gave me this monstrous horsie bite on my right leg and said, 'Stop carrying on. Advanced Hair Yeah Yeah'."

"And that's where it came from. He talked me through how 'Oi!' had been so successful for him and he said, 'Just tag it on, and it'll be good for you, it's a natural thing because you're always saying it.'"

"A lot of the things I do come from Mark, he is an inspiration to me."

About a third of men's hair losses are genetic, passed through the mother's genes.

It is also estimated that about 50 per cent of men will be affected by genetic hair loss by the age of 50. About 20 per cent will be affected by age 20.

Although anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that women are not bothered by men's hair loss, the fact is most men find baldness unappealing.

And this is not just a recent phenomenon. Throughout history men with thick, strong hair

have been revered while those with thin hair or bald heads have been considered weaker and less masculine.

But that's not to say that bald men can't be cool. Just look at Yul Brynner, Sean Connery, Michael Jordan and Bruce Willis.

Dr Brian Hickman, consulting psychologist and Australian Psychological Society representative, says some men are more severely affected by their hair loss.

"In most cases it's just about appearance, they feel they would look better with hair but it's not a big issue," said Dr Hickman.

"For others it's all about status and virility and competitiveness."

Janet Hall, a clinical psychologist and sex therapist, has come to the conclusion that men's obsession with baldness makes "no sense at all."

"It is totally irrational," she said.

"They feel that it threatens their masculinity, adequacy and attractiveness."

"Many men feel they need to have some sort of hair piece or hair restoration as a sort of security blanket."

Howell, however, is reticent to say whether he finds bald men unattractive.

"It's not important what I believe," he said.

"I think that it can affect people drastically — some people look horrific without hair, others can look great."

"At the end of the day it's what they perceive themselves as, it's what they want."

"Many things can motivate somebody to do something about their hair."

"It's interesting to note that lately there's been tremendous media coverage about the new bionic ear."

"For every guy who is losing his hearing, there would be 100 guys, possibly more, who are losing their hair. Many of them find it can be an extremely traumatic experience that can affect them mentally."

"Yet when a company like us invents something new that is revolutionary nobody really cares."

Advanced Hair uses a technique which involves fusing a skin-like membrane — like a second scalp — with the existing hair.

Obviously the more hair the client has, the better. Using a strand by strand procedure, hair — which is bought from countries such as Russia — is injected into the fake skin.

The cost varies from \$2000 up to \$10,000 and there are a range of different procedures available.

"The cost depends on how quickly they want the process completed; if it's done gradually it's more expensive," said Howell.

"The minimum time is about six weeks. It's up to clients how long it takes. Sometimes it's six months, sometimes a year."

The benefit of this system is that it withstands tough treatment and would need a force strong enough to yank out real hair, to pull it from its roots.

Howell's clients come from a cross section of the community, the only constant being their age which is consistently between 22 and 50.

As well as people such as Greg Matthews, Howell has many confidential celebrity clients.

"I can't divulge the names of our clients," said Howell.

"The public would be very surprised at the names of some of them. We have some big names."

"One English pop star flies from London to Brussels to be serviced just so people won't find out."

'Some people look horrific without hair, others look great' ... Advanced Hair Studios' founder Carl Howell

