



Executive Suite: Ouidad builds business on good hair days

What's this?

Updated 5d 19h ago | Comment | Recommend

E-mail | Save | Print | Reprints & Permissions | **RSS**



Enlarge By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

In her Manhattan salon, Ouidad Wise styles the hair of Bernice Leber. She has built an internationally known business around the care of curly hair.

By **Laura Petrecca, USA TODAY**

NEW YORK — Some people manage to become such a bigger-than-life presence in their field that they become generally recognized simply by their first name. Emeril in food. Oprah on the talk-show circuit. Valentino in fashion.

And in the world of caring for curly hair: Ouidad.

CORPORATE PULSE: [Executive Suite index](#)

A loyal following of ringlet-adorned women around the globe are intimately familiar with the Ouidad (WEE-dod) line of specialized hair care products and Ouidad's frizz-reducing hair-cutting technique known — and trademarked — as Carving and Slicing.

In Ouidad Wise, these women have an ally — as well as compatriot with personal experience — in battling distressing tresses. Lebanon-born Ouidad, 50, describes the long, thick, curly hair of her youth as a "mop head."

FIND MORE STORIES IN: [Manhattan](#) | [Executive Suite](#)

Even after moving to the USA with her family at age 16 and getting a job at a Rhode Island hair salon, Ouidad had a tough time taming her mane. In learning to care for her own hair, she began developing a professional specialty for conquering curls.

By her early 20s, Ouidad says, she established a reputation as a go-to hair stylist for curls and worked for Broadway shows, advertising-agency photo shoots and fashion magazine spreads.

A difficult leap of faith

At 26, she opened a salon dedicated solely to the care of wavy, kinky or curly hair.

But that entrepreneurial leap proved difficult.

Beauty editors warned her there was no market for her concept. "They said, 'You might as well throw your money away,'" says Ouidad.

And bankers scoffed when she tried to get financing. Raising money "was very difficult," she says. "I had to borrow from friends and family — a thousand here and a thousand there — to build the business."

She ultimately also was able to obtain a loan from the U.S. Small

Business Administration and, in 1984, she and husband Peter Wise opened a 1,200-square-foot Ouidad Salon in New York City.

A little more than two decades later, Ouidad has built curls into a multimillion-dollar hair business that also includes hair products and professional training. Among her roles:

•**Lead stylist.** In 2004, she moved from that first salon to a sleek, 5,000-square-foot space in Midtown Manhattan. The operation has 15 full-time employees and a clientele that includes women who travel from as far as Italy, Argentina and Israel for the services of Ouidad and her staff. And it includes about 20% men.

•**Trainer.** She's made a brisk business out of training haircutters from around the country in her Carving and Slicing technique. Beauticians pay \$2,000 for a course to become Ouidad Certified in styling curly hair and take those skills back home. Their salons are now able to offer Ouidad Certified services for curly hair and sell Ouidad products.

•**Inventor.** She works with chemists to create products that soothe unruly tresses.

"I started out mixing (drugstore-bought) products, and then I went into a lab with chemists," Ouidad says. Her namesake line has more than 20 products such as shampoos, conditioners and gels. It also includes a KRLY Kids brand designed for children.

Real solutions for your real estate needs.

Choose from the selections below:

- [Customized financial solutions](#) [Click here to begin](#)
- [Search properties nationwide](#)
- [Full service relocation assistance](#)
- [Apartments for rent in your area](#)
- [Home improvement options](#)

Financing Options:
Need help financing or refinancing a home? [Click here](#)

•**Author.** Her *Curl Talk* is a book of tips on how to not end up with a poofy-haired Roseanne Roseannadanna look.

•**Philanthropist.** A breast cancer survivor who lost her mother to the disease, Ouidad started a fundraising plan called Curls for a Cure. The company matches client donations and has raised more than \$136,000.

Making a name

At 5-foot-9 with a neatly styled wave of shoulder-length dark hair, Ouidad comes across as combination hostess and hair evangelist as she makes her way through her flagship salon.

Between greeting clients, she proudly shows off the salon layout: an out-of-the-way section for chemical treatments, a window-lined cutting section that gets lots of natural light and a waiting room dotted with spiral-haired women waiting their turn.

Ouidad does not hesitate to run her fingers through the hair of anyone in the place (including a reporter). And she's not shy about staking her claim as a trailblazer in specialty hair care — or talking about her personal obsession with curls.

"I think there are only two hours a day that I'm awake and don't talk about hair," she says.

That passion and outgoing, take-charge personality have made her a name in the hair care industry.

"She's a pioneer," says Michelle Breyer, a co-founder of NaturallyCurly.com, a hair-focused social networksite that draws about 200,000 unique visitors a month. "Ouidad is to be applauded. She was out there talking the talk before anyone else."

Her success also drew the attention of business suitors. One, JH Partners, which has investments in consumer-driven companies such as Design Within Reach, Peet's Coffee & Tea and Bare Escentuals cosmetics, was intrigued enough to buy an undisclosed majority stake in her company in June, though she continues to be chairman.

Ouidad's unbridled enthusiasm helped seal the deal, says JH senior partner Michael John. That, and her company's sales.

"Our interest only grew after we met Ouidad and we learned that she was generating in excess of \$10 million in revenue (a year)," he says.

And that was with limited distribution. Ouidad's signature cuts and treatments are available at the flagship salon and eight affiliated salons outside New York City. Her products are sold only at those salons, on Ouidad.com and on Amazon.com.

With its investment, JH plans to expand Ouidad's training services, add salons (next up: the Los Angeles area) and get into direct selling using infomercials and segments on TV home-shopping channels.

Getting some help

While Ouidad as chairman remains the creative force and face of the company, JH brought in Hillary Solomon as CEO to manage the financial side and build marketing buzz around Ouidad the person and Ouidad the brand.

"One of my top priorities is driving awareness for Ouidad, making her the star and getting people to know who she is," says Solomon, whose experience includes beauty company Frédéric Fekkai and L'Oreal's Kiehl's.

Beyond the financial rewards, Ouidad says she's thrilled by the opportunity to leave behind some of her operational duties and focus on cutting techniques, training and creating products. "I don't have to do the CFO work and the HR work anymore."

In return, JH has a beachhead in a growth area of the hair care market.

According to researcher Packaged Facts, overall hair-care product sales were \$7.2 billion in 2005, up 3.9% from the previous year. It projects they will top \$7.8 billion this year and \$8.5 billion by 2010.

Outpacing the overall market, however, are conditioners, gels, mousse and holding sprays — key elements in Ouidad's product line. The market for those products formulated specifically for curly hair is taking off.

"Hair companies have finally opened up to the fact that more than half the population has curly hair," says NaturallyCurly.com's Breyer. "It's not like that market wasn't here. It's just that companies have a growing awareness (of the business opportunity)."

Last year, 166 products for curly hair were launched, up 131% from 2005, according to Datamonitor's Productscan Online.

Returning customers

One major business draw, Breyer says, is that women with curly hair typically buy more styling potions than their straight-haired sisters. "Anecdotally, the average person on our site uses at least three products a day — not counting shampoo and conditioner."

And when a woman with hard-to-manage hair finds a product or stylist she likes, she tends to be fiercely brand-loyal, Breyer says.

JH's John says many of Ouidad's clients fit that description. Internal research showed that customers return repeatedly for cuts and products. "You love seeing that as an investor," he says.

While some of Ouidad's prices may seem a bit hair-raising — women's cuts start at \$125 and a 4-ounce bottle of conditioning Deep Treatment goes for \$30 — Ouidad's business model also has shown that people will pay a premium for her specialized hair care.

Elizabeth Repoli — a blond mom who took an hour-long bus ride from her Riverdale, N.Y., home to the Manhattan salon on a recent day — says Ouidad's products and signature haircuts are worth the price.

A five-year customer of the Ouidad salon, she had just had a trim by Ouidad stylist Anila Poreci.

"I really trust what they're going to do," she says. She paid \$135 for her cut — and that didn't include the shopping bag of styling products she splurged on.

"The investment is worth it," she says. "My hair looks and feels great."

Posted 15d ago

Updated 5d 19h ago

E-mail | Save | Print | Reprints & Permissions | [RSS](#)

*To report corrections and clarifications, contact Reader Editor **Brent Jones**. For publication consideration in the newspaper, send comments to letters@usatoday.com. Include name, phone number, city and state for verification.*

Conversation guidelines: USA TODAY welcomes your thoughts, stories and information related to this article. Please stay on topic and be respectful of others. Keep the conversation appropriate for interested readers across the map.

Newspaper Home Delivery - Subscribe Today

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USATODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Reprints and Permissions](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) | [Podcasts](#) | [Widgets](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#)

Copyright 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.