

Meet Mark Kress

The Man Who Invented the Cosmetic HairLoss Category

Mark Kress is the founder and president of Spencer Forrest Inc., the company that almost single-handedly created the category of cosmetic solutions for thinning-hair. Like so many hairloss businesses, Spencer Forrest was the response of one man to his own predicament. In this interview, Mark takes us back 26 years to those early days and describes how Couvre led to Toppik and, now to laser light therapy.

Spencer Forrest markets Couvre, a lotion-compound that colors the skin to disguise the thinning area, Toppik, organic keratin protein fibers that intertwine with growing hair to make it look thicker, Toppek Hair Fattener, Fullmore aerosol fibers that bond to hair to add thickness and color; and now X-5 a new handheld laser.



Mark Kress

NHJ: 1981 was the year you started something that went on to become a worldwide success story. Mark, take us back 26 years to a time when there was no Spencer Forrest and a decision you made that would change your life.

MK: In 1981, I was a single guy watching the beginnings of a bald spot and feeling pretty unhappy about it. I looked around for what I figured would be a variety of cosmetic products that would help somebody in the early stages of thinning – and there was nothing! All I wanted was to conceal my lack of hair and look good; but to my amazement, there was nothing to help me on the market. There were some clumsy sprays that didn't do a very good job, but nothing else. So, as a person with a marketing and advertising background, I decided this was an opportunity to create a new product... and maybe grow it into a business. That was the birth of Spencer Forrest Inc., but I didn't know just how big it would become.

NHJ: Where did you start?

MK: My first product was called Couvre and after all this time, it's still on the market. It's a cream that darkens your scalp to

match your hair. Couvre became the standard among make-up people; even doctors who would recommend it to their patients.

NHJ: But you didn't stop at Couvre did you?

MK: After many years in the business, we began looking for a more advanced product. This resulted in the introduction of Toppik eleven years ago. It is now the world's leading cosmetic product for enhancing thinning hair and concealing the signs of thinning. Toppik is made up of pure Keratin fibers that are colored to match the eight most common hair colors. We have a process in which we charge the Toppik fibers with static electricity to make them adhere to your fine vellus hairs. About 30 seconds after shaking the product into your hair, your hair looks thicker and appears to have more volume.

NHJ: Who is Toppik designed for?

MK: Toppik has become a great product for people in all walks of life. Hair transplant patients can use it during a cosmetically awkward period like post operative thinning. It's also great for people who are taking Minoxidil or Propecia and want to see an immediate result. And, of course, it's great for special occasions or any time people simply want to feel better.

NHJ: Today, Spencer Forrest offers multiple hairloss solutions. Do you believe it's important to give the consumer a range of choices?

MK: Since its inception, the mission of our company has been to provide a cosmetic benefit to hair loss patients. Our products do an incredible job of making people look and feel better. Prior to lasers, we never became involved with products which attempt to grow or restore hair.

NHJ: Is a laser a good companion to your other hair loss solutions?

MK: Absolutely. It enhances whatever they are doing now. The laser does not replace other products, it complements them.

NHJ: How have your clients responded?

MK: We have been getting very good feedback from our customers in terms of the results they are seeing. It's reassuring to hear we're selling something to people that really works. I should add that it is also a very profitable and growing area of our business.

NHJ: At the beginning of this interview, you explained how your own experience led you to create Couvre. Have you had a similar personal experience with light therapy?

MK: Yes, I have. I've had several hair transplant surgeries with a good deal of success, but nevertheless I retained some thinning at the crown. As soon as we started selling the LaserComb, I began using it on myself and found it produced results. It did not grow back all of the hair, which I didn't expect, but I definitely saw increased growth.

NHJ: You started off using Couvre, moved on to Toppik, had hair restoration surgery... and now you are using a laser. Is this typical of hair loss clients today?

MK: More and more. Our clients are coming to realize that there is more than one answer to hairloss. And many solutions, like laser therapy, work best in tandem with other regimens.

NHJ: Why is hair important to you?

MK: I'm probably more vain than I like to admit. When my hair looks good, I feel like I look great. And when my hair doesn't look good, I don't feel the same way. Hair has always mattered to me.

NHJ: Are most of your customers like this?

MK: Most of our clients are extremely con-

cerned about their hair. I see myself as the gauge, or laboratory for new products and technologies.

NHJ: April 2007, Spencer Forrest took another step, this time into the laser marketplace. Tell us about the X-5 hair laser.

MK: For the past two years, we have been in quiet development of our own hair laser. There were several reasons for this. First of all, we recognized that despite the commercial success we were having with the HairMax LaserComb, we were not the manufacturer of that product and could never fully enjoy the financial rewards. Secondly, we wanted to provide customers with new features, but at a lower price point. We felt this would open up a much larger market to lasers and benefit everyone.

NHJ: The X-5 hair laser is very different in its physical configuration. Let's go over the design features one by one. Let's start with the shape. Why is it round?

MK: When you start with a blank sheet of paper, interesting things happen. We were looking for the most naturally comfortable design, and it happens that a round format sits perfectly in the palm of your hand. We also sought greater coverage than devices shaped like hairbrushes.

NHJ: We also don't see any power cord.

MK: In 2007, we didn't feel there was a need to have a product tethered to a wall outlet. We wanted a cordless product that would fit comfortably in your hand and lend itself to the greatest ease of use. The easier and more comfortable it is to use, the greater the compliance... and the better the results.

NHJ: How do you use the X-5?

MK: The round shape allows you to rest the X-5 on your head as you're applying it, taking all the pressure off your shoulder and elbow. The fact that it's cordless means that you can sit in a chair and watch television or work at your computer, rather than standing in front of your bathroom mirror for 10-15 minutes.

NHJ: We see 15 light sources, arranged in a circular pattern. They appear to be mounted in a floating base.

MK: One problem many laser devices have is the fact that laser light has to work its way through the hair to reach the scalp. Our design uses light pipes that channel the light so it emerges where the pipes actually make contact with your scalp. By gently working the X-5 in a circular motion, you can help the light bypasses virtually all the hair.

NHJ: How are the diodes aligned?

MK: We have five laser diodes, with each laser divided into three equal beams. We wanted to equalize the amount of light coming out of these three points and we achieved this by mounting each one on an individually floating head. Since it's a three-point design, and, as you know a three-legged stool keeps all three feet on the ground, all three light pipes always make contact with the scalp. Each of these membranes floats independently of the others, like a Norelco Floating Head Shaver, so that they're always in perfect position and they always conform to your head.

NHJ: With a 9 square inch coverage area, does this translate to a time-saving for a user?

MK: We think it does. The X-5 covers a significantly larger area than any other handheld device on the market and we think this is an important benefit.

NHJ: What is the recommended application time?

MK: Once we begin our clinical trials, we will have a better sense of the optimum time. At this point in time, we recommend the same time per session as most other units.



NHJ: The X-5 has an integrated timer. Why?

MK: The digital readout shows the elapsed time so there's no guesswork for the user. If you're watching TV or talking on the phone, you may not know how long you've been using the laser. There's an automatic turnoff at 15 minutes.

NHJ: What about battery life?

MK: The readout includes a battery meter that shows you how much charge remains. If you're going on a trip for 5 or 6 days, you'll likely be using your laser three times. The battery is strong enough that you may well be able to travel with the X-5 without bringing the charging base.

NHJ: We've talked about the technology and comfort. What about the aesthetics?

MK: I wanted a device that would sit hand-somely in your bathroom. Something you'd hold in your hand and feel it was worth several hundred dollars. To my mind, this unit is handsome, comfortable, and has virtually every function you would want. And at \$299 retail and with generous wholesale pricing, it is by far the most economical laser unit for hair.

NHJ: Readers of The National Hair Journal are hair loss professionals. How would you see them integrating the X-5 into their day-to-day business?

MK: If I was operating such a business, I would be remiss in not offering a laser. It's simply a choice of which device is best for the job.

NHJ: In the market, there are well-produced lasers... and less well-produced and over-promised lasers. How can we guide the public to the right equipment?

MK: There are already a number of devices we've all seen on the Internet at very low prices that are clearly assembled by hand, and most likely in somebody's garage. Then there are products that are being sold that have no lasers whatsoever, just LED lights that offer no benefits. Products like this hurt everyone. If a professional is going to be working with a home laser unit, they need to deal with one of the companies that are respected in the industry. These would include Lexington International and Spencer Forest in the handheld area and the premium manufacturers in the floor units.

NHJ: What steps is Spencer Forrest taking to educate professionals about the X-5 handheld laser?

MK: We plan on expanding our website to provide more information. We are also developing an instructional DVD. We've hired a PR firm to get the word out that products like these really work... and we will be looking to participate in industry-wide events such as those put on by the National Hair Society.