HairUWear tackled an undeveloped niche, changed the haircare landscape and struck skyrocketing success—while maintaining its family-owned values for nearly 50 years.

By Tracy Morin

When Michael Napolitano, owner, president and CEO of HairUWear, launched American Hairlines in 1980 with wife, Denise, and mother, Eleanor, he couldn’t have predicted the explosion in popularity of hairpieces, extensions, wigs and accessories in the coming decades; but he did have a strong premonition. Even years later—after acquiring Eva Gabor International in 1996 and introducing Great Lengths in 1997—many skeptics remained.

“Everyone thought I was crazy,” Napolitano says. “In 1997, there was virtually no hair extension business in the United States, outside the ethnic markets. But I didn’t believe that.”

His hunch proved correct—and drove him to play a major role in reigniting consumers’ passion for the category. Beauty Store Business recently chatted with Napolitano and a few key executives in his thriving enterprise to learn more about the company’s humble roots and meteoric rise to becoming the No. 1 alternative hair company in the world.
MODEL PORTFOLIO

Napolitano may have once seemed like an unlikely haircare innovator; after graduating from Rutgers with a mass communications/journalism degree, he plunged into marketing and sales for the then-nascent computer industry. His mother also worked in sales at wig manufacturer Eva Gabor International. By 1980, mother and son decided to join forces and take a chance on their own venture, American Hairlines. “We decided to start a business from ground zero,” Napolitano says. “We jumped into the deep end and learned everything really fast!”

With few employees on hand, he did it all—packing boxes, monitoring finances, drumming up business, and often forgoing a paycheck. When he purchased Eva Gabor International, he didn’t acquire a broad-based company with a deep portfolio; Napolitano laughs remembering the company’s reputation as a provider of “little old lady wigs.” Faced with the daunting task of completely reinventing the brand, Napolitano renamed Eva Gabor International in 1996 to HairUWear, Inc., intending to turn the business into a multi-branded, fashion-focused company.

The following year, Great Lengths USA, which provides professional hair extensions made from 100-percent human hair of guaranteed origin, was added to the fray—along with a comprehensive three-day certification program for stylists throughout the nation. In 1998, the Raquel Welch Signature Collection marked its first celebrity rollout, featuring the Hollywood icon as the muse and creative director promoting the fashion-forward wigs and hairpieces. HairUWear also kicked off an onslaught of ads and marketing campaigns to create customer awareness, which propelled the business to expand its portfolio. Today, the company encompasses a range of brands to meet just about anyone’s needs.

- **American Hairlines:** Natural Advantage, Virtual Reality and Virtuesse provide nonsurgical hair replacement systems for men and women.
- **Hair2wear:** The Christie Brinkley Collection promises supermodel hair, from clip-in extensions and perfect ponytails to camera-ready wigs and other designs.
- **Hairdo:** It’s “style at the speed of life,” sans commitment—think clip-in extensions, ponytails, wraps, wigs and more.
- **Gabor:** This go-to women’s hairstyle collection features effortlessly wearable looks and modern classics inspired by salon stylists’ most popular cuts.
- **HairUWear Professional:** Developed for haircare professionals by industry experts, this high-quality, non-permanent hair extension program is exclusively offered in the professional market to build service revenue for salons and stylists.
- **POP by Hairdo:** With affordable, easy-wear options, POP “flips the script” on basic hair, offering looks from boho braids and shiny metallic trends to beauty-queen topknots.

Napolitano continues to build his family company’s vision: inspiring women and men worldwide to discover the possibilities of alternative hair, and bringing together the best stylists, designers and artistic talent to innovate and create tomorrow’s looks. “Being a family business is our culture; though we’ve grown tenfold, we’ve maintained the way we operate,” Napolitano notes. “And I like the power and flexibility to do what I want!”

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The graduated tones of Gabor’s wigs mimic the look of natural hair. Simple and easy, these wigs and hairpieces make beautiful hair attainable every day.
“Your biggest asset is your team, so we make sure everyone is aware of how valuable they are to carry out our goals and vision. They believe in making a difference.”

ETHICS OF CARE
From initial design to finished product, quality is a top priority, and Napolitano insists HairUWear delivers gold-standard products by maintaining strict standards for quality control. This mission involves several overseas offices, including locations in northern and southern China, Indonesia and Hong Kong, working closely with company headquarters in Lenexa, Kansas, and Sunrise, Florida. “We’re the only [alternative hair] company with offices and full-time employees on staff supervising the manufacturing process on-site,” Napolitano asserts. “We employ an extremely stringent and formalized quality-control process, where production is monitored for quality assurance every step of the way. Each brand has its own benchmarks and unique criteria for the materials and techniques used, while employees also receive regular education to maintain quality standards.”

From sourcing 100-percent certified hair to manufacturing, packaging and distribution processes, quality has become a bona fide obsession.

Branding is another priority, which oozes from the new company headquarters, completed in the spring of 2014. Clocking in at 141,000 square feet, the loft-like design “resembles a Manhattan creative or advertising agency,” Napolitano says, noting the entrance-way flanked by a two-story glass wall and an open, expansive reception area. “We wanted an environment in our new building that stimulated creativity and innovative thinking,” Napolitano explains. “When you walk in, you’re walking into a brand.”

Of course, the employees who fill the company’s offices, both stateside and abroad, are key to success. Napolitano believes company culture starts at the top. Passionate and driven through the decades, he seeks like-minded team players who truly believe in the company’s mission. From office cleaning staff to box packers and educators, “there’s not a soul who’s not critically important,” Napolitano notes. “Your biggest asset is your team, so we make sure everyone is aware of how valuable they are to carry out our goals and vision. They believe in making a difference.”

STAR POWER
Raquel Welch—screen legend, ageless beauty and international sex symbol—fulfilled yet another iconic role when she partnered with HairUWear to introduce the Raquel Welch Wig Collection. Known for its bold, sensuous looks, her eponymous line has been one of the largest and most-respected wig collections worldwide for nearly two decades. “When you feel good about your hair, you radiate beauty and confidence,” Welch says. “My style is simply beautiful: the freshest looks, the easiest to wear. A wig should be as easy and effortless as slipping on a T-shirt and jeans.”
“Change your look, change your life! Whether it’s a runway-inspired updo or long, sleek locks, nothing can transform your attitude like a bold new hairstyle.”

HairUWear also recently launched Raquel Couture, her first ultra-luxury collection featuring six styles with dramatic cuts and sumptuous textures made from 100-percent, certified Remy human hair and designed with a French drawn top for a natural-looking, glam feel. The collection’s success spurred the introduction of two new styles in October. Welch’s mantra: “Make it timeless, but keep it on trend. Make it new. Make it now. Make it fun. Make it fashion. Make it dazzling. Then all you have to do is make it you!”

Another wildly successful celeb collaboration features supermodel Christie Brinkley and HairUWear, a line inspired by stars who change looks by the minute. “Updos, side ponies and other off-the-face options are driving the explosion of this hair category, so we thought the timing was right to develop a brand for the mass market,” Napolitano says. He teamed up with Brinkley to launch Hair2Wear—and his star spokesperson wears the looks virtually every day.

“I’ve worn hair extensions and various hairpieces over the years on numerous photo shoots and TV appearances,” Brinkley explains. “I’m a working mom; my day starts by jumping out of bed, and I never stop running. I learned at work that hair extensions are a great way to have instant volume and style—or make messy, thin hair instantly look finished, or short hair look longer. When HairUWear called me a few years ago about developing a new line and I saw the quality of their products and people, I knew immediately it was a match made in heaven!”

Hairdo, a collection that includes on-trend styles and colors with patented technology—easy to use, easy to style—offers a variety of clip-in extensions, ponytails, bangs and more, for freedom and individual expression. The company’s recent brand makeover includes a new marketing, lifestyle-oriented campaign featuring millennial personalities in relatable experiences.

“Hairdo is all about style at the speed of life; hair with no commitment and unlimited style, day or night or all night long,” Napolitano says. “It perfectly positions the brand to capture the huge, elusive millennial generation, which has become a force in fashion and beauty, and we’re thrilled with the response from consumers and customers.”

Meanwhile, because hair can never be too long or voluminous, the new Hairdo Invisible Extension offers a new take on the halo extension by using a clip-free multi-level design, making it eminently wearable. The piece blends seamlessly into the wearer’s own hair, adding instant length and volume, and has already been nominated for best...
Business Boosters

After decades of entrepreneurial success, Michael Napolitano offers key advice for fellow business owners.

1. Be willing to do everything.
2. Have a passion for what you do. If you’re doing it just for money, don’t bother.
3. Create a culture and lead by example.
4. Value your team; that’s your biggest asset.
5. Keep your mind and body in shape. Get proper nutrition and exercise.
6. Don’t micromanage. Surround yourself with great people who are smarter than you in their field.

A new product and best hair extension for the Annual Stylist Choice Awards. After so many decades of success, Napolitano looks back in amazement on how far the company has come—and gazes even more fondly on his “tremendous” team members. “We ventured into uncharted territory,” he muses. “I’m so proud of the relationships we’ve built, the image we’ve built—how the brands are viewed—as well as our education.”

Looking forward to 2018, the HairUWear family is excited to celebrate, with loyal customers and employees, 50 years since Eva Gabor’s conception—think special collections, promotions, customer contests, social media sweepstakes and more. “This is a terrific industry I’ve spent my life in, and we’re extremely passionate about what we do,” Napolitano says. “Change your look, change your life! Whether it’s a runway-inspired updo or long, sleek locks, nothing transforms your attitude like a bold new hairstyle.”

Intent to continue changing the way stylists and consumers think about hair extensions and clip-in accessories, “We want every woman to view ready-to-wear hair the same way she thinks about what blouse she’s going to wear or what color lipstick she puts on,” Napolitano says. “HairUWear is more than just a hairdo; it’s a style statement. I’m very excited about the future!”

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