



# Relaxed Tans

## An Education in Success

by John P. Ribner

*Three friends, a solid business plan and a town in need of a tanning salon all combine to make Relaxed Tans in Washington, D.C. one very successful venture.*

### STATS:

**Locations:** 1  
**Years in Business:** 1  
**Tanning Systems:** 7  
**Employees:** 10

For years, students at George Washington University in our nation's capital had to take a 20-minute bus ride to tan indoors. Then, Graham Galka, Kristopher Hart and Todd Stromberg – three fraternity brothers with a plan – opened Relaxed Tans, an upscale tanning salon in the heart of the GWU campus. After an opening day that could only be described as a big winner, the three are enjoying success with their venture. As they work to perfect their business model, the goal of opening more Relaxed Tans salons continues to look more and more like a feasible reality.

#### A Shared Plan

Successful businesses have to start somewhere, and in the case of Relaxed, it all began at the Phi Sigma Kappa frat house. It was the fall of 2004, and Graham Galka met Kristopher Hart while the former was pledging the popular fraternity. "We found out that our parents lived very close to each other in Philadelphia so I would always ride home with him on the holidays, and in that time we became friends," explained Graham. "We were returning from Easter break in 2005 and Kristopher was getting ready to graduate; he said that he would like to start a business and an indoor tanning salon seemed like the logical choice. We knew that there weren't any salons near the school – the closest was at least a 20-minute ride away – so one on campus would probably be successful." The more they drove, the more they talked, and the more they talked, the more the idea of opening a tanning salon felt right.

#### Let's Get Started!

While Graham and Kristopher were intent on becoming indoor tanning salon owners, there was one small problem – neither young man had ever tanned indoors. They took a crash course at many Virginia-area salons, and their experiences not only cemented the idea of salon ownership in their minds, it also taught them more about tanning and even helped them come up with a name for their new business venture. "We found the tanning experience very relaxing, and since it was our intention to develop a salon with an upscale, spa-like atmosphere, we decided to name the business 'Relaxed,'" Graham explained. "Our last step was to recruit a third team member, our friend Todd Stromberg, who was the former chapter advisor for Phi Sigma Kappa, because we knew his business experience would help get the salon off to a great start."

So, with a 60-page business proposal in hand, the three opened Relaxed Tans in 1,350 square feet of space on the first floor of an eight-story medical office complex in the heart of D.C.'s GWU campus. "We signed a lease on February 2, 2006 and were able to open for business on March 3," Graham recalled.

#### Putting It All Together

Graham and the guys credit much of their success to the staffs of EuroWalls and tanning distributor, American Sun Systems. "EuroWalls helped us best utilize our space and create an upscale look," he commented. "And we learned so much at American Sun Systems' symposium, which has been very helpful in operating our business. The sales staff at American Sun Systems also was a huge help with determining the best equipment mix for our store." Relaxed currently has seven tanning systems – two Soltron Race beds, four Ergoline Ambition, and a Soltron Shuttle stand-up. On the shelves are lotions from Australian Gold, Designer Skin and Swedish Beauty, and the store operates with TanTrack salon software by NicheSoft.

#### The Hot Spot

On Relaxed's first day of business, the three partners tanned a total of 211 people. Not bad for an opening day! What was their secret to marketing and promoting their brand new business? "We were reaching out to the college community before we ever opened our doors," Graham explained. "People saw us loading the equipment into our facility in the days leading up to our opening, and that helped create some excitement. To keep it going, we advertised in our school newspaper and worked with various student groups to distribute flyers and get our name out there in our community." Another promo that's worked well for the Relaxed gang is the "\$2 tan" in any unit for all first-time tanners. "That was designed to be a one-time special and it was so popular that it became our trademark; now we offer it to all first-time tanners," he added. "Last September, we sold \$5 tans in all units for the weekend, and that was very popular, too."

#### What's Next?

With a year in business now on the books, it appears that Relaxed is off to a good start. So where will the three business partners take the salon? "We have one empty room, and it's our goal to fill that room with either a sunless spray booth or a high-pressure unit, whichever will be more popular with our customer demographic," Graham said. "We've also considered adding a manicurist. Whatever we decide, we'll do it in the fall because our season coincides with the school year." Once space at the current Relaxed location is maxed out, the trio would like to open a second store. "Opening another salon will happen in due time; right now, we're busy perfecting our existing business model," he said.

Although he never planned on going to college to become a tanning salon owner, Graham says he's more than happy with his career choice. And, even though he's finishing his degree, he's totally embracing his new life as a salon professional. "This is a great way to earn a living!" Graham exclaimed. "It's a very fun business to operate and everyone in the industry is very nice and helpful. Most of all, we love our clients – it's great to be able to offer them a service that makes them so happy."