

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Spa Savvy - Best Practices for Hiring, Training & Retaining Your Staff

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Dr. Judith L. Singer

In the last several years, spa development in the hospitality and lifestyle real estate industries has boomed. As more and more spas are built, the challenge will be to find, train and retain staff. For those of you who already have a spa, you know that the spa staff are not exactly like all the other staff at your property. They make contact with the guests not only in terms of their service/hospitality skills, but there is also physical contact and oftentimes there is a certain degree of emotional and psychological contact. Many of them are care-givers, nurturers and healers. In this article, I will try to give some insight into the challenges and opportunities for staffing your spa with people who are "grounded" and who possess the right skill set, attitude, vision and professionalism to make the spa a successful, marketable and profitable venue within the hospitality industry.

Staffing is one of...if not the... most important decisions you will make. There are lots of beautiful spas that have stunning architectural and interior design features, high tech sophisticated equipment, customized exotic products, and unique signature treatments, but this is "hardware"...this is the "stage." We need it, but without the "software" (the cast), there is no "performance." You can set the stage but don't pull up the curtain unless you are ready to perform. The staff perform the magic, create the memories, establish the relationships...they are the key to your success. Never underestimate this.

Since staffing is so important, I thought it would be beneficial to hear from people who are operating successful spas on a daily basis. Therefore, I invited several well-respected spa operators who have extensive experience to share some of their insights and strategies. Kim Huber, Spa Director, Pinehurst Resort, Pinehurst, NC. Theresa Clements, Director of Ponte Vedra Inn & Club Resort Spas, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL. Jill Eisenhut, Director of Willow Stream Spa, Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, Scottsdale, AZ and Nicolette Kroucamp-Lee, Assistant General Manager, Skin Sense Day Spa, Raleigh, NC.

Positions

Before you can start your staffing program, you need to lay the foundation. Based on the type and size of spa, market, desired guest experience, depth of the labor pool, staff licensing requirements, etc., you will want to establish an org chart identifying the type of positions, number of FTEs, responsibilities, compensation, etc.

Here are some of the key staffing positions within a spa:

Spa Director: This is the producer and director of your Broadway production. It is someone who understands how to set the stage by drawing upon a variety of skills such as psychology, hospitality, sales and marketing, public relations and finances. This is one of the more challenging positions to fill. It is equally challenging to retain them once you hire them. It's not easy to find someone who understands and can exemplify the balance between pamper (warm-fuzzy persona) and profit (business-minded acumen).

Assistant Spa Director or Spa Manager: This person typically oversees the spa operations. Try to find someone who can run a business but also who can be mentored to be the Spa Director in case your leader is recruited away from your spa. This person should have a good understanding of hospitality as well as technology (spa software) and spa treatments.

Sales & Marketing: Depending on the type of hotel/resort and the size of the spa, you may or may not have this position. Typically, this person works with the meeting planners and incentive groups plus may also have a role in selling spa memberships and conducting special events for the local community day spa market.

Receptionists: Similar to the person at your hotel/resort front desk, this is the first impression, the meet and greet person who possesses an infinite amount of information and who sets the stage for the guest experience. They are the "air traffic control center" since they are responsible for scheduling the guests, the staff and the treatment rooms plus they are the point of sale for all treatments and sometimes retail transactions.

Retail: If the retail area is small, the Spa Receptionists and Service Providers might be the "sales" staff. If there is a significant emphasis on retail and if the retail space is large, there could be a retail manager plus dedicated retail sales staff. Everything used in the spa treatments as well as your locker room products and miscellaneous accessories are sold to help create the "home spa experience." A good retail program does more than sell products; it maintains the relationship between you and your guests and it becomes an on-going annuity program for the spa.

Spa Concierges/Attendants: This is a non-licensed position. These people are primarily stationed in the locker room. They are responsible for not only maintaining the area but also making sure the guests are comfortable. They set the stage for the pre and post treatment experience as well as for the rest and relaxation experience. They are the liaison between the Receptionists and the Service Providers. Their role is often under-rated, but you should never under-estimate their importance.

Service Providers: These are the people who are performing the spa treatments. Many states require that they be licensed and/or certified. For some positions such as the massage therapists, there are national certification programs. Service providers are the hair stylists, make-up artists, nail technicians, massage therapists and aestheticians (facialists). Some spas will have Supervisors for the various spa departments such as Massage/Body, Skin Care, Hair/Nails. Other spas may have a Personal Services Supervisor to oversee all the Service Providers.

Fitness Instructors: These are people who not only supervise the cardio/weight studio, but they may also conduct one-on-one training sessions as well as teach a variety of fitness classes. In some cases, they also oversee or participate in the resort recreation program. Depending on the type of fitness facilities and classes, there might be a Fitness Supervisor.

Spa Specialists: Depending on the program of services, the spa may employ or have on-call specialists in areas such as nutrition, stress management, behavior modification, health and lifestyle assessments, etc.

As you can see, the positions are many and they are varied. Now you know who you need. Next step....how to find and hire them.

Hiring

Each position in the spa has a different set of criteria in terms of education, skills, physical work load, psychological profile, etc. Make sure you have a clearly defined job description for each position as well as an org chart before you try to find your staff. If you don't know what you are looking for, you will never find it.

Due to the nature of the work, it is critical to find people who are competent and compassionate; want to give and learn; work well on their own yet work better as part of a team; want a career and not just a job; feel rewarded by bringing pleasure to others; and understand the continuum from pampering the guests to creating profits for the owners.

Give yourself plenty of time to find hire your staff. It is not uncommon for the Spa Director to start 6 –

12 months pre-opening. You will be using a variety of methods to find people: ads, referrals, job fairs, etc. Reference checks with people who will tell you more than the dates of employment are very helpful. Interviews should be both one-on-one and there can also be departmental team interviews or management team interviews so that several people can give their impression on a person and how this person will or will not be compatible with the rest of the team. Auditions for Service Providers are a "must" if you really want to really understand someone's technical proficiency, hospitality skills, neatness, etc. If you are interviewing for management positions and the person is currently employed, go to their facility and see what it is like in terms of service, cleanliness, etc.

Here is some advice from our experts:

The Goddesses of Spa: Our distinguished panel of experts...



Kim Huber



Teresa Clements



Jill Eisenhut



Nicolette Kroucamp

Kim Huber

- Conduct job fairs several times a year
- Look for the "best of the best"
- Work with the schools within the State and provide internships. Start people in support positions then move them into full-time licensed service provider positions.

Teresa Clements

- Determine the skills and knowledge the employee needs in order to succeed in the position
- Look for candidates you think would be likely to succeed

Jill Eisenhut

- Hire staff who are passionate about what they do
- Have staff go through several interviews with various leaders on your team to make sure they are all getting the same feedback. It also shows if the colleague can be patient with the thorough process.

Nicolette Kroucamp-Lee

- Hire staff who are aligned with the spa's philosophy and want to be part of a team
- Find people who can be ambassadors in terms of always representing the spa in a favorable way
- Do a careful reference check. Spa staff tend to jump around a bit. You want people with loyalty and commitment.
- Check for valid licenses for state and national certification
- Staff need to have more than good technical skills. They need exceptional guest service. They need to be willing to learn and grow, open to change and receptive to teamwork.
- Hire some people who are just out of school. Mix the new and eager staff with some of your tried and true staff.
- Try to hire people who have a dual license so they can work in different spa departments, e.g., massage, skin care, image center/salon

Now that you have found the people you want to be on your team, you need to train them so they all know their role as individuals and as team players.

Training

Training needs to be an on-going process. Pre-opening training is typically the most thorough, and there can sometimes be a 4 – 5 week training program which includes resort orientation, your spa's USP and DNA, departmental standards and protocols, service/hospitality training, product knowledge and treatment training, retailing, mock runs, soft opening, etc.

When new staff are hired, make sure they go through a similar thorough training program. Don't just give them a uniform, a treatment room, a guest and put them to work...unless you really don't care about your business.

On-going training can be done in-house by your lead staff, vendors and various industry professionals. It's always good for some staff to attend off-site workshops and conferences then bring this information back and set up in-house training sessions.

Bottom line...make a commitment to continually train your staff and make sure there is a training budget and that you allocate time to do this. Training needs to be a priority if you want the staff to be their best and deliver the best guest experience.

Kim Huber

- Provide a very comprehensive training program and strive for the highest level of standards
- Offer on-going education with product knowledge refresher classes, exceptional guest service, body mechanics and ethics
- Sponsor CEU accredited classes for all licensed staff

Teresa Clements

- Ask a more experienced employee with good work habits to act as a "buddy" for the new hire
- Provide coaching tools in the form of handbooks, logs, manuals, checklists, etc.
- Provide positive feedback in the form of evaluations

Jill Eisenhut

- Training is essential at all levels of the spa. This should be done for all positions and on a regular basis: weekly, monthly and quarterly.
- Choose partners who support treatment and product training
- Training is truly effective when you get results and it should be measurable

Nicolette Kroucamp-Lee

- Create a training schedule for all new hires
- Staff must be fully trained and tested in the spa's procedures and protocols before they start working
- Make sure the staff feel ready, competent and confident before they start working with the guests
- Choose your trainers well since the quality of the trainers will directly reflect on the quality of your staff

Once you have invested the time and money to train your team, you will want to make sure you do everything possible to keep them. Let's take a look at retaining your team.

Retaining

With the abundance of spas that are being built and existing spas that are being expanded, there is a real challenge in retaining staff. Spa staff are continually being enticed to leave their existing spas and are given signing bonuses and better compensation as well as incentive and benefits packages.

In order to have loyal staff, they need to be well compensated, but they also want to feel that they are

important. They need to be your "partner"...you commit to them, they are loyal to you. You need to listen to them, seek their advice, be sensitive to their personal and professional needs, invest in them and make them part of the team. They need to know that you are committed to providing the right environment and tools for them to do their job and that you care.

Kim Huber

- Support, recognize and acknowledge
- Maintain an environment that promotes the sharing of knowledge by allowing all employees to make positive contributions to the spa's success

Teresa Clements

- Provide education that can give the staff the CEUs to maintain their licenses
- Give perks such as property-wide discounts on services, retail and hotel rooms
- Provide benefits plans for insurance, profit sharing, 401Ks
- Communication through evaluation
- Provide performance salary increases

Jill Eisenhut

- Treat staff with respect and honesty
- Get staff involved with decisions and ask for input
- Give positive and constructive feedback
- Complete performance evaluations on time
- Recognize and reward good performance
- Thank staff daily when they do a good job
- Make staff feel valued and appreciated
- When issues are raised, follow up with a solution in a timely manner
- Promote from within

Nicolette Kroucamp-Lee

- Provide a competitive compensation package: salary and benefits
- Award loyalty
- Make sure the staff feel as though they are part of the business by providing bonuses for departmental or spa profitability
- Staff should see good role models and know there is room to learn and grow
- Listen to the needs of your staff
- Provide appraisals on a regular basis
- Let your staff know how valuable they are and what a great job they do

Conclusion

The spa business is not just about beautiful facilities, signature features and extensive treatment menus. It is about passion and compassion. Without the right people with the right skills and attitude, your investment in bricks and mortar will never realize its full potential. The "hardware" is important, but it is the "software" that makes it work. With so many spas being built, it is challenging to find staff. When you do find the right people, take care of them personally and professionally so that they can take care of the guests. Try to foster a positive work environment where the staff feel valued and respected. Allocate the time and money to make sure your people have what they need so they can focus on what the guest needs. Spas are all about people (staff and guests)...when you take care of them, they will take care of the business.

**** Invitation ****

If your spa would like to contribute to future "Best Practice" articles, I would welcome your participation. Send me an e-mail, and I will send the calendar of future articles.

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economic and consumer spa research. Since its inception in 1983, HFD has been the consulting firm to over \$650 million of completed spa projects. A partial list of clients includes: Little Dix Bay, Four Seasons Hulalai, Miraval, Malliouhana, Cranwell, Pinehurst, The Homestead, The Greenbrier, Bacara, Silverado, Delano, La Posada de Santa Fe and Hotel Crescent Court. Dr. Singer is also the past chairperson of The International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC) and was on the ISPA Committee for the inaugural edition of the Uniform System of Financial Reporting for Spas. Dr. Singer can be contacted at 954-942-0049 or judysinger@hfdspa.com

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