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## At Michelle's, a tough economy means the customer is always right about her own hair, even when she's wrong



BY KHRISTOPHER J. BROOKS  
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A new customer walked into Michelle's Hair Salon on Fulton Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn on a Saturday afternoon last month. Owner Michelle Anderson noted her broad shoulders and flat nose as the woman explained what she wanted: A strawberry-colored weave.

Michelle directed the customer to sit down and thought to herself: "This is gonna look hideous." And yet she looked on the outside cheerful as she opened the pack of red hair, which the customer had brought in herself, and began to sew it in.

In their training, hairstylists are taught guidelines for matching a client's facial features with a hairstyle. Women with wide or big ears should have hair with more body, perhaps longer hair with faint curls, so that it hides their ears. Women with smaller ears could have short hairdos, straight or curly. Dark-skinned women are advised to stay away from bright yellows and platinums. Lighter-skinned women can play with all hues of brown and subtle shades of red.

These best practices are bolded in cosmetology textbooks and reiterated by instructors. But once a hairstylist graduates and begins to work in a salon, another rule tends to take over, a rule of commerce: The customer is always right.

At Michelle's, for example, most of the hairstylists give the customer whatever she wants—Michelle called it the salon's policy. But Michelle allows each hairstylist to follow that rule on a case-by-case basis.

Both the policy, which might allow a customer to become a bad advertisement for the salon back at home among her family and friends, and Michelle's laxity in enforcing it are products of the same reality at hair salons like Michelle's.

Hairstylists at Michelle's aren't on salary; they split their fees with the salon, to help cover the costs of doing business. So the greater the number of customers they serve, the bigger paycheck they can bring home, and the better the salon does.

Back in 2001, when the U.S. unemployment rate was slightly more than half of what it is today, Michelle's salon was packed every weekday with the volume of customers it now only sees on Saturdays. That year, the salon brought in three times as much as it does today. The hairstylists were so busy on



Michelle's. Christopher J. Brooks.



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those Saturdays that some of them went 12 hours without eating more than a bag of chips or a bagel.

As the economy continues to falter, times get tougher quick for these hairstylists and their families. The cosmetology-school ethos just isn't workable.

"I give the customer what they say, what they're paying for," one of the hairstylists, Danya, said a few weeks ago while curling Chariece Burns' hair. "When their mind is already set, it's very hard to change someone's mind."

Chariece has been coming to the salon for about a month and a half, and she has the makings of a regular customer. She is a Bed-Stuy mother who lives nearby on Lafayette Avenue and works as a caseworker for New York City's Administration for Children's Services. Chariece's previous hairstylist lost her job at a salon and began doing hair out of her home. She didn't like having to enter someone's basement for styling and so popped into Michelle's one afternoon. Chariece is a customer who knows what she wants: The same curls and teased bang style that her husband Kenny, to whom she has been married for eight and a half years, is used to seeing.

Danya finished one side of Chariece's hair, and Chariece continued to sit silently in the chair as Danya continued to explain her policy, switching to the other side of Chariece's head.

"A lot of people choose styles that don't fit their face and that's just the truth," Danya said. "But I want to get paid for my work. I stand on my feet for 12 hours a day. I want to get paid."

Now Chariece turned her head and interjected.

"See, I disagree," she said. "I might have my own idea, but I respect your input, your decision. I take you as a professional who knows what she talking about and—

Just then the salon's phone rang and Danya picked it up. Someone was calling for Michelle. Michelle came over and grabbed it.

"And you're right," Danya continued. "But see a lot of people don't see it that way. It depends on my client; some people I can keep it real with, and others, like I said."

"But I'm just saying," Chariece said. "I would want somebody's input if I was about to get something that didn't work. Especially now since I'm getting older. I mean, I'm aging gracefully and I love it, but older women need short hairstyles. Getting all that long hair, down your back and stuff; that don't look cute."

On an unusually chilly afternoon this past March, hairstylist Dawanna Carter explained how and why she tries to change customers' minds when they request something she thinks will look awful.

"I mean, some people have no knowledge of a comb, brush or iron to their hair," she said, having a little difficulty getting her point across. "You know? Whatever. You know what I'm saying?"

"Put it like this: everybody is different. Everybody's head is shaped different; everybody has different shaped eyes, different shaped noses. The thing is, most people tell me they have a hard time finding a stylist who does styles to fit their face."

By "people" Dawanna meant black women in and around Bed-Stuy. These women are meticulous about whom they let style their hair and they will abandon a salon after one dissatisfying visit.

Dawanna plugged her cell phone charger in the electrical socket under her countertop. She had a feeling she was in the minority, but Dawanna said a responsible and caring hairstylist would not allow a client to leave the salon "looking like who done it."

"If they say they want a style out of a magazine and you know it won't fit their shape or you know just them as a person period, why not give that advice? Like, 'Why don't we look at something else' or 'Let's weigh our options with a hair style.'"

There's a longer game in this: Dawanna worries that the salon will get a reputation for sending its customers out looking bad.

"Then, after they walk out, their friends or whatever say 'Girl, why you get that color? Oh my God, that color's too bright for you!' And she'll say 'I saw it on TV, the girl did it for me and I thought it would look nice'."

Last month, Dawanna had a customer who wanted a hairstyle that featured a large, poofy bang that swooshed to the right. The customer, Dawanna said, had a long cone-like head. As she finished the style, Dawanna turned to the customer and tried to convince her to try a different bang.

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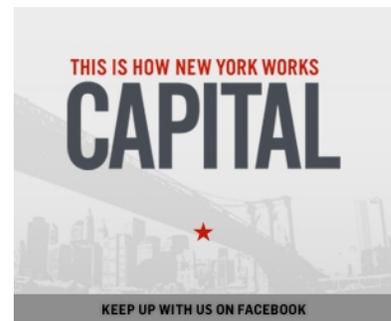
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A large swoop bang like the one Dawanna's customer wanted usually makes a person's head appear larger and wider.

"She said 'No, this is how I want it. I'm used to it this way. This is what I like'," Dawanna said.

Reluctantly, Dawanna began creating the bang. But before she'd gotten very far, she leaned over her countertop and grabbed one of her hair magazines. She turned to one page and laid the magazine flat on the counter. Poking her finger at one of the pictures on the page, Dawanna gave it one last try.

"I said to her 'See, this is sorta the kind of bang I was thinking about for you,'" Dawanna said. "She still said 'no', so I just gave it to her."

Danya and Chariece had long finished their conversation about styling for the face when Danya finished Chariece's hair, peeled off the black and gold smock she'd fastened around her neck, and handed her a mirror. She smiled and looked satisfied.

"I'll be back," Chariece said. "You know me."

*Christopher Brooks will be filing regular reports from Michelle's. Some last names have been omitted at the request of the subjects.*

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