

The New Way to Relax...

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When we hear the word “straightener” or “relaxer”, we tend to think of the Afro-American or ethnic client. However, there is a major segment of the caucasian market for example, people of Hispanic, Jewish, Irish, Italian descent who do not identify with the Afro-American “type” of relaxers, mainly sodium hydroxide based (lye) or calcium carbonate based (no-lye) relaxers. And in reality both hair textures are extremely different from one another and the need of each hair type is diametrically opposed. The ethnic-type hair thrives on oil-based products whereas Caucasian curly hair is not porous enough to absorb the excess oil of sodium hydroxide relaxers.

Until recently there were 3 professional services at salon level to “straighten”, relax or “texturize” curly, wavy or unruly Caucasian hair:

1. Sodium hydroxide (lye) or no-lye (calcium carbonate) based relaxers.
2. Thio-based straighteners euphemized as hair texturizers or “temporary” relaxers
3. Permanent thio-based, heat-driven, Japanese-style straightening systems

Over the last few months a new, different approach has become a huge impact in the professional industry. Caucasian-Latino clients have been sold on a “conditioning, non-chemical, non-damaging, healthy” alternative to traditional relaxing methods. It is known as the “Brazilian keratin treatment”.

Brazilian Keratin Treatment

The Brazilian Keratin treatment started to trickle into the US market approximately 2 years ago. It first appeared in major internationally-influenced cities such as New York and Miami. At the beginning, Brazilian stylists residing in the US started bringing it back from Brazil, where it is known as “escova progressiva” and slowly it caught on. The word spread and about a year ago, the product started to be distributed more widely, all of them imported from Brazil.

The “craze” for the Brazilian Keratin hit Miami about nine months ago, becoming extremely popular overnight. Later it moved on to Puerto Rico, New York and other US Latin markets. At the present time there are approximately 4 major brands, among them Marcia Teixeira, who registered the brand Brazilian Keratin Treatment, BKT for short.

The product itself claims to be a “revolutionary” process that “repairs damaged hair”, eliminates “frizz” from the hair and lasts up to 4 months. It claims hair is left in an almost perfect condition, silky, shiny and manageable. Some products claim to straighten or relax the curl in the hair, some do not. However, all of them claim the process infuses the hair shaft with keratin. Some claim to reach the cortex level others say that the keratin is deposited at the cuticle level only.

All of the systems specify the product’s effects are only temporary lasting between 3 to 4 months. This is in direct contrast to the Japanese-type thio-based hair straighteners

whose relaxing effects are permanent. However, the application process for both services are equally tedious and time consuming. The product is applied to clean, dry hair and must be flat ironed in very thin sections. The process takes from 3 to 6 hours depending on the amount of hair and texture. Both products are very expensive, approximately between \$15-\$25 per ounce. For this reason, both services are being priced at approximately \$100-\$200 an hour at salon level.

However, the Brazilian treatment will revert its effects in 2 to 3 months, sometimes less, depending on how well the client has cared for her hair. In the case of the Japanese-style straightening system, the effects on the processed hair shaft are permanent; the curl and or frizz will not return. A retouch must be performed at the regrowth only, after 4 to 6 months, but there is no need to process the hair shaft again. In the case of the keratin treatment, the entire head must be redone, making it a more costly upkeep.

The Brazilian treatment must be maintained with sulfate-free shampoos, since sulfates will strip hair of the coating left by the product and the hair will lose the effect of the treatment.

The big controversy in the Brazilian Keratin treatment is the use of formaldehyde in high concentration as the main active ingredient in the popular BKT. As is widely known, formaldehyde in high concentration is a highly toxic, cancer-causing, dangerous chemical, especially when inhaled. For this reason, there are salons where both customers and hairdressers do the treatment in a special room, wearing gas masks, or with fans and extractors, believe it or not!!!

According to Allure Magazine “some of the most popular BKT treatments contain at least ten times more formaldehyde than the .2 percent considered safe by the Cosmetic Ingredient Review Expert Panel. The FDA doesn’t currently regulate cosmetics, but they are investigating the safety of “escova progressiva” treatments.

There is nothing in keratin that makes hair straight; it’s the formaldehyde that does it. Keratin is merely for a cosmetic, conditioning effect, which is temporary and is used as a good marketing story. The formaldehyde controversy has permeated the success of this new service at salon level. New brands have come out in the market claiming they are formaldehyde-free, and at the present time FDA is investigating the major brands since at least one death has been attributed to this treatment due to formaldehyde inhalation.

All of this just goes to prove that there is a huge market for a hair straightening, frizz eliminating system for Caucasian hair. There are good brands out there that do an effective job, but perhaps they have not been properly advertised to the general public and therefore this service is still far from becoming a major factor in the professional beauty industry.

The need for a good, reliable product that tames unruly hair, gets rid of excess curl and makes it easier for a curly hair person to control his or her hair is evident by the “craze” caused by the BKT. The major players in the professional market for thio-based relaxers are: Optismooth by Matrix, Anticurl by Rusk and Vertical by Redken.

The active ingredient in all of them is Ammonium Thioglycolate. They perform extremely well. The major drawback is the strong, offensive smell of the chemical

during application, and the fear of the average hairdresser in using the product which is a result of course of ignorance or lack of education.

The major difference between this service and the Japanese-style permanent relaxer is that the latter uses a higher concentration of the chemical and the heat of the flat iron to drive the product. Therefore, the result of this service is said to be “temporary” and the Japanese-style permanent. However, the porosity of the hair and the processing time of the thio-based relaxers determine the duration of the service, which on many occasions does not have to be redone completely, just retouched as the hair grows out.