

Style

Creating a Lifestyle Brand

An Interview with John Allan,
Founder, The John Allan Company

EDITORS' NOTE In November 2005, The John Allan Company and Saks Fifth Avenue partnered to open the first John Allan's club in a retail establishment, while the product line entered global distribution. Before this, in May 2004, Allan introduced a skin care line with national product distribution. In March 2003, Allan's hair care line launched at Barneys New York. In January 2002, Allan opened his midtown club, followed by the reopening of his downtown club, which closed after 9/11. His first club opened on Stone Street in 1988, where he introduced his signature full service and club membership. Allan began his career in Paris, France, in 1979 under the personal apprenticeship of Jean Louis David.



John Allan

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1988, The John Allan Company (www.johnallans.com) specializes in men's grooming products and services, helping customers to understand their personal style, and fostering a commitment, to their appearance and personal well-being. John Allan designed his formulas specifically for the needs of men and uses the latest ingredients containing vitamins, botanicals, and marine plant extracts. Using feedback from a select group of clients and members, John Allan and his team have developed a high-quality product line with proven performance.

Are you satisfied with the understanding and awareness of the John Allan brand in the market and the way you've been able to build the recognition?

I have had opportunities to dilute my brand, but that's not what I'm going to do – not on the product side, on the accessories side, or on the club side. When your foundation is built on service, and not just on products, the longevity is there if you can maintain and hold on to that quality of service. So we march now to Chicago, San Francisco, Paris, and Las Vegas over the next year and a half. But to control the service part of my company, we have a training facility. We have an approach that has withstood the test of time. What's important when you talk about branding is how you manage the growth and hold on to your brand. But you still have a bottom line you have to address, so the core training that we give all of our staff is going

to allow us to duplicate this in major cities. I think that's going to keep that quality of the company intact.

Are you beginning to think about brand extensions?

I think John Allan's is one of the few companies out there that has the possibility of creating a lifestyle brand truly built around grooming. What we have communicated to our thousands of customers is that we're going to work on your appearance, and once we have your trust, we're going to start making suggestions. They may

be about what you're wearing, for instance, because you may not go to personal shoppers. We can use our relationships with Saks Fifth Avenue and Barneys New York and start sending our customers to direct contacts at these stores once we get their trust. That's where John Allan plays within the world of true brands.

Many people might think that your company has a club feel and, therefore, is in a niche market. Is it a niche market, or is it much broader?

It's much broader. The club aspect came about because I thought men would relate to the word "club" as opposed to "men's salon." I don't know what "salon" means. So the word "club" is something that men can relate to. When I came into the men's business, back in 1988, it was to change the landscape. I wanted it to be where men are more of a focus and not an afterthought. It's a little high end, but we're not charging you for that. Service to me has never been about price or what rates you have on the wall. Service is a handshake and a look in the eye. I trained in Paris and Milan with Jean Louis David, and I was a women's hairstylist in an international salon. I wanted to have that type of vibe, as far as my team was concerned, and then build a club attitude. It's sort of an anti-salon.

In this industry, many talk about how hard it is to find good people, and retaining them might be even harder. Do you find it challenging?

I always say that my job is to make sure that these people are making money. That's really the bare bones of it all, because if that is working, everything else is working too. When you teach people their trade, then you implement that trade because you have a space on the floor for them, and then you have 600 new customers a month coming in the door, and your people get billed very quickly. It breeds loyalty. Some people have been working with us since 1988. There is something about a trade being passed down through generations, and there is a certain loyalty and a certain trust. That gives you a certain longevity.

When you think back to 1988, when it all began, did you know it would work?

Yes. I knew my ability. Not only that, I opened up this higher-end personal service business during the worst recession in history. But I went with a one-head-at-a-time approach. I charged people \$1 but gave them \$1.50 worth of service. Those things stand the test of time. So did I know it would work? In my heart of hearts, I did. But it took from 1988 to 1994 before the world and the publications started to get me out there. But back then, there was me, slowly starting to grow the business. I believe the next 10 years in men's grooming products and services will show a bigger growth than we saw from 1996 to 2004.

Is it hard, as you grow, to stay hands-on? Is it difficult for you personally to do that?

No. That's where the training comes in. I think it's also very important, as a company is growing, that you understand where you belong in the company, even if you own it. It doesn't mean you belong everywhere just because you're the owner. I rely on people to run it, and as I go forward, I will build the infrastructure. I will bring in a president and CEO to take over, because quite frankly I don't want to do it. I know where my strengths lie, and my strengths are the people, the stylists, the camera, and how I deal with the editors. I'm sort of a hands-on face of the brand. ●

A selection of products from John Allan's line (top); a truly luxurious John Allan razor (left)

