



The *Conni* Show

SOME OF THE KEYS to success in indoor tanning that first come to mind are quality equipment, well trained staff, and great customer service, but often times the most important factors are actually the more intangible ones. In the case of Midnight Sun, it seems that owner Conni Pataki's personality and ability to relate to anyone and everyone is what really paves the way for sustained success. Her husband calls it "The Conni Factor." Competition comes and goes but, as he says, none of them have the Conni Factor.

Her leadership has encouraged staff members and customers to stick around for decades, and it's helped her summon a remarkably broad demographic of clients to the Burlington, Ontario salon. Approximately one of every three customers is male, and about half are over 50 years old. Staff members that range in age from 18 to 65 make the business even more relatable to everyone, and even people who are skeptical of tanning when they first visit quickly become comfortable there.

Conni says it's "like a salon talk show in there," and that dynamic, along with their communication skills and the comforting environment, are the biggest reasons why once staff members or clients are welcomed to The Conni Show, they're usually there to stay.

"I'm there a lot, and I'm not trying to be a certain way — I'm just a generally nice person," Conni says. "I'm very generous. I always treat every single person, staff or customer, as an equal. It doesn't matter who they are; I relate to them. I guess it's kind of a gift. I just do well with people."

Born into Tanning

Conni's connection with tanning and the Burlington community far predates her ownership of the business. Her father and stepmother opened Midnight Sun in 1986, her parents had other salons before that, and Conni grew up around the tanning environment. The experience ingrained in her a personal appreciation and "natural" relationship with tanning that, to this day, influences the way she operates the business and drives her emphasis on the importance of a moderate approach.

"I've been tanning almost 40 years. We had a tanning bed in our house. I think, because I've grown up tanning, I have a very natural relationship with tanning," Conni says. "I tan all year. I rarely go in the sun. I don't really go on southern vacations, because I don't



SALON NAME	Midnight Sun
LOCATION	Burlington, Ontario
OWNER	Conni Pataki
YEAR OPENED	1986
WEBSITE	midnightsuntanningburlington.com
EQUIPMENT	Ergoline, Royal Sun, Sundash
PRODUCTS	Ed Hardy, Supre Tan, Devoted Creations, Australian Gold, Norvell

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Conni Pataki, owner

really feel the need to search for the sun, because I’ve always had it. I’ve always tanned but never abused it. Once a week — that’s been my lifestyle for my whole life.”

When she worked in the salon as a teenager, she also learned that the industry was something she always wanted to be a part of. After moving to Denmark and running her own business, she started feeling the urge to head back home, and then she got the final push she needed to make the move.

“I worked there when I was going to college, then I moved away, and 20 years later I moved back and bought the salon. When I was younger and worked in the salon, I always said I’m just going to have a tanning salon. My parents said you have to get a real job. I had my own business in Denmark and worked around the clock, then I just all of a sudden decided I wanted to come home,” Conni says.

“I was like, ‘My parents are getting older. It’s time for me to come home.’ I had been thinking that and not really acting on it, and then my parents called me and said they were going to sell. They said I

had two days to make up my mind, and I moved back and bought the salon. It was an easy decision, and I love my job — always loved it in high school and up to now.”

Between her prior knowledge from growing up around and working in tanning, and the business structure her parents already had in place, it was a smooth transition for Conni to take the reins at Midnight Sun. “I just kept doing what they were doing. They always had very good plans and procedures in place, so it was easy for me to transition over,” she says. “I knew when and how to change the bulbs. I went with my dad to do it as a kid. A lot of it just came naturally.”

Being around tanning most of her life has also given Conni a comprehensive perspective on the service and business, and helped develop her ability to connect with clients who have a variety of tanning preferences. She remembers the days when they had one jug of lotion to give people a pump before they tanned, and there was only one level of tanning equipment. Of course, she’s added all the product options and new beds with all the bells and whistles over the years, and appreciates them personally as well as professionally, but she also still enjoys a 20-minute nap in a tanning bed.

"I remember people would have to come and make appointments because every bed was like 20 to 30 minutes. Now we have the eight-minute beds and standups and everything else, so you can pump more people through," she says.

"We have 16 rooms, and I still have two 20-minute beds. Older clientele who really want vitamin D or have a bit of psoriasis want the length as opposed to the strength. I still like them myself. Sometimes I go in them because I just like the good old beds still. I like a bit of everything, and because I use a bit of everything, it's easy to sell everything. I like to stand up in the summer, and in the winter I hate standing and just want to do 20 minutes and take a nap."

Home Away from Home

Whether intentionally or naturally, the environment at Midnight Sun looks and feels like "home." Since Conni is in the salon practically more than she's at her own actual home, it makes sense that Midnight Sun has the look and feel "kind of like you're going into someone's house," but without being too old fashioned. "The salon is the only place I decorate for Christmas. There's no point in decorating my house because I'm never there," she says.

The fact that she's always there and also willing to lead by example also sets the stage for developing strong and productive relationships with staff members.

"I do everything. I'm as hands-on as you can be. I work a lot. Sometimes I'll take time off in sow season, but in busy season, I'm there all the time. I do most of the sprays. I'm behind the counter the most," Conni says. "I do everything myself, and I find the key to success is I lead totally by example. If I'm going to ask the girls to get on their hands and knees and scrub the floors, I'm going to do it first."

But, maintaining a constant presence in the business doesn't mean she micromanages her employees. Trust is another important factor that underlies her success with personnel. Staff members are allowed to — and expected to — be prepared to act independently in response to any situation they might face.

Fast Facts About the Salon

Staff Members 5

UV Units 14

Best Selling Lotion
Supre Tan

Most Used Sunbed
Ergoline 600



"We're a real team. I totally trust everyone, and they make the call if I'm not there. Worst case, I'll tell you not to do that again," Conni says. "I hire people usually based on their smile. It's a tanning salon; I can teach them the rest. Personality is No. 1. They're smart girls; the other thing I look for is common sense."

More specifically, Conni says another reason she believes people like working for her enough to stick around for many years is her willingness to be flexible. The owner/employee relationships are mutually beneficial, and she has found that by being respectful of people's schedules and willing to work with them, she earns their loyalty and gratitude in the form of dedication to the job.

"I kind of work around them, not that they have all the say, but I make the schedules far in advance, and I hand it to them and ask what days they can't work. They tell me, and I work around it," she says. "I try to give them the same nights if they're working nights and days if they're working days. I know if I usually to go to yoga on Thursday, then all of a sudden I get these shifts, that's going to make me mad. I try to make it easy for them, and when somebody calls in sick maybe once a year, they're really sick."

While the depth of Conni's relationships with long-term staff surely goes beyond what can be properly conveyed in an article, those notable factors are at least part of the reason why one employee has been with Midnight Sun for 20 years, others stick around to some degree even while pursuing other opportunities, and most everyone who has ever worked there and remained in the area is still "on call."

"Barb is in her 21st year. I inherited her when I bought the salon, and she knows all the customers. She's probably my best seller. Obviously we can all have our days, but she probably tries harder today than the day I bought it," Conni says. "What happens usually

is I get them when they're in college, then they work a lot for me for a year or two, then they get their big girl job, but they'll continue to work for me part-time. I have one girl who's been with me for two-and-a-half years and one for one year, and I feel like this is the newest staff I've ever had. If I ever need anybody, I can probably call on 95 percent of former staff and they would show up tomorrow.

"It's just an awesome business, and if you sat in my salon for a day, you'd be like, 'I want to work here.' Everybody wants to work for me. I have a list, but it never happens because nobody ever leaves."

Here to Stay



Barb's tenure at Midnight Sun predates Conni's ownership, and the same can also be said of many customers. They still have current clients that visited Midnight Sun well before 2006, and even ones that remember her as a child from the other salon her parents opened prior to this one.

"I still get people from that salon that have now moved to my town. They say, 'I remember when you were 15 years old.' That's great!"

Conni says. "If our customers leave, it's usually because they moved away. Nobody leaves

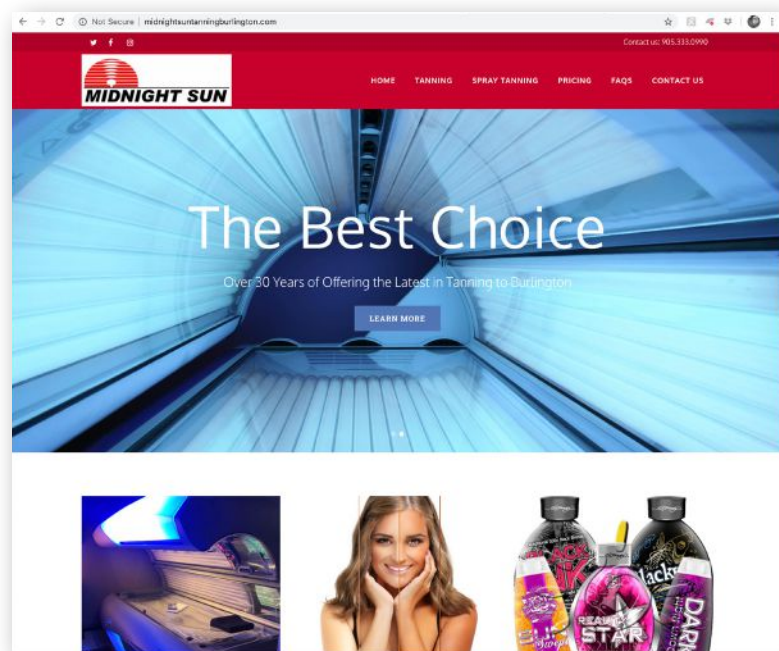
because of service or anything I've done. We just work really hard to keep them happy."

Like the connections between Conni and her staff members, you'd probably have to see it for yourself to truly understand the relationships between Conni and Co. and their customers. But, that has to start somewhere, and when you boil it down to the simplest level, the common thread seems to again be communication.

"We talk to our customers. How was your tan last time? Why are you tanning? What's your purpose? We communicate so much with our customers – just normal conversations, too. It's a salon talk show in there," she says.

Beyond how long many customers have stuck with the salon, the other particularly interesting characteristic of Midnight Sun's client base is diversity. Clients are young and old, male and female, and tan for any number of different reasons, but no matter who they are, they're all made to feel comfortable in the salon. That's due to Conni's innate ability to connect with anybody and everybody, and also because of their staff makeup and approach to customer service.

"We relate to everybody. We're not on our phones, and not talking to people. We will help our older clientele. We put ourselves to every level. I have staff that's everything from 65, 29 to 18. I have a little bit of everything," Conni says. "You can't say what my customer demographic is. I always say, you can look at any person, anywhere, and you don't know if they're a tanner. Everybody tans."



Along with around half of her clients being 50 or older, Conni also says that about 30 to 40 percent are men – certainly a surprisingly large ratio for a tanning business. The male demographic is perhaps most impacted by the salon's ability to make people feel comfortable, because in most circumstances, men tend to feel a little uncomfortable in a tanning salon environment that they might perceive to be geared toward a female audience.

"We have so many male tanners, it's unbelievable. I think they're not intimidated. It's kind of like, you know how the more something is used, the more it is used? Let's say I have a man coming in with his wife for a vacation. If he's the only man there, he might not come back, but if there are three other men in there, he might come without his wife the next time," Conni says.

If it's Not Broke, Don't Fix It

With nearly 15 years of successful ownership of the salon personally, Conni isn't going to try to "reinvent the wheel" now. She's seen the industry change over the years, competition has come and gone, and her personable approach has always remained the same. And, she's also stayed the course with a simple approach for selling tanning sessions. UV tanners can either purchase by the session, or in packages of 10 or 20. The simple pricing structure lends itself to a consultative "selling" process that prioritizes the customer's comfort. Conni doesn't care if a customer wants a session or a package. She's happy to give them exactly what they want. And if they want to tan without a lotion, she'll tell them why she wouldn't recommend it, but won't risk alienating them in order to make a sale.

"That's how we started out. I think we might be the only ones in our town that sell packages this way. Our customers really must like it. If it's not broke, I'm not fixing it," she says. "A lot of people like to buy packages. If they don't want a package, we don't care. We want them to buy how they want to buy. My price for paying as you go isn't a

huge difference from buying a package. We do get comments a lot that we're not very pushy. We don't force people."

One of the biggest changes the industry's veterans have seen over the years is the introduction and growth of sunless tanning. But, it's nothing new for Conni – she's been spray tanning since before most people in North America probably knew the service existed. She first started when she lived in Denmark, and Midnight Sun has offered airbrush spray tanning services for the last 18 years. Despite having the level of expertise that you would expect someone to have after so many years of practice, Conni again displays her trust of her staff members by training them all to spray clients. She's confident in their abilities and needs their help to keep up with demand, since a competitive price point and widespread knowledge of the quality they provide keeps their doors churning with sunless clients.

"Everyone except the bed cleaners has to be able to spray. I'll do 45 sprays a day, but physically I can't be there all the time. I tell them to try to spray as close to I do as possible. They're all good. I train them myself, then they have probably girlfriends coming in for a month for practice, practice, practice," Conni says. "We get clients from word of mouth. We're good at it, and we have a great price point."

"I still get people from that salon that have now moved to my town. They say, 'I remember when you were 15 years old.' That's great! If our customers leave, it's usually because they moved away. Nobody leaves because of service or anything I've done. We just work really hard to keep them happy."

Conni Pataki, owner

All Day, Everyday

With an established presence in their community and confidence in what they have to offer, Conni isn't inclined to overcomplicate things with lots of discounts and deals.

"Our prices are great. We're open 10 to 10 throughout the week – our hours are great. Our service is great. We've always changed our bulbs before they're due. We just have the right recipe," she says. "We do everything you're supposed to do. The beds are clean. The place is spotless. I set the prices as what I would pay. I go up with inflation, but it's never ridiculous, because I just think, 'I would never pay that.' We have fair prices, so I don't feel the need to have sales."

When they do have a sale, it's only for very special occasions.

"I do sometimes at Christmas, Mother's Day, and Valentine's Day. We only sell packages of 10 or 20, but sometimes I'll do 5 sessions as like a stocking stuffer or Mother's Day gift. Other than that, I rarely ever have a sale," Conni says. "However, when we had our 30th anniversary, we had a big event and did 30 percent off everything for a week. We did 20 percent off for Barb's 20-year anniversary. We had a full Barb week."

Everyday pricing can be kept low, at least partially because they don't need to invest much in marketing. Most people know they're there and what they offer, and people that are new to town will likely come across the salon before long thanks to word of mouth from happy customers, social media, or the Midnight Sun sign placed by the road on their busy street.

All in all, everything Conni does at Midnight Sun, as well as what she doesn't do, is based primarily on what she thinks works best for herself and the people around her – both staff and customers. That's a good lesson for owners who might find themselves letting what the salon across town or the gym down the street is doing get in the way of what matters most. "I don't care what my competition does," she says. "You do a good job, and you don't need to spy on other people. I just concentrate on my business."

Then and Now

It's hard to know for sure, but Midnight Sun likely has some of the earliest Smart Tan Certified employees that are still working in a salon anywhere in the world. When doing some spring-cleaning this year, Conni recently found Barb's first Smart Tan certificate from 1999. And, another staff member who worked at another salon when she was in high school thinks she was certified for the first time even before that.

Whether their introduction to Smart Tan dates back to before Y2K or more recently, all Midnight Sun staff members achieve their Smart Tan UV Certification. It makes sense that Conni is a big believer in the Smart Tan method, because she used a similar approach personally before Smart Tan even existed. While requiring clients to tan in moderation might in some ways conflict with her aversion to being pushy, she says most people are able to grasp the importance and be thankful for the guidance.

"I think the majority of them appreciate it. I always talk them down – talk them off the cliff. If it's not enough, we can always increase next time. Why burn when you shouldn't burn? That's the whole point of coming in here," she says. "I talk about it a lot. I don't preach, because nobody wants to be preached to."

While Midnight Sun doesn't have a lot of new employees to certify on a regular basis because of their incredibly low staff turnover, Conni continues to support Smart Tan primarily in recognition of what the company has done and continues to do for the industry that is so near and dear to her heart. That love for tanning, as well as the people around her, will keep her in the business for as much as another decade, and when she's ready to step away, she doesn't want the Midnight Sun tradition to end there.

"I just think if we didn't have Smart Tan, and we don't stick together as an industry, we'd be in trouble. I believe in tanning as I believe in breathing. It's in my blood more than anybody. I think Smart Tan training should be not even an option. I wish we had it when my parents started," she says.

"I want to have the business for at least 20 years. I have at least six to 10 years left in me. Then, hopefully, I will pass the torch to someone who is just as passionate as I am. My business has been here for so long. COVID put a dent in it, but I'm not worried. I will be up and running, and I'm not going to quit. I'm in it for the long haul."