

The Cricket Co.

The high-energy company sparkles with new lines of award-winning sundries and shears.

by J. Elaine Spear



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The Cricket Co., based in Benicia, California, has been a leading manufacturer of sundries and shears for nearly 25 years. Founded by Wayne Clark, who recently sold off his other well-known company, West Coast Beauty Supply, Cricket has consistently set industry standards for sales and product quality. That trend continues.

With Cricket's family of Centrix blow-dryers and flat irons currently impacting what many store owners put on their shelves, Beauty Store Business wanted to know what makes this market-driven organization so successful. So we sat down with Jared Clark and Jeff Schwartz, key members of the Cricket team, to talk about the company's past and present activities. Their responses paint a vivid picture of how marketing and customer service continue to play crucial roles in helping the dynamic company achieve double-digit growth during sluggish economic times.

BSB: Let's start with some background on the Cricket Co. When was the business founded, and how has it grown over the years?

JC: My father, Wayne Clark, was a hairdresser in the 1970s. He loved the beauty business but felt frustrated over the lack of quality sundry items for salon professionals. He also realized that, unlike liquid lines that were being shrewdly marketed by many beauty manufacturers, there were few compelling marketing activities surrounding sundries. Wisely viewing this void as a business opportunity, he started the Cricket Co. in 1979. And his vision has proven to be very successful. In 2003 the Cricket Co. grew by 23%, while the beauty industry averaged only 3% growth.

We've always been an industry leader in terms of introducing new and innovative tools to the professional market. Today we're a top company in many categories, including shears,

brushes, apparel, electricals, and accessories such as shear cases and hand mirrors. Having recently sold West Coast Beauty Supply to Alberto-Culver, Wayne is now involved with the Cricket Co. as owner, advisor and visionary. I'm currently the general manager and marketing manager, and Jeff Schwartz is the vice president of sales.

BSB: How do you categorize the Cricket Co. in the marketplace?

JC: The Cricket Co. is first and foremost a marketing company. We create all of our own product designs, but we manufacture off-site. Cricket primarily sells to full-service distributorships that, in turn, often distribute to OTCs. Our end-users are hairstylists and their clients who want professional-quality sundries with compelling, cutting-edge designs. Examples are our new Technique brushes and our patented



ECHO and ENVY magnetic capes. Our packaging is also extremely innovative and effective, both in terms of functionality and visual appeal.

JS: Our goal is never to overburden our inventory, or that of our customers, with a million items simply for the sake of coming out with new products. Each product that's released by the Cricket Co. has been well thought out and always has the hairstylists' needs in mind. We're also at the forefront of novel and aggressive marketing strategies for sundries, haircutting tools, blow-dryers and flat irons. Starting with nothing more than a great idea over two decades ago, the Cricket Co. has become an international company with full distribution throughout the United States and Canada. We also have distributors in Mexico, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Australia and, most recently, Lebanon.

BSB: Can you tell us about your personal backgrounds in the industry?

JC: I joined our family business in 1987 right after graduating from high school. Initially I worked at one of our West Coast Beauty Supply stores. From there I worked in the warehouse and did customer service and telemarketing. Eventually I became a buyer for West Coast Beauty Supply and held that position for nine years. During that time I received an excellent education on many aspects



view from the top

of the beauty business, including distribution, purchasing and, most importantly, the needs of our distributors and beauty stores. I was also fortunate to have great mentors enrich my career, people like Pete Record, Paul Eggert and Jim Klickman—and, especially, my father.

JS: I've been in the professional beauty business since the late 1970s. I began my career with Revlon Realistic as an assistant district manager, and finally as a district manager. I then became the eastern division manager for L'Oréal Classic Salon Products, and was ultimately promoted to eastern division manager of L'Oréal Professionnel. Subsequently I became the national sales manager for Matrix and had the pleasure of working with Arnie Miller for many years. I joined the Cricket Co. in 1998. As vice president of sales, I'm responsible for sales and customer service, and all rep groups report directly to me.

Going from liquids to solids has proven to be an interesting transition, partly because I love being a student of the game. I also have a deep respect for all aspects of the beauty business. My wife, Paula, is a hairdresser. I even went to beauty school early on, while I was still working for Revlon Realistic. I did this because I wanted to know more about hairdressing and the people I serve. I never took my boards because my hands never quite did what my brain told them to do, but my school experience affirmed that my destiny is tied to successfully marketing and promoting beauty products.

BSB: The company has a reputation for developing innovative marketing campaigns. Can you tell us about some recent successes?

JS: After joining the Cricket team, I began drawing from my own experience and business vision to help sharpen our marketing efforts, including creating more effective marketing materials and promotions. We now have our promotions set six months out, and what we



have to offer the salon industry is irresistible. In fall 2003, for instance, we gave away a free beach cruiser bicycle with the purchase of a Centrix shear. That promotion turned out to be one of the biggest of its kind in our company's entire history. We also had an extremely successful Roc-it Dog shear promotion in January 2004: Purchase one of these shears for \$124.95, and you received a metal attaché case loaded with over \$100 in Cricket merchandise as a gift. Aggressive promotions like these make it much easier for our distributors to sell volumes of Cricket products.

BSB: Customer service also plays an important role in your company. How is this philosophy carried through to the client?

JS: Arnie Miller taught me so many things when we worked together at Matrix, including one very important lesson: Always exceed your clients' expectations and they'll be your clients for life. I try to practice this philosophy every day. I personally answer all e-mails that are sent to our Web site before 10 a.m. This is sometimes an awesome task, because we receive up to 80 e-mails each day. Our staff members are also expected to return all voice-mail messages the day they're received. As a result, people love dealing with us, because we're responsive and dedicated to taking care of their business needs.

I also believe that I strengthen our team through leading by example. I work our booth at all trade shows, selling scissors and personally meeting thousands of hairdressers each year. It's

such a powerful way to manage our staff, and it really keeps me in touch with the industry.

BSB: What are a few of your star products and lines?

JS: Static Free was one of our first brush lines, and it still leads the industry in terms of everyday brushes used by salon professionals and their clients. It eliminates flyaway hair, has reinforced "stay-put" ball tips and features a nonslip grip for maximum control. Our Technique line is also a leader in the round brush business. We recently improved this popular line by engineering a new lightweight handle and adding antibacterial protection, a "sueded" rubber grip, static-free properties and heat-resistant bristles.

All of our shears are at the forefront of the industry, including our higher-end Centrix shears and our value-priced Roc-it Dog shears. Our Ultraclean PROclips sectioning clips are no doubt the leader in the industry. And our Cricket styling mirror and Silkomb cutting comb collection continue to be huge sellers. In terms of apparel, our popular ENVY black and ECHO color capes now feature our new MAG-LOC patented magnetic closure system. This inventive new closure has proven to be so popular that we recently sold a record 33,000 ENVY capes in just 30 days. Our ECHO COLORS cape collection has also been selling very well.

BSB: What new products have you released most recently?

JS: Our biggest news at the moment is that we've become involved in both the blow-dryer and flat-iron markets. Our goal is to sell top-end tools with promotions that are far superior to those of other professional irons and blow-dryers on the market. They're also packaged to sell, with powerful gift-with-purchase sales incentives and other equally persuasive promotions.

Our new Centrix 5000 is a 1,600-watt Italian blow-dryer with a motor that blows gale-force winds of up to 50 miles per hour. This is important to hairdressers, since it's wind—not heat—that's largely responsible for drying hair.

The more intense the airflow, the more productive stylists can be. We've tested the Centrix 5000 against many leading professional blow-dryers and have found that it consistently generates up to 25% more wind velocity.

To launch this important new category for our company, we've bundled our RotoRazor with the Centrix 5000 as a gift-with-purchase promo, giving stylists \$129.95 worth of tools for only \$79.95. The packaging is also fabulous. The Centrix 5000 stands up in a clear crisp box, so stylists can see its sleek design from all angles. To help aggressively promote our new blow-dryer, we've also given every sales consultant a \$79 wind meter so that they can invite stylists to compare the speed of their current blow-dryers with ours. This alone has helped introduce the Centrix 5000 to thousands of stylists across the country.



Our StraightCrazy ceramic flat iron is also the epitome of our goal to have a strong presence in the styling tools market. It has solid ceramic plates to eliminate static electricity, five temperature settings, and an ergonomic design that's both sleek and lightweight. We've positioned the StraightCrazy iron to be the most profitable and affordable professional-quality flat iron on the market. It's also designed to be a lucrative retail item for salons. Unlike comparable irons that typically cost over \$150, for instance, the StraightCrazy flat iron has a suggested salon price of \$34.95, with a suggested salon retail price of \$49.95. To support better retail sales, a recent ONFOCUS promotion gave salons the opportunity to purchase five StraightCrazy irons

view from the top

packaged in an attractive retail display for just \$29.95 apiece.

Because of its innovative design and our aggressive marketing techniques, the Centrix RotoRazor is also setting sales records. Rather than the standard straight handle with rigid construction like other haircutting razors, the RotoRazor has a fully rotational cutting blade that locks into six different positions, eliminating the need to flex and bend the wrists and elbows. This makes cutting more comfortable while helping to avoid career-threatening carpal tunnel syndrome. The handle is also ergonomically designed, and the overall look is extremely edgy. The RotoRazor sells for \$49.95, but we aggressively promote it in various ways.

BSB: What's the buzz on your new display? How is it designed to improve your company's sales?

JS: Our new racking system fits in a 30-inch-wide space. Designed to minimize space needs while maximizing sales, the unit holds 57 pieces of our best-selling apparel. It also features a universal design that can sit on a standard gondola shelf, attach to pegboard or hang directly on a slat wall. We initially made 700 of these cape displays and sold every one of them in 30 days. BSG, Armstrong McCall and State Distributors report an incredible spike in their apparel business since introducing this new presentation piece.

To complete this system, we've also introduced new box packaging for our capes that shows models wearing the apparel, instructions on care, and a cutout where clients can see the true color and feel the material. We also introduced a new color-coding system: red for haircutting, purple for waterproof, yellow for coverups and aprons, and blue for all-purpose.

We also recognize that salon stores need to turn inventory quickly, and anything that doesn't sell immediately runs the risk of being returned. We always make sure that our salon store displays don't require a big buy-in and that they help sell sundry items. Our Technique display, for instance, holds 18 brushes, is made of brushed metal and has a very

high-tech appeal, piquing the interest of clients who might not otherwise be thinking about buying a new brush. If you don't do interesting, yet functional displays like this at the store and salon levels, brushes often wind up in standard baskets and get lost on the shelf.

BSB: The Cricket Co. has received quite a few ABBIES nominations this year. Has the company won awards in the past?

JS: We won the first Golden ABBIES two years ago. This year, the introductory deal for our RotoRazor has been nominated for an ABBIES for "Best Marketing for In-Salon Use Products." Our ENVY/ECHO cape promotions have also been nominated in this category. Our Centrix Apparel Swatch Book and Centrix Shear Catalog have been nominated for "Best DSC Marketing Tool," and our Centrix shears promotion, which we tied to the free beach cruiser bicycle in fall 2003, has been nominated for "Best Sales Promotions Overall."

BSB: What's the company's focus for 2004? Does it perhaps involve any new product releases?

JC: Our company is very promotion oriented. Let's face facts: Hairdressers are no different than other consumers—they love a good deal—so we embrace the philosophy that "with promotion, there's emotion." We've recently strengthened our marketing approach by streamlining our product promotions. Instead of coming out with an avalanche of unrelated deals throughout the year, we now have our ongoing ONFOCUS 30-day, moneymaking deals for stores, involving things like brushes, apparel or hard goods. A good example is our first Technique smoothing brush promotion, designed to introduce this new brush to the market. When customers purchased a Technique thermal round brush, they got a smoothing brush, a \$14.95 value, free. The promotion came with a display that read, "Buy this brush and get this one free," and it was so successful that our smoothing brush is now an open-stock item in our Technique line.

We also have ongoing bimonthly salon promotions involving key items in our open stock, such as Static Free brushes or Cat Clipper combs. These 60-day promotions are designed to give salons enough time to buy two or three deals of popular, key products at a significant savings.

BSB: What trade shows will the Cricket Co. be involved with in 2004?

JS: We participate in all of our distributors' shows to support their ongoing efforts with Cricket products. We also plan to continue having a strong presence at BBSI [Cosmoprof North America] and every major show across the country in 2004.

BSB: What's your take on the new beauty industry?

JS: There's no doubt that consolidation, global commerce, computerization and many other factors have changed the way we do business. But I also believe that the beauty business is still a people business. You can walk into any salon and tell which salesperson has the best relationship with a given company based on where their products are displayed on the shelves.

In terms of beauty stores, the ones that are thriving have good relationships with their customers. This includes having an enthusiastic staff that truly enjoys sharing information with customers about how they can improve their appearance, which is really the most powerful form of salesmanship. A case in point was a flight I once took while traveling on business. I was sitting in first class with four other passengers, including Lee Iacocca. When the passengers around me found out that I was in the beauty business, they immediately stopped asking Mr. Iacocca about Chrysler and started asking me about what type of brush, comb and shampoo they should be using. It just goes to show, people are more driven by their looks than by their cars. BSB

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