

GMSB 203

[00:00:00] **Antony W:** Welcome to the Grow My Salon Business podcast, where we focus on the business side of hairdressing. I'm your host, Antony Whitaker, and I'll be talking to thought leaders in the hairdressing industry, discussing insightful, provocative, and inspiring ideas that matter. So get ready to learn, get ready to be challenged, get ready to be inspired, and most importantly, get ready to grow your salon business.

[00:00:28] **Antony W.:** Hey, it's Antony Whitaker here, and welcome to today's episode of the Grow My Salon Business podcast. I often talk about what it means to be a hairdresser and how it covers a wide spectrum of things for both the client and for the hairdresser. And when it comes to salons, at one end of the spectrum, you have the budget or the value salons, and at the other end, you have the premium or the luxury brands. Well, they all serve a purpose and they all attract a clientele and a team that represents what the business offers. In a city like London, the luxury end of the market is very competitive and brands will come and go, but occasionally you come across a business that has got everything right and continuously evolves, and the result is a great reputation and the longevity that comes with it. My guest on today's podcast is Michael Van Clarke, owner of the Michael Van Clarke Salon in Marylebone, London, which is firmly at the luxury end of the market. And after 35 years, the Michael Van Clarke Salon is going stronger than ever. So in today's podcast, we're going to discuss what it takes to create a luxury brand business, and we're going to talk about the Michael van Clarke limited liability partnership model and the importance of training your team and lots more. So. Without further ado, welcome to the show, Michael.

[00:01:53] **Michael V.:** Hello, Antony, great to be here.

[00:01:56] **Antony W.:** Well, it's really good to have you here. I know you're really busy and uh, we have spoken before, but it seems like quite a while ago. And, uh, uh, I really appreciate the fact that you've taken some time out of your busy day today for me to ask you all about your business and, um, you know, exactly what's been happening since we last spoke. So let me just start by sort of doing a, if you could do a two minute intro of. Who is Michael Van Clarke? And then we'll jump in and start talking all about your business.

[00:02:25] **Michael V.:** Okay. Um, well, it's an interesting day today because, uh, third of July, 45 years ago, I started my hairdressing career. I walked into John Frieda's first salon that he had. Uh, as a partnership, having left Leonard, that was 1978 and I didn't know what I was coming into, but I have to say from day one, uh, I knew I'd made the right decision and I've loved every day since. So I, I worked with John for 10 years and then, as you said, 35 years ago, we opened our own business in Marylebone. Which, uh, is now a very nice trendy area of London. At the time, it was a quietly forgotten part of London, but very central. And, uh, we bought a large Regency building that we couldn't afford, and sold half of it the same day. The half that we didn't, um, require. And... started about our business using, I think at the time we used about a quarter of the premises that we had and we just blocked off the rest. But, um, something I always had was a very strong client following. I'd always had more clients than I could actually service because I was very committed to building a strong clientele, um, that, that

came and it's something I, I tell my own team. It was only 18 months into hairdressing that, um, I'd had some quite strong PR in Vogue. I'd had an eight page spread in Vogue. I'd had the front page of the Observer magazine with a spread inside that had brought a lot of clients to me.

[00:04:18] **Michael V.:** So 18 months into hairdressing, I was barely 19. I remember, seeing a client. Who getting talking to her, she didn't know my name. And I guess very precociously at the time, I was a bit offended that I was looking after someone that didn't care who did their hair. And after I finished her hair, I went to the desk and I said, don't you ever book, anyone to me that hasn't asked for me by name, and that's how it's been for the last 43 years. Um, you know, I told this to, to staff and they look at me incredulously, you know, how on earth can you be busy? and I, I say, well, it's actually because of that, because I take the responsibility to make sure I'm always fully booked and I always have more clients than I need. I don't want to rely. On the variables of other people. And so that client relationship really underpinned my business. When I started on my own, you know, that sense that a client, should be a client for life. You know, if they're not all clients for life, but the attitude is, is that we should be able to deliver, um, an experience and a quality of work that they won't want to let go of that they actually won't want to go somewhere else. You know, and we, and we fail, you know, it doesn't work all the time, but we do have, I think that last count, we had over a hundred clients still that have been with me for more than 40 years.

[00:05:54] **Antony W.:** Wow. That's

[00:05:55] **Michael V.:** And, you know, it's a very strong, loyal clientele. And it was that ethos of customer care that, that really launched our business with only, I think five staff we started with. I had no business plan whatsoever. I just knew I needed to do something. You know, it was, um, you know, I didn't have the team that I should have developed before venturing into something so risky. Yeah. I didn't want to have other people risk their careers. So, you know, we started with a very few of us that wanted to do something. And, you know, as I say at the time, clients were never the issue. We always had too many clients to service ourselves, but the issue was getting Wanted to believe enough in our ethos to do the work to reach the standards that we wanted.

[00:06:52] **Antony W.:** Okay.

[00:06:52] **Michael V.:** found it very difficult to hire people. There was, there's never been a pool that we could just dip into and recruit from. You know, everyone that we've taken on, we have to train. We have to go through rigorous training, which takes time. And we've built a business from that. And. You know, some people will say, well, why don't you have lots of salons? I don't feel the need to have lots of salons. We have a very large salon here. We're now about three, three and a half thousand square feet. We've bought, um, buildings next door now, which we plan to bring into the space we have. So, you know, we can double the size of our business over the next three or four years. and it's a, it's a salon which I enjoy going to and clients enjoy coming to is probably closer to a club than a salon. And I know lots of people say that, you know, it's just, Oh, we're like a club. Um, but there is that sense because the clients have been coming for so long, you know, many of them feel that it's their, salon as much as it is ours.

[00:07:58] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:07:58] **Michael V.:** And

[00:07:59] **Michael V.:** it does feel like that when I've been in there. It feels, it feels very homely.

[00:08:02] **Antony W.:** So, Michael, I once listened to you talk about luxury. it was a very insightful sort of observation. And when I was talking about your brand at the beginning, I sort of, you know, alluded to the fact that it was a luxury brand.

[00:08:17] **Antony W.:** What are some of the things that you need to have in place to create a luxury salon environment? That's a very good question. I think I, I myself am a bit of a sucker for luxury. Um, whether that's the, the rarity, the, Attracts me the depth of quality in luxury, which I find, you know, is very stimulating. Um, I think in a salon, it's really about, having those things in the environment, having an experience that's very, very high quality and that luxury isn't just about tangible things. It's also very much about how people treat each other and how people treat you, you know, the way those people come across. There's a certain standard that makes you feel special.

[00:09:19] **Antony W.:** Yeah, okay.

[00:09:20] **Michael V.:** And I was actually reading a very interesting article yesterday, um, in Luxury London, actually. And it was a, um, a critique on Alan Dukas at the Dorchester.

[00:09:35] **Michael V.:** Uh, not a cheap meal, uh, um, 750 for a set menu with drinks, um,

[00:09:42] **Antony W.:** a cheat meal.

[00:09:43] **Michael V.:** plus service per head. Um, but it comes down to about 2 85 plus service if you don't have the, the wine pairings. But, I research that sort of thing. I spend my life researching luxury examples of things, whether they be in retail or hospitality, or any area of excellence, because it fascinates me anyway. But I think the journalist got this one absolutely right, because he was saying about the service. It wasn't the food. It was a three Michelin star. There are only five of those in London. And he said it wasn't the food because you expect that. And it's something I've said as well to staff. You know, people expect good food now. It's very much about atmosphere. But what he said that was so telling was that it was how the staff made him feel. He felt by the end of the meal that the sommelier and the head waiter Would take him into the kitchen at the back for, you know, some leftover cheese on and biscuits You know, he wanted to invite them down to his local pub

[00:10:59] **Antony W.:** Right. Yeah, okay So it's very much about that people component.

[00:11:03] **Michael V.:** the balance of service that it wasn't aloof. It wasn't overly friendly Pally But it there was a connection there that made that diner feel special Feel that you know, he was wanted And, and that, that's very much part of the luxury experience. It's not enough just to go into something that's, um, all golden diamonds. It's like, it doesn't touch on an emotional level.

[00:11:34] **Antony W.:** Yeah. But having said that in, in your salon, which I've been, you know, very fortunate to go into a few times, um, you have little touches that, over and above that personal experience. And I totally agree with you, whether it's the, you know, the deli that you have or the restaurant, I'm not sure what you refer to it as, or, you know, the fragrances that you have in the bathrooms, the flowers, the library. Talk to us about all that sort of stuff and how that contributes to the, the luxury experience of your brand.

[00:12:04] **Michael V.:** Yeah, they are. Those things are very important. And I think we're fortunate that because we own, own the building, um, the fixtures and fittings, we can afford to. Go overboard because, you know, we know we're not going to give up the lease in five years and go somewhere else, you know, we can invest in a refit, knowing that we will get 30 years out of it, you know, in fact, one of the big refits we did 32 years ago, where we built stone staircases that the whole basement level is in limestone. It still looks beautiful, and yet that's over 30 years old now. Um, it cost a lot of money then. Everything was bespoke, worn up fixtures and fittings, bronze door furniture. But it's still there, you know, we only paid once. So, so the actual foundation is important in that, we invest in that sort of quality. Um, but then we can add to that on a changing basis by having fresh flowers that we will have around the salon. they're changed weekly. Um, you know, that, that adds a lot to the experience for people. Yeah, we will have art and antiques around the salon. Um, just the sense of quality, as you mentioned, the perfumes, you know, we will have perfumes and they will be high end Chanel and Dolce Gabbana and, you know, all of those types of fragrances. And as you say, there'll be chocolates. Bowl, huge bowls of chocolates available for people which are very popular. Those little touches don't actually cost that much across the average bill.

[00:13:57] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:13:58] **Michael V.:** You know, we, we can put all of that in because we do that ourselves. We do the flowers ourselves. It would cost much more to have a florist come and do them, but, um, all those touches add a lot to the luxury experience for the client, but they may add up to 1% of our bill.

[00:14:17] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So when we talk about the, the bill, what sort of price point just for our listeners that are, you know, all over the world, what sort of price point is a, and I know in your salon that you have. You know, a level system. So not everyone is at the same price point, but at the top end of the scale. So for yourself, for a haircut, whatever service you want to, uh, quote us on what would be the sort of ballpark figure that a client would pay?

[00:14:45] **Michael V.:** So, so for a haircut with myself, um, it's 395,

[00:14:50] **Antony W.:** Okay. So that's, that's three, nine, five pounds. So it's about 500 us dollars. Yeah.

[00:14:55] **Michael V.:** Yes. Yes. Um, and then we have, uh, there's a follow on price that's not that much different now. It's about 30 pounds cheaper as a loyalty price. So it's 365, I think now. and then, um, we will have haircut prices that go all the way down to, I think about 80 pounds

[00:15:15] **Antony W.:** Right.

[00:15:16] **Antony W.:** Okay.

[00:15:16] **Michael V.:** there's quite a range and that, that range is very much based on experience. So, uh, 80 pounds, they will be a second year graduate. Um, they'll be in their second year with us. We, advance people quite quickly through their training. Um, it's quite intense for them. And then all the different levels in between.

[00:15:38] **Antony W.:** Right. Okay. So it starts at about 80 pounds. So about a hundred US dollars goes up to your price point 400 odd pounds. So, uh, about 500 US dollars just to give it some context. Um, one of the things that I was really impressed with when I, I last was in your salon was the deli space and I know it is lovely and I know that in a bygone era, um, you know, sort of the sixties, the seventies, that was quite a common thing to have, a restaurant within a salon. And, and nowadays you don't see that very often. Talk to us about the, the deli space. Do you refer to it as a deli space or the

[00:16:16] **Michael V.:** Now, it, now it's the deli.

[00:16:19] **Antony W.:** Right. Okay. So, so talk to us about how that is evolved as part of your business and who it serves.

[00:16:24] **Michael V.:** It's quite a it's always difficult to make it work in a salon because. Um, for it to work for a chef and their staff, you have to have enough turnover for them to be able to make a business out of it. And it doesn't really work. Well, it hasn't worked for us to try and employ someone to do it and then manage them. It's much better. It's been much better. Make it a separate business and set our standards. Um, but what we really wanted very much important for us was to have that experience for the clients.

[00:17:04] **Antony W.:** Yeah,

[00:17:05] **Michael V.:** And then being able to have food, wine, cocktails, whatever, while they're there having their hair done. That was also part of that whole experience and tapping into why do people go to restaurants? The restaurant business has boomed at the high end, not because people are hungry and they need to eat. You know, they go out for the experience. They expect to eat well, but you don't go and spend 100 a head or 150 a head because you're hungry. You go out because it's an

event for you and there's something about the ambiance of these restaurants that are in central London very busy all the time. There's something about the and the. nature of, um, being amongst people that are enjoying themselves, seeing other people. There's a lot of people spotting goes on. Salons are very similar to that. And I think salons can learn an awful lot from the successes and failures of the restaurant business. Bringing catering into the business, which has grown very well for us. Has been a huge help in us elevating our whole offering to that luxury level.

[00:18:26] **Antony W.:** right. Okay, and I know that you were telling me previously when we spoke about this when you just put it in that I think I'm right in saying that you did away with a staff room and that the deli sort of became as much for staff as for clients and it was sort of giving them a a sort of a luxury experience. Tell us about that.

[00:18:48] **Michael V.:** Well, it was that also, and I think. in teaching a team how to behave with clients, you almost have to treat them as clients as well. You have to get them to live the experience as much as possible. And you know, it's a battle sometimes, especially with entry level staff. If they're, coming into the West End, it's very high end. And at that stage, they're going home to something very, very different. They're mixing with people that don't get what they do. You know, they don't understand that they're moving into a different world and often there's competition in their home environments and their friends environments to actually hold them back a little bit. And, you we find very much as we, advance people, they often have to let go of a lot of their old friend group in order to realize who they can be at another level.

[00:19:46] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah. I remember you, you told me, in fact, I've, uh, used your story, the coffee shop experience story,

[00:19:55] **Michael V.:** yeah,

[00:19:56] **Antony W.:** I I've used it several times. I've probably embellished it quite a lot. Uh, but it is such a good way. of teaching people about what you were just alluding to. So, so talk us through that process again of, uh, why you did that and, you know, what that experience is like for a young person to sort of understand that a cup of coffee is not just a cup of coffee.

[00:20:19] **Michael V.:** Yeah, it started out as a price versus value, um, symbolism and for them to understand that, um, because, you know, again, we'll get young kids coming into the West End and the idea of a client spending that much money on their hair, which is, could easily be more than a week's wages for them. You know, they don't necessarily quite get it. I think they just think it's expensive. They don't understand that actually there's a value judgment there being made by people that to them, this is good value. and so it started as a price value, um, symbol for them to understand that there is a difference. And what we did, we would send pairs of apprentices, um, to three different places to have a coffee. one of them would be, uh, M& S at Marble Arch. where they had a cafe. One would be a three or four star hotel locally, and one would be Claridge's. And the coffees ranged in price from what was probably about 1.90 to the last time at Claridge's it was about 8 pounds or something. And they had to Take photos of what they were getting they had to take photos of the

washrooms that they used they had to take notes on how they were treated how they felt and finally would they like to repeat the experience and Which did they think was the best value? well, of course You know, everyone wanted to go back to Claridge's, and that was the most expensive coffee of all. It was eight pounds. That was the experience they wanted to repeat. They were treated so well. The coffee didn't come just on its own. It was beautifully served on a tray with, you know, accompaniments. No one wanted to go back to Marks and Spencer's and have a coffee, even if it was being bought for them.

[00:22:16] **Antony W.:** Yeah, yeah,

[00:22:17] **Michael V.:** And the mid-range one was like, well, again, what's the point?

[00:22:22] **Antony W.:** Yeah

[00:22:22] **Michael V.:** So I, I think, you know, it was a very good, um, experience to illustrate that value is different to price and perception of value will depend on what they're receiving and whether they want to repeat it.

[00:22:37] **Antony W.:** Sure. Yeah. The other thing I, before we got on this call, I was, you know, uh, I was on your website and I was looking at a video and, uh, that you'd done and it was a short video, it was three or four minutes. And, uh, there's a couple of things that really stood out. One of them was. You know, you were introducing different stuff and there was a housekeeper. Well, her title was housekeeping manager. Her name was Elsa and I thought, how many salons call someone a housekeeper or, you know, the housekeeping manager. So, what exactly does. Elsa do. And then there was another time I saw that you had someone and that their title was maître d floor manager. And so these titles are very important, aren't they? In, bringing, well, attracting the right calibre of staff, but also getting people to realise what their role is and elevating it.

[00:23:31] **Michael V.:** Well, I think it is important and it took me a long time to realize how important, The titles were because, uh, and to define the role much more clearly, you know, beyond the title to actually define the responsibilities and the role more clearly. but you know, we have, it is a large salon and it has lots of very, um, delicate finishes as well. Lots of art and antiques. Um, the flowers too. Yeah, it does need a sensitivity. to deal with those things. So we do have housekeepers that are around during the day as well. but you know, also for our apprentices, they're on a learning journey where they're not just learning how to do hair. They're, learning how to be and communicate with a very, you know, a more discerning section of society. They're learning to be more elegant, how they carry themselves, how they conduct themselves. How they communicate with people is it's very much life skills that people acquire. And I think we are very lucky. To have the opportunity to look after our clients and, you know, the ones that are with us for a number of years realized that, you know, it's so much of their own development is from the clients that they're looking after because they're from all walks of life and they're very savvy people, you know, they're very discerning and you pick up a lot. from these clients and that's a huge opportunity for someone that's come from the backstreets, you know, as I did myself, um, it was

something that, I was wide eyed when I started, I loved it. And I know, you know, Sassoon was the same. Leonard was the same. They all came from, you know, rough backstreet areas and. They, were just, they were so attracted to this world.

[00:25:32] **Antony W.:** yeah. What are some of the other things that you do practically to culturally educate your team, particularly the young ones?

[00:25:42] **Michael V.:** Um, we will take them to, we have two, two very good young staff. I say young, they've been with me for 10, 11 years now. Um, they look after the apprentices now. They will take them to museums. They will take them on, fun days. Uh, Yeah, I will take staff to certain restaurants where I want them to understand how things could be done for them to get a feel of places where they wouldn't necessarily go themselves. Um, yeah, I think Claridge's has been a great example for, a lot of what we've tried to get across to people. But I also think as there's a club called Annabelle's. Which, I use and again, it's so different to, it's at another level to a lot of restaurants. And I will take people there from the, I'll take the team there. You know, they just, I start to see that there is actually another world that they can aspire to.

[00:26:40] **Antony W.:** Yeah. I remember you told me at one point that you would also even take some of the assistants into your apartment and you would do dinner for them. Do you still do that?

[00:26:50] **Michael V.:** Absolutely. Yeah. And, um, every month we have the whole team up because we have a large media room upstairs. We have our monthly team meeting. In my home, um, because we can get everyone in this room with a big screen and, and do the meeting there, but I actually love having the young ones up for dinner is something that's a real pleasure for me. And, you know, we limit it to about 8 or 10 because I can't really handle more than that. But, you know, there's some of the best evenings of all.

[00:27:20] **Antony W.:** Yeah. I'm sure they are. And I know you have a thing, I hope I'm getting this term right, where you refer to it as apprenticeship to partnership. Now, I sort of know the background of that, but could you tell our listeners what apprenticeship to partnership actually means? Because I do want to also then dig into what is this partnership model that you've, uh, that you've got.

[00:27:43] **Michael V.:** Well, we like to feel that if we're taking on an apprentice and we're developing them, that they will want to stay with us. Um, I also feel that the salon, you know, it belongs to all of us and that, um, as many of the team as possible should share in the rewards of that. So it was in 2007 after, um, several years working with lawyers, accountants, that we formed our limited liability partnership. So apprentices now would be expected to move through three years of stages. And if they're achieving what they need to at each stage, at the end of their apprenticeship, they come into the business as a partner. So, uh, I think the youngest one we had, um, who is one of the girls that looks after the apprentices now, I think she was a partner at 18.

[00:28:40] **Antony W.:** So what does that look like? What does, what does it mean that they're a partner? Do they have, you know, profit share? Do they have voting

rights? Do they have something that's saleable if they left? I mean, how does that work?

[00:28:53] **Michael V.:** Um, it's not a partnership in that sense that they have to put money in. You know, that was something that wouldn't have worked. It's too, it's asking too much. It's too high risk. it's essentially profit share. So it's, it's no downside, but it's all upside. So now I've probably given away 40% of the business to the team inside. That, that's increasing, which as we get more people on board and they will earn. Some, most of their earnings, about 80% will come from 70, 80% from, their own work and at least 20% from the overall profits of the salon. But that 20% grows generally quicker than their own, um, their own work. So for, for the older partners now that, um, end of year profit can be quite a substantial amount.

[00:29:52] **Antony W.:** Yeah. So after three years, a trainee is a qualified stylist and they automatically become a partner or they're invited to become a partner. I mean, is it, how does that, how does that work?

[00:30:06] **Michael V.:** Uh, well, we would want them to become a partner. You know, we would want them to, to join us properly because, it, it means that we have that security of feeling that they are part of the whole team. they know they have the benefits and the long term benefits as we grow. As well, so we would want them to be a partner and, you know, virtually everyone in all the seniors are partners bar a couple and the apprentices are, as we say, apprentices, but we have very few people that, not one or the other.

[00:30:43] **Antony W.:** Right.

[00:30:43] **Michael V.:** There are a few employees and there are a few, um, contracted associates, but most of the key people are our partners. 18 or 20 of us now.

[00:30:56] **Antony W.:** Okay. And so like at the end of the year, you know, the books are done and you know how profitable or not the business has been for that year. And then a partnership arrangement, a shareholder's, um, arrangement, they get a

[00:31:10] **Michael V.:** Profits are distributed. Yes, that's right.

[00:31:13] **Antony W.:** I think that's a brilliant model for this industry. Absolutely.

[00:31:17] **Michael V.:** I think it is. And I think it's done a lot to stabilize our team. We have very, very low staff turnover. Um, I think we've got four, four members now that are more than 30 years. Um, we've got probably half a dozen at 20 years. And quite a lot around the 10 year period

[00:31:39] **Antony W.:** Yeah, yeah,

[00:31:40] **Michael V.:** You know, that stability is really important for, running a business. That, you know, everyone's growing together.

[00:31:48] **Antony W.:** yeah, definitely. I think that, you know, these days there's so many changes to the hairdressing employee employer business model that, um, having something that gives people a real career and a real opportunity to grow and a real opportunity to, to earn more and own more and to feel like part of something is,

[00:32:05] **Michael V.:** And that's right. And, and, but also, as they can see, you know, because we are in central London and we are at the luxury end. You know, our prices reflect that. So our average bills are probably 170. Um, some of our bills can be 1, 000 if people are having colour and cut and whatever, but the average bill is about 170. So someone coming in at year one, we expect them by the end of year three, their own business, their own clientele to be turning over about 100, 000 a year.

[00:32:41] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:32:41] **Michael V.:** So at that point, we bring them into the partnership. And then they, they grow from there. So, I mean, we've got probably, if we look the other day, and I, I talked about this with the partners because the industry, we know the industry is at the bottom 10% of the earning scale in the country, you know, hairdressers, carers, actors, hospital porters, you know, and that that's never been my experience, and I don't think it has to be, I think what hairdressers offer their clients is something that's really very, very skilled and specialized. You have to have not just the creative skills, you have to have those personal skills, the technical skills, the social skills, the empathy. You know, there's an awful lot that you have to have to do well as a hairdresser that in most jobs you can get by with one or two of those.

[00:33:33] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:33:34] **Michael V.:** In hairdressing, you have to have all of them

[00:33:37] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Exactly.

[00:33:38] **Michael V.:** and that requires, you know, quite special training and development that, um, you know, sadly for most of the industry, they are in the low end of the pay scale, but that's not what we want for our team. And we were looking the other day, looking at, um, averages in the UK earnings and nine of our team are in the top 1% of UK earnings, not UK earnings in hairdressing UK earnings,

[00:34:03] **Antony W.:** Across the board. Full stop.

[00:34:04] **Michael V.:** know, and that's what we want. We want people to do as well as they possibly can. And for each year to be better, it's not just about achieving success. It's sustainable success. That's what's so important.

[00:34:16] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Well, you know, I used to say when I had my salons, which is many years ago now, I used to say that I wanted my team to be the best paid people in the industry, but there was a second half to that sentence, which was, and I also want 'em to be the most productive people in the industry because if they're not

productive, they can't be the best paid. So, you know, you mentioned a figure then you said after three years, Uh, if they're doing a hundred grand a year in, in services, then they become a partner is that the criteria for promotion or is that the main criteria that there are certain, you know, financial benchmarks that they have to hit before they go from one level to the next?

[00:34:54] **Michael V.:** There are, because you've said productivity at the end of the day, productivity is the key thing. And you know, if you're not productive with your time. Then, you know, someone's overpaying and, you know, we are in a salon where people could get by with not doing very much work and charging very high fees, but I don't think that's fair to the clients either. So, you know, productivity for us and it's been actually the number one driving force for us since lockdown is restoring productivity because obviously lockdown just crashed out productivity.

[00:35:35] **Antony W.:** Sure.

[00:35:36] **Michael V.:** And, uh, we've been rebuilding that, um, ever since the last lockdown.

[00:35:41] **Antony W.:** Yeah. What do you find young people want today? you know, since lockdown, there's been, I think lockdown was a catalyst for a lot of people to sort of reassess life and work life balance and all that sort of thing. Um, what sort of impact does that had on your business in terms of creating more flexibility for people in terms of how they work? Have you had to make any significant changes?

[00:36:06] **Michael V.:** Um, we haven't really. I think, there is, you're absolutely right. There is this zeitgeist energy around about, um, work life balance. But I think it carries a lot of negative baggage about the word work. And my own belief is that... For a lot of the people promoting this idea that, you know, work less, work less, work less, work at home, you know, don't work if you don't have to. A lot of people promote promoting these ideas of people that perhaps are working in office jobs that they really don't like. And I think that's sad that they're actually working, not properly engaged with their work. And if you're not properly engaged, you're not going to enjoy work at all. I think in hairdressing, we're very fortunate that. You can engage fully, and if you are engaged fully, it's a very exciting way to, you know, be a professional. It's very social, it's very creative, it ticks all of those boxes. Mental health, you know, it's very good for your mental health, being in the service industry, and be creative. To have free expression. You know, all those things are very positive. But I do think I am challenging certain ideas, uh, being fed to young people these days that makes them misunderstand how life works. And yes, I do get people in year two that have achieved a certain level of success, but still in their apprenticeship thinking that, you know, but surely it's okay to go and get an easy jet holiday every month.

[00:37:50] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:37:52] **Michael V.:** You know, but, oh, but why can't I just have three weeks off? A critical stage of building your clientele, it's not wise. You know, you're learning a craft and a profession, and you're building a clientele. You have to apply yourself.

[00:38:08] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly.

[00:38:10] **Michael V.:** and the whole thing about work life balance, I think, you know, work is part of life.

[00:38:15] **Antony W.:** Yeah, well, I'm, I'm very lucky and I think you're very lucky in that we love what we do. I never really think of, I just sort of work all the time, but that's part of my life and I love it. There's no great hardship to it. And, you know, you love what you do. And I don't imagine there's that much sort of separation, you know, I mean, obviously we all need a holiday and all that sort of stuff. But, I think a lot of the key to it is what you just said. There's a lot of people in jobs and offices and stuff that actually hate what they do for a living. Uh, whereas if you love what you do, I mean, I hate that expression. And if you love what you do, you'd never work it out in your life, but there is some truth in it, you

[00:38:48] **Michael V.:** Well, and I think, you know, it's not, it's not... luck or good fortune that you enjoy what you do, you give yourself fully to it.

[00:38:57] **Antony W.:** exactly. Exactly.

[00:38:59] **Michael V.:** you know, if you give yourself fully to something, the chances are you will become good at it, and if you're good at it, you will tend to enjoy it.

[00:39:07] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly. One feeds the other. What, um, one thing I wanted to ask you about was awards. There was a period of time where you were, and I don't know if you still are or not, uh, where you were very into awards, the awards side of the industry, particularly the business awards, and you were cleaning up, you know, consistently for year after year. Um, are they still important to you?

[00:39:33] **Michael V.:** Less so, um. I very much enjoyed that period when we put a lot of work into entering the awards and it was great for the team, but they do take a lot of time.

[00:39:47] **Michael V.:** And I think for the last, I think the last ones were. Gosh, it must, must be seven, eight years ago, um, that we won, but we did, we, you're right, we, we won a couple of awards and then we went back the following year, we won four, no one had ever won four. And, uh, I remember the compere making a comment by the time we got the second one, and he said, Oh, why don't you just stay up on stage, which we all thought was quite funny. Um, but then we won four again, a couple of years later, and then four again, um, a year after that. Um, And I don't think anyone has actually won four in one year, but they may, maybe they've changed the way that they allocate awards now. It's probably not good for them to give too many to one salon.

[00:40:33] **Antony W.:** yeah. What did they do for the salon?

[00:40:36] **Michael V.:** I think, we didn't, I don't think we used them that much PR wise, but they're very nice in the salon, you know, we quietly know we've achieved something that's, you know, notable, and the team, the, the team really enjoyed having those, we got our manager to win manager of the year, you know, I obviously helped a lot with how that was presented. We had, I think, four juniors, one junior of the year. That was great. I think there was a couple of years we had three or four juniors in the finals, which is brilliant for them.

[00:41:10] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:41:12] **Michael V.:** and yeah, it was great. But I think because of the time and we moved on a little, we did, we put less effort in and we missed most years of not putting something in. I've spent an awful lot, lot of time on products of the last, um, seven or eight years, and we've developed an awful lot of products and it takes so much time to develop products, the testing, the development, the, the lab work, you know, takes, takes three or four years for many of the products.

[00:41:44] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Well, I, I was going to, I was going to ask you about that. Um, because I've exploded since,

[00:41:52] **Michael V.:** they're doing very well, they're doing very well.

[00:41:54] **Antony W.:** and they're available now. I know they're available in the U S so they've, uh, like, uh, how global is it? Yeah.

[00:42:01] **Michael V.:** Um, it is in the U S but still through our own U S website and through Amazon U S, um, we haven't yet gone to bricks and mortar because we had a lot of success with digital. And I just felt that. It was something that I could control more. Um, you know, we've let some salons have it. We are moving into professional now. but mainly it's digital, digital in this country, digital in Europe. Um, bricks and mortar in Australia and New Zealand, Mecca, um, have had it for a number of years and do very well with it. But, uh, mainly we're, we have a digital team, uh, and I think what I like about digital is that, you know, we're building up a large database of followers we have, um, People we send our newsletter to, we have our Instagram, our TikTok now, which is fairly new as well. Yeah, I've had to understand, learn so much, uh, at a late stage in my life. And, each time, each new thing, I think. You know, it's just like a wall of new information. I think, Oh my God, I mean, how on earth am I going to, going to understand all this? I remember my first meeting at the Facebook agency, you know, and all these young kids just talking in acronyms, and I said, Oh my, and the backend of the information that they draw from the internet. I mean, fascinating, but just reams and reams of information, but actually, once I started to understand it more, I did enjoy it. And then we, you know, likewise, Instagram, Google, all the analytics. Only recently, we started TikTok just before Christmas. We've got nearly 20, 000 followers already

[00:43:51] **Antony W.:** Great. Fantastic.

[00:43:52] **Michael V.:** Um, we just started a TikTok shop, about six weeks ago, which is doing well in that world, it changes so quickly and, and the small team we have are just, you know, they're very into finding the new and we have to find the new all the time because the way we do stuff works really well. And then suddenly that doesn't work anymore. You have to go to this one

[00:44:17] **Antony W.:** Sure.

[00:44:18] **Michael V.:** and it changes so quickly, the digital world.

[00:44:21] **Antony W.:** Yeah. I was going to, I was going to ask you about that before because you've got two, well, you've got two very different businesses. You've got the salon and you've got the product side of it. And I was going to ask you before, how important is social media for your target market? And I suspect in terms of the salon, it's not particularly important. But in terms of the products, it's hugely important. Have I got that right or wrong?

[00:44:44] **Michael V.:** what you have and, um, we do an awful lot of promotion now because of the products, and I, I wouldn't do that promotion for the salon because deep down part of me feels that you should be able to get clients to refer you. Now, that's probably, probably wrong. And, you know, in this world, you need to promote to get yourself out wider, but as it will have this old fashioned view that as a professional, your clientele are your best sales force. And if you look after them well enough and don't lose them, you'll have more clients than you need. Um, but it doesn't, it's not quite enough when you've got 20 other stylists and young ones coming up,

[00:45:32] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:45:33] **Michael V.:** It's not quite enough to feed them quickly enough. And so what's interesting is that by doing the products, the salon benefits enormously in terms of the spin-off of clients.

[00:45:46] **Michael V.:** You know, we have clients that new clients will come in and say, I've been using your products for two years. You know, and I've decided to come and have my hair done and we get a lot of clients like that. Clients come from around the world because they've seen, you know, one of our social media influences and they've been following them and they come from South America to have their hair done.

[00:46:07] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:46:08] **Michael V.:** It helps, but it's not, it's not the main intention. The main intention is the product company. And the salon should sort itself out, but actually benefits enormously from what the products are doing.

[00:46:22] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well, I, um, as you know, I, I get your newsletter, your blog, uh, every week and it drops in and I, I always have a look at it.

Um, I think there's great things on it. I mean, the video I mentioned earlier on, that was on the one that came last week. Uh, just that short video. I don't know how new it is, but it's like I remember looking at it thinking, God, it's like the United Nations, your salon. They were just all these different accents. And, uh, I remember you told me before how many different, uh, languages were spoken between your team. And it's truly is this, you know, sophisticated, well educated. Um, you know, multinational environment, and that's fantastic. But, one of the things that I particularly like on your blog is Gabby's Bakery. And for people who don't realize, Gabby is your wife. And she, you know, my wife follows her recipes on the, um, on the bottom of the weekly newsletter on a regular basis. I have a particular favorite. It's the, uh, Caribbean spiced rum cake. Apple banana and maple tray bake. And you know, she does these fantastic, really healthy things and it's like, it's like, it's not a newsletter about hairdressing all the time. There's hair components to it, but there's all sorts of other, you know, social and Gabby's bakery, all sorts of other stuff in there and your products. And, uh, I think that's a very interesting marketing approach, you know, um, that you've taken.

[00:47:55] **Michael V.:** it, yeah, I think, it's really trying to cover. Lifestyle points. And I think we went, we started to really drive up the whole blogs and everything when lockdown happened, you know, suddenly we had nothing to do. And I'd been, um, told by, some of our marketing people, you need to, you need to blog, you need to blog. And I was doing some before, but not to the same extent as and. I also had the headspace to get into the routine of initially just writing about family life, um, not just hair stuff, you know, what we could do for clients over zoom, but also just what we were doing at home. Um, it gave me a chance to. Get into the theme of writing I'll write about restaurants. I'll write about holiday locations. I'll write about hair problems mainly But it's really things that I believe our clients have an interest in

[00:48:54] **Antony W.:** Yeah,

[00:48:56] **Michael V.:** So anything that's of interest to them that's on brand with us I think can go in the newsletter.

[00:49:03] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Well, I think you do a great job. But I remember reading about some art gallery you went to. Now, I might be wrong here. Was it in Brussels or Belgium somewhere? It was

[00:49:12] **Michael V.:** Yeah. And then the Vermeer exhibition and, uh, that was, it was a lovely trip. And again, it's something that, you know, we talked to clients about, um, and I knew that a lot would be interested because it was, a client actually told me, and I thought, I love Vermeer. I followed him for years and I thought we must go. And I, I booked that night and then within a few days, the entire season was sold out. No one could get tickets, like four months had just been sold out. I thought, I'm so glad we got.

[00:49:46] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:49:47] **Michael V.:** So, writing about that was lovely because it's something I enjoy. There's, uh, that whole art world and Amsterdam, Amsterdam's lovely, easy to get to on the Eurostar.

[00:49:56] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly. And there was another thing I wanted to ask you about. Now, I'm not sure where I read this. It could have been on your website. It could have been on one of your blogs. I have no idea. Uh, but you used the phrase, and I thought I must ask you about that. And it was, you were talking about industry hairdressers, and you were talking about client focused hairdressers.

[00:50:15] **Michael V.:** Yes,

[00:50:16] **Antony W.:** What's the difference between an industry hairdresser and a client focused hairdresser?

[00:50:22] **Michael V.:** I, I guess, I guess that comes from my Background, starting with John Frieda, um, always working in the West End. It was very much client based, you know? So even though with John, I did a lot of session work, a lot of magazine work at the time, he was doing a lot at the time. I did two or three years of, you know, all the magazines and, it was great. I loved it. And the shows, it was still very much about, you were doing that, but then you were bringing your skills back for the clients. We didn't worry that much what the industry thought of us. We weren't doing many hair shows. And I think, I think some, some hairdressers fall into a trap of worrying too much what other hairdressers think and not worrying enough what the client in front of them thinks. And they, they tend to get drawn into too much industry stuff, but never really build a proper clientele.

[00:51:26] **Antony W.:** Yeah, yeah,

[00:51:28] **Michael V.:** Now, some of those ones go on to great things. You can, you know, people like Sam McKnight and Guido, um, or they'll do teaching and, they reach a peak and it's, it's fantastically successful, but I think a lot gets stranded in the middle. But then don't have a core clientele to fall back on.

[00:51:51] **Antony W.:** Yeah, There's an interesting connection between that and the awards side of it. You know, like the, the award side of the industry, I was very much when I had my salons into the award side of things as well, but clients don't really care. Um, you know, it's not like it's great when you're at Grosvenor house or wherever you are and you're a hairdresser of the year, or you win some, you know, accolade for your business or, or whatever it is, but it doesn't in a lot of cases, I won't say all cases in a lot of cases, it doesn't transfer into more clients. It doesn't transfer into a more financially successful business.

[00:52:29] **Michael V.:** That's right. And, and I, and I think particularly now when the session world has gone through a big downturn, you know, we get a lot, a lot of applications from stylists that have been in the industry a long time and, you know, they'll still write a CV full of all the magazines and the industry work they've done. But

they don't have any clients and I don't think they quite get that at the end of the day that those skills don't necessarily translate to being a good stylist with clients.

[00:53:04] **Antony W.:** Oh, exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:53:06] **Michael V.:** Um, and so the value that they think they may have, they actually don't have. And it's, it's very difficult to integrate and transition someone who's had, you know, 30 year's experience, but mainly doing that type of work. Who then says, I want to be a salon based stylist. But they don't have this clientele or the skills necessarily.

[00:53:32] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly. Um, you mentioned your products, but you didn't mention the name of them. And, uh, it's an unusual name for hair products. And that's good in itself as it gives them some presence because people obviously ask the question, which I'm going to ask you, uh, which I have asked you before. So I know the answer to, but, uh, the products are called three more inches. So how did that come about?

[00:53:54] **Michael V.:** Well, it came about from what was a very small range we had at the time. And this key product, which was a pre wash treatment, which was different to everything that was on the market and actually allowed people to keep a quality of hair that would grow much longer. Without splitting, without breaking. And the name actually came to me when one of our test models who started out with a, shoulder length bob, dark hair, full of split ends, and over the course of like 10 months, her hair grew longer than she'd ever had it, but there were no split ends anymore. And because I knew she'd been using these litres of product that we'd been testing with her, The name just came to me.

[00:54:42] **Michael V.:** Let's, let's call it three more inches. We could have said four more inches, but I prefer to over, over, over deliver under promise. But, um, you know, I think as the range has got much broader now, we are bringing our own name back onto pack and, and reducing the power of the three more inches becoming minimized on new packaging. Van Clarke is coming back in on front of pack. Um, we, our strap line is healthcare for hair, which actually covers the entire range of products. Um, and just from our digital understanding of what people are searching for, they're searching much more for my name than they are for three more inches.

[00:55:30] **Antony W.:** Right. Okay. And, um, obviously now the product range has got much broader. There's a lot of them. Uh, and so therefore it obviously takes up a lot of your time. Are you, are you running the product company yourself as well as being an in demand hairdresser behind the chair? How are you sort of carving up that time?

[00:55:47] **Michael V.:** Um, foolishly. Yes, I am doing all of it,

[00:55:51] **Antony W.:** Yeah. Okay.

[00:55:52] **Michael V.:** but we have very good people, um, that, very skilled in their part, but I am overseeing and driving the products. I do all of the product development, all of the new products. Uh, we do all of the testing ourselves in house. I guide product design, um, as well. Um, Yeah, I enjoy it. I probably do too much. I want to step back a little bit. the salon takes a lot of my time. We have about 45 people now in the salon. Um, but we are bringing in people to take on more responsibility. We've just taken on a very good maître d from, one of the major London restaurants. And, she's doing very well.

[00:56:35] **Antony W.:** Good. And you're still behind the chair frequently during the wait.

[00:56:39] **Michael V.:** Well, I, I am actually a bit more now than I was. I was just doing three mornings, um, a week because I think it is helpful for me to be there for the rest of the team. Those mornings seem to have become till like three or four in the afternoon.

[00:56:55] **Antony W.:** Right, okay.

[00:56:56] **Michael V.:** Um, and I start at 7 45, the first client. So, uh, yeah, our first clients can be 7 30 for some of the team. the older ones like to start early. Uh, I like to start early as well. so I'm doing pretty much three full days with clients. And working around the other stuff with, with my team to make sure that the salon is still going forward.

[00:57:20] **Antony W.:** Okay. And when we last spoke, you were, and you've sort of alluded to this at the very beginning about the footprint of the building. You only used a small part of it and bit by bit, you've, you've bought bits of it back and you know, you're knocking down, you seem to always be knocking down walls and, and expanding into other parts. When we last spoke, you, you were turning part of it into a gym or something. Did that happen?

[00:57:45] **Michael V.:** Um, no lockdown got in the way, but the plans are there and we have pre app permission and we are back with the architects now to put full application in. So that's very much. We want to sort of expand the salon into wellness more as well. You know, the beauty side is great. My, my wife was a personal trainer. we're very much into the whole health and wellness aspect. We'd like to offer a bit more of that to the clients as well. Um, so having something a bit more all-encompassing in the building would be good

[00:58:23] **Antony W.:** All right, fantastic. Well, what's the most important thing that you've learned in, uh, so what did you say it was 45 years ago? That you started hairdressing. Is that right? 45 years ago, you started

[00:58:36] **Michael V.:** Today. Yes. Today.

[00:58:38] **Antony W.:** Okay. So, and the salon is started 35 odd years ago. Is that right?

[00:58:43] **Michael V.:** Yes. Yes.

[00:58:45] **Antony W.:** So, so what's the most important thing you've learned as a leader, as a salon owner, as a manager of other people?

[00:58:51] **Michael V.:** Oh, what one thing?

[00:58:54] **Antony W.:** Yeah. If you could just, yeah, just distill it down to one thing.

[00:58:58] **Michael V.:** I guess the most important thing is to keep learning for everyone.

[00:59:03] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:59:05] **Michael V.:** I, I think, the moment you think, you know, it,

[00:59:08] **Antony W.:** Yeah.

[00:59:09] **Michael V.:** life seems to pull the rug from under you,

[00:59:12] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly. Sometimes

[00:59:14] **Michael V.:** and I think

[00:59:15] **Antony W.:** Sometimes that question. It just seems all encompassing and too big to answer. But actually, I think exactly what you've said is the answer. I once heard someone say, whatever the question is, the answer is education. And that's pretty much what you've just said,

[00:59:30] **Michael V.:** I think it is. I think, and I think it's also what keeps things interesting. You know, I had, um, had one of the young ones the other day say to me, um, you know, Why is it not okay just to get to a level and just stay there? and I said that, you know, in my experience, people that try to just hang on to where they are and stop growing within a team, end up becoming like a cancer within that team. You know, that they, they start to resent the fact that they're not making progress and people are going past them. they'll often try to hold other people back so that they don't look as bad. in relation to their peers. I don't think it's an option and especially not in the center of a global city like London, where it's so, so fiercely competitive. You know, you can't just think you've arrived. As soon as you think you've arrived and sit back, then you start going downhill.

[01:00:34] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly. A new generation are

[01:00:37] **Michael V.:** Go past you.

[01:00:37] **Antony W.:** Yeah, exactly. Okay. Well, on that note, one last question. Uh, what do you wish you were better at? Okay. Yeah.

[01:00:47] **Michael V.:** relaxing.

[01:00:48] **Antony W.:** Okay.

[01:00:51] **Michael V.:** Um, I think, I think since lockdown. You know, we've all worked so hard to recover what we had and get back to growth. And I think it's very easy to keep taking on more stuff. Yeah, I love creating stuff. I love doing stuff. But, um, I also need to, to... Be careful I don't overdo it.

[01:01:17] **Antony W.:** All right. Okay. Well, on that note, we need to, uh, we need to wrap up. Whereabouts can people connect with you, Michael, on Instagram or any other social

[01:01:28] **Michael V.:** We have our, um, Van Clarke Instagram. Uh, we have YouTube channel. We have a lot of, um, tutorials on YouTube.

[01:01:36] **Antony W.:** Great.

[01:01:37] **Michael V.:** Have our TikTok channel now as well. And people can always, uh, write to me through our website. If they have any questions, I'm very happy to share anything we know with um, anyone that would like to listen.

[01:01:52] **Antony W.:** Fabulous. Well, that's very generous of you. I'll put those links in the show notes for today's podcast. So if you're listening to this podcast with Michael van Clarke and have enjoyed it, do me a favour, take a screenshot on your phone, share it to Instagram stories, and don't forget to subscribe and leave us a rating on review and review, sorry, on the Apple podcast app. So to wrap up, Michael, thank you for being on this week's episode of the grow my salon business podcast. That's

[01:02:20] **Michael V.:** Thanks for having me.

[01:02:21] **Antony W.:** Always a pleasure.

[01:02:23] **Michael V.:** Thanks, Antony. We'll catch up soon.

[01:02:24] Thank you for listening to today's podcast. If you'd like to connect with us, you'll find us at growmysalonbusiness.com, or on Facebook and Instagram at Grow My Salon Business. And if you enjoyed tuning into our podcast, make sure that you subscribe, like, and share it with your friends. Until next time, this is Antony Whitaker wishing you continued success.