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B&H Photo Emerges as a N.Y. Institution

By **ANNIE KARNI**, Special to the Sun | February 5, 2007

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CARL REDDING, A CHEF WHO OWNS THE HARLEM SOUL FOOD RESTAURANT AMY RUTH'S, HAS A ROUTINE that takes him out of the kitchen one afternoon every week. Mr. Redding, who works on the side as a freelance photojournalist, makes a trip to Midtown to stock up on a few hundred dollars' worth of photography supplies at B & H Photo, the large photo and video store on Manhattan's West Side.



Konrad Fiedler

B&H Photo on 34th Street and Ninth Avenue is a magnet for professionals and tourists.

"They have the best prices, and whatever I'm looking for is almost guaranteed to be in stock," Mr. Redding said.

In a city where chain stores such as Starbucks, Barnes & Noble, and Best Buy make vast sections of Manhattan look like generic American strip malls, an independent business that can compete and offer something unique has become something of an anomaly. Over the past 30 years, B&H has become a New York institution with a loyal local following and growing international fame. The store has established itself as Manhattan's gathering place for professional photographers and tourists because it is almost guaranteed to have in stock everyday items and many products that are unavailable anywhere else. NASA even turned to B&H

years ago to purchase a lens for a Hasselblad camera to photograph space. During a visit to B&H last week, Mr. Redding pushed his way through the store's crowded showroom, where members of a Brazilian tour group purchased Japanese digital cameras from an Orthodox Jew. A woman from Queens, Betty Steier, purchased her third television from B&H, and a British salesman, Charles Markowitz, spoke Mandarin with a Chinese couple shopping for a camcorder in between trips to the Empire State Building and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

B&H sits on an otherwise undeveloped block of Ninth Avenue just west of Pennsylvania Station on 34th Street that feels empty compared with the pedestrian bustle just one avenue away. The Orthodox Jews who work at B & H and the store's mostly secular clientele make up the majority of the foot traffic in the area. Men wearing beards and side curls come and go from the store in groups on company charter buses that service the suburban Orthodox communities of Monsey and Kiryas Joel, N.Y, where many of B&H's employees live. On Friday afternoons and Saturdays, when B&H is closed — the owner, Herman Schreiber, and many of the store's employees are observant Satmar Jews, who do not work on Shabbat or half a dozen Jewish holidays throughout the year — there is little to attract anyone to the area. Inside, however, B&H sometimes feels as busy as Pennsylvania Station. David Jones, a cheerful Harlem resident dressed in a green B&H vest and a Knicks cap, said he greets about 3,500 shoppers daily at the front entrance, where he hands out the store's monthly price bulletin, which is as thick as a fall fashion

magazine. Green signs guide customers to different departments in the 35,000-square-foot showroom, from the home theater equipment department to the camera tripod display to the crowded digital camera section. Professional photographers and the amateurs who shop like them make a beeline for a less-crowded nook of the store, where they sort through lighting kits, enlargers, and lenses. The bearded salesmen, many of whom are photographers and filmmakers themselves, are ubiquitous throughout the store. Many have worked at B&H for more than 10 years, and some have been with the store since it opened more than 30 years ago. The sales staff works on salary, not commission. "Commissions create incentive to sell customers what they don't need or don't want," a store manager, Gary Eisenberger, said.

An overhead conveyor belt brings purchased goods from a basement storeroom to the checkout counter in large plastic bins, giving the two-level store the ambiance of an airport baggage claim.

The bustling store accounts for only about 30% of B&H's total business. A 200,000-square-foot warehouse in Brooklyn's Navy Yard feeds a Web business that accounts for 70% of B&H's sales. Like the store, the Web site, bhphotovideo.com, is closed for business on Jewish holidays and Shabbat.

With an Internet business that allows B&H to broaden its geographic reach, aggressive advertisement campaigns abroad, and a staff of experts in electronics, B&H remains competitive with chains like Best Buy and Circuit City. "The specialty retailers are often leaders in new technologies," the president of consumer sales at Sony Electronics, Jay Vanderbree, said. "They provide a value to the industry as changes in technology happen at a faster and faster pace."

While the chains buy larger quantities of a small sampling of products manufactured by Canon, Sony, or Panasonic, B&H purchases smaller quantities, but stocks the entire line of products of every brand available and acts as a showcase for both consumer and professional products.

Stores such as B&H attempt to be "ruthlessly competitive at the bottom of the price spectrum and extraordinarily powerful from an assortment and service point of view," a professor of retailing at Columbia University's Business School, Marc Cohen, said. "As a customer, they mean something very different to Sony or Panasonic than a Best Buy or a Circuit City."

B&H offers lower mark-ups than Best Buy or Circuit City on certain products; it makes much of its money on accessory products. A spokesman for the store, Henry Posner, would say only that the store does a multi-million dollar business annually, and it has been reported that B&H makes more than \$700 million a year. An unscientific survey by a reporter found that the average customer at the store spent about \$400. The store's owner, Mr. Schreiber, and the chief executive officer, Samuel Goldstein, are Orthodox Jews who are self-taught entrepreneurs.

B&H opened as a storefront film shop on the Lower East Side run by Herman Schreiber and his wife, Blimie (the store's name comes from their initials).

The store quickly outgrew its space, and Mr. Schreiber opened shop in the Photo District in a large loft on West 17th Street in the 1970s. Catering to the needs of neighborhood artists, B&H expanded to selling film equipment as well as photo products. Ten years ago, the store moved to its present location, and it now has a staff of 1,000 employees. B&H plans to double its retail space by the end of the year.

As B&H has expanded into consumer goods such as iPods, televisions, and laptop computers, its overlap with the

consumer-driven chains has increased, challenging the price-matching policies of Best Buy and Circuit City.

These chains have instituted some loopholes in their official policies of price-matching any local retailer in order to avoid going up against B&H if possible. If B&H does not have a certain product in stock, if B&H is closed, or if the product comes with a rebate, the chains refuse to match the store's lower prices.

Even as B&H continues to expand its business on the Web and at its New York store, the spokesman for the store said there are no plans to ever expand into franchises. "I have a feeling B&H will always be the way it is," Mr. Posner said.