

Price barriers? What price barriers?

The cost of high-end beauty appliances keeps rising, and there's no end in sight.



LIKE A THERMOMETER ON A HOT DAY, THE price points on professional salon appliances are going straight up. The category is on fire, and the manufacturers of these items are notching record sales with high double-digit, year-to-year increases. And it's not just the Big Three—Belson Products, Helen of Troy and Conair Pro—reaping the rewards. Almost every manufacturer has added new blow-dryer and iron models that cater to both professionals and consumers who want performance and edgy appearance—and are willing to pay for it. With their technology, design and performance improvements, high-end dryers and irons with price points at \$150 and above are becoming increasingly common.

It wasn't always this way. A number of years ago, as a buyer for our family distribution business, I was called on by current Conair Pro senior vice president Ken Russo. As the company's national sales manager at the time, Russo was presenting a new hair dryer with the unheard of salon price of \$19.95. As an astute buyer, my response was, "Are you nuts! Salon professionals will never pay 20 bucks for a blower." At the time I don't think either one of us had any idea how high salon appliance pricing would go, but sure enough, stylists paid the 20 bucks. Today they're spending 10 times that amount for the latest, greatest professional appliances.

THE IONIC FACTOR

The appliance business is global, with a number of manufacturers throughout Europe and Asia producing the hottest-selling models. Features, performance and style are the primary considerations when it comes to the most expensive units; in other words, these tools need to look good as well as provide clear-cut benefits. Over the past several years, the highest-end appliances to meet these goals have incorporated ceramic and ionic technology.

Tim Purcell, a brand manager at Helen of Troy in El Paso, Texas, explains that ceramic and ionic technologies "are popular because they bring significantly improved performance and benefits to stylists and their clients. Ionic dryers add volume and shine to the hair, reduce frizz and make the hair softer. They also dry hair faster than conventional

convection-heat dryers. All of that is accomplished because of the way negative ions break down water molecules and allow the hair shaft to retain moisture. Ceramic technology provides many of the same benefits—shinier hair with more volume and fewer split ends—but delivers them primarily via flat and curling irons rather than with hair dryers."

Bio Ionic in Beverly Hills, California, founded by stylist Fernando Romero, was one of the first companies to foresee the huge opportunity in hair-straightening systems using ceramic-ionic styling tools. "Ceramic-ionic appliances are hugely popular because professional stylists can both improve their services and supply their clients with products and tools that deliver healthy, shiny, undamaged hair," says the company's executive vice president, Jay Jacobs. "All of our tools contain a natural mineral blend of 32 elements that emit negative ions, allowing hair to be dried or flat-ironed up to 60% faster while the cuticle is also moisturized and sealed. The difference can be seen and felt on the hair, which is why professional ionic appliances have become more popular than traditional alternatives."

Okay, so the leading appliances really do offer noticeable benefits for the hair, but are the higher-priced units really worth the money, or are customers paying for the hype? "Many of the products on the market are indeed pure hype and won't last," remarks Kent Yu of Rancho Dominguez, California-based HairArt. "But that isn't the case with goods that are made with real ceramic and ionic technology."

The manufacturer hype isn't surprising when you consider all of the money at stake. Big bucks go into creating new, higher-end appliances, which drives up the units' cost. "As with any products that feature new technology, the latest appliances tend to be higher priced since production levels can't absorb all upfront R&D costs," says Belson Products marketing manager Ileana Moya. "Additionally, the components are more technologically advanced, which in turn carry a higher cost. The good news is that the positive results obtained from these technologies have far surpassed the cost of acquiring ceramic and ionic styling tools."

HOW HIGH CAN IT GO?

At Cosmoprof in July, the newest high-end blow-dryers had SRPs around \$150, with some units priced as high as \$250. Have we finally hit the price barrier? The consensus among manufacturers is an overwhelming "no." "As long as manufacturers can keep demonstrating benefits that are more tangible than the ones offered by ceramic and ionic technology, we will see price points continue to rise," states Yu.

Michael Gilbert, president of International Styling Tools in Sunrise, Florida, comments that once the \$100 mark was crossed by dryers from companies like his, there were simply no more barriers to break. He forecasts that the market will continually allow higher prices on truly advanced hair dryers and irons. "The market will grow exponentially within the next four years," predicts Gilbert. "When the first cordless hair dryer comes to market using ionic and ceramic technology with a price tag of \$295, there will be a line around the block for it."

Conair Pro's Russo adds, "The industry now understands the benefits of trading up for products that make a difference. Hairdressers are willing to pay for a tool that makes their job easier and their finished product better. If these items didn't do what they're supposed to do, they wouldn't sell."

THE HOT LIST

After covering most of the salon trade shows in 2004, talking with a number of platform artists about their styling tools and speaking with distributors, I developed this list of some of the best-selling high-end appliances on the market:

The Carrera² blow-dryer from **BaBylissPRO** is 25% lighter, 25% smaller and 50% more powerful than any professional dryer in its class. The unit features a non-slip, rubberized housing and advanced built-in ionic and ceramic technologies, and it delivers 1,900 watts of power via a quiet, state-of-the-art AC motor. With a salon list of \$79.99, it's a real bargain for a professional ionic dryer. For more information, call 800/726-6247 or visit www.conairpro.com.

The **Bio Ionic** Super-Hydrator Pro is a state-of-the-art, super-lightweight unit outfitted with a powerful DC motor and variable heat settings. The company's

As I See It

new Supercharged Natural Ion Complex technology emits natural negative ions and far-infrared energy to micronize water clusters, effectively increasing the hair's moisture-binding abilities by up to 58% and cutting drying time by up to 60%. The Super-Hydrator Pro has a salon list price of \$165. For more information, call 888/755-6834 or visit www.bioionic.com.

Elchim USA introduced its new ionic dryers at last year's Cosmoprof shows in Bologna and Las Vegas. The Uragano Ionic and VIP Ionic are both 1,800-watt units that employ a patent-pending Negative Ion Generating System to produce a continuous stream of 1.5 million negative ions/cm³ per minute, reducing drying time by 50%. Their Italian AC motors are rated at 2,000 hours, which equals about 2½ years of drying time in the salon. Retail prices on these advanced tools top out at \$250. For more information, call 800/875-7511 or visit www.elchimusa.com.

ERGO Styling Tool's Velecta hair dryers all feature a patented ergonomic handle

carpal tunnel syndrome. It comes in silver and black and has a salon list of \$99. Also offered are Krembs wet-to-dry flat irons, which dry and straighten hair simultaneously. They come in two sizes, both with a salon list of \$190. For more information, call 888/872-9997.

Metropolis Beauty's Ultra Ion blow-dryer has been a top seller since it was introduced a couple of years ago. It features a patented, curved nozzle that creates ripples of air, evenly distributing the drying power produced by an ionic generator and an 1,800-watt, cyclonic AC motor. The unit has a salon list of \$139. Also from Metropolis is the Ultra Ion line of flat irons, available in four sizes from 18mm to 45mm. The lightweight irons work on wet or dry hair, feature Metropolis' Natural Ion complex and heat up quickly. They each have a salon list of \$225. For more information, call 800/871-6824 or visit www.metropolisbeauty.com.

Solano International's Solano Ion dryer produces over 1.2 million negative ions/cm³ per minute and features an

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and extra-long cords. The line includes the XXP, an 1,880-watt model with turbine impeller airflow for high volume; XXP3, an 1,800-watt ionic unit with a trigger for instant, nonionic airflow; TGR Plus 230, a super-compact 1,350-watt unit; and TGR Superlight, a 1,250-watt model that's mini (under 13 oz.) yet mighty. For pricing and additional information, call 888/275-3746 or visit www.ergostylingtools.com.

HairArt's cutting-edge T3 Tourmaline blow-dryers feature heater coils and fans made from crushed tourmaline, a precious stone that naturally emits high levels of negative ions and far-infrared heat. The Featherweight features an 1,800-watt motor yet weighs only 13 ounces; the Welterweight employs an 1,875-watt AC motor for heavy-duty performance. The company's T3 flat irons, which feature ceramic plates infused with crushed tourmaline, are available in five sizes from ¾ inch to 1¾ inches. For pricing and more information, call 888/424-7278 or visit www.t3tourmaline.com.

International Styling Tools has a number of top-performing SKUs, including the Io'ne TID600 blow-dryer. It produces 1 million negative ions/cm³ per minute, drying hair 40% to 50% faster than conventional dryers, and has a salon list of \$120. There's also the company's uniquely designed Saturno dryer, imported from Italy. With its ergonomic, no-handle shape, the Saturno is intended to help stylists avoid painful

1,875-watt Super Veloce motor, two speeds and five temperature settings. It's available in a great-looking merlot color and lists at \$199. The Solano Standard Electronic straightening iron has wide 2¼-inch plates, an adjustable temperature control and a removable comb; it lists at \$180. For more information, call 847/675-0087 or visit www.solanointernational.com.

The Italian-made Twinturbo Ionic 3000 blow-dryer from **Turbo Power** delivers 70 cubic meters of air per hour for fast drying time. It utilizes a patented ionic generator that reduces static electricity and stress on the hair, and that means healthier locks. Additional features include four heat settings, two speeds and an overheating sensor. For pricing and more information, call 888/715-6100 or visit www.turbopowerinc.com.

Demanding customers will also find high-end appliances from manufacturers like Helen of Troy, Andis, Belson Products, The Cricket Co., The Magic Ionic Co. and Wahl. Like new-model cars, where each year's performance innovations and added features justify higher costs, the prices of these premium salon tools will continue to rise. The best news for distributors and store owners is that with no price barrier in sight, the financial benefits are endless. ■

Mike Nave is president of Professional Beauty Distributors and publisher of "The Beauty Industry Report" newsletter.