

Top Entrepreneur

Archbeauty Skin Care Salon & Boutique, Newport, RI
archbeauty.com

When the going gets tough for Archbeauty Skin Care Salon founder Sara Schieff-Ross, she asks herself a simple question: What would Elizabeth Arden do?

"She's one of my all-time idols," Schieff-Ross says. "She actually expanded her business during the Great Depression." Just knowing that gave Schieff-Ross the courage to start her own skincare spa about two years ago, in the middle of our own Great Recession, even as she watched others fail.

Schieff-Ross, who entered the beauty ranks as a 17-year-old Clinique makeup consultant at a Boston-area Filene's, established her creds in her early 20s as a lead esthetician and consultant for local spas, honing her management and training skills before moving to Rhode Island six years ago.

By 2009, she saw spa owners respond to the recession by offering deep discounts—with disastrous results. "That never works because then customers won't pay full price again," she says. Schieff-Ross's service philosophy: "You may be pinching your pennies. But you are going to come into my world and I am going to take care of you. And you are going to see results."

No longer satisfied with being on the sidelines, the budding entrepreneur partnered with her tech-sales manager husband and spent six months creating an airtight business plan. It wowed bankers, but didn't result in any loans. "They may have been impressed but nobody was lending," she says. Then she found SEED Corp., a nonprofit that helps small enterprises, and received a \$50,000 start-up loan. She next rented an adorable shingled cottage in the heart of historic Newport. "I wanted people to feel at home, not in a starched commercial space." Months before launch, she engaged future clients through Facebook, posting photo updates as the spa took shape. "People loved seeing us evolve," she says. "Before we gave our first facial, we already had 250 Facebook fans."



Sara Schieff-Ross, founder of Archbeauty Skin Care Salon & Boutique

Archbeauty opened its doors in March 2010, with six employees and a vow to focus on three things: customer service, education and details. The estheticians (or Archbeauties, as she calls them) are schooled to "treat everyone like family." In addition to a service menu of high-tech facials, Brazilian waxes, massages and \$15 arch tweaks at the stylish BrowBar, spa staff are skilled in treating adult acne and rosacea. (Archbeauty also partners with local dermatologists for client referrals.) Staff frequently take weekend classes and field trips to Boston, sponsored by the spa's featured skincare lines—all of which boosts employee

knowledge and retention. In fact, all the original employees remain more than 18 months later.

"I like to tell my clients that you'll get phenomenal service here, and you'll learn something about your skin," Schieff-Ross says, adding that she cautions staff never to hard-sell. "Our philosophy is we don't push, we educate." Similarly, she hosts complimentary client events with free mini-facials and Q&A sessions.

And while her big-picture vision makes her a standout entrepreneur, it's her focus on the smallest of details that sets Schieff-Ross apart.

"Make sure the walls aren't scuffed, make sure the products aren't dusty," she says. "I can't tell you how many times I've gone into a spa boutique and picked up a dusty product. I don't want to buy it. If they don't care about their product why should I?" Business owners, she says, may get busy and become complacent, "but customers notice, so you have to notice, too." Which is why she makes sure that everyone who works for her "has pride in our place, because customers pick up on that."

Schieff-Ross next hopes to establish Archbeauty Salons in Boston, New York and Connecticut—Great Recession be damned. "If you are good at what you do you will thrive," she says. "The ones who have integrity will succeed and grow—even in this crazy economy."—Alison Singh Gee