

Spa Vision: What Lies Ahead...

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Ms. Judy Singer

There's no doubt about it...spas have become an important part of the hospitality industry. If you are a 4 or 5 star lodging property, you are probably either in the process of building a new spa, expanding your existing spa or looking at ways to make your spa more profitable and marketable.

As someone who has made a career out of researching, planning, marketing and providing management advisory services for the spa industry, I have seen the "good, bad and the ugly" in terms of facilities, treatment menus, service standards, integration of the spa into the resort, financial profitability, etc.

As I look ahead, there are many challenges and opportunities. In this article, I am presenting some ideas that might help you prepare for the future. Keep in mind that the future is tomorrow, so if any of the ideas make sense, think about how you can use them now.

Note: I use the word "resort", but for the most part, it can be inter-changed with the word "hotel."

Hybrid Spa Concept

The hybrid spa is a blend between the best features of the resort spa (formerly called the "amenity" spa) and those of the spa resort (more commonly described as the destination spa). At the resort spa, the focus is more on a "feel good, look good, life is good" vacation. At the spa resort, people are focused on a "change my life" destination spa experience void of many of life's pleasures which the spa refers to as "temptations."

The hybrid approach gives you the programming flexibility to maximize the appeal and utilization of the spa. During the peak season and weekends, the spa might do very well just by offering a la carte treatments and maybe some half-day spa experience packages. During the off-season and maybe during the mid-week, you could offer some multi-day themed programs for behavior modification, lifestyle enrichment, etc. The hybrid concept can be effectively used to yield manage the spa as well as the resort.

There are a lot more people who will go to a resort for business or pleasure and will use the spa as part of a vacation (whether it be a "1 hour vacation break" while at a conference or a multi-day relaxation vacation) verses those who will go on a dedicated spa vacation. The key is where you focus your energies, e.g., resort spa/vacation spa verses spa resort/spa vacation. I think the future is with the former.

While this concept is something that I have been advocating for many years, I think it will become increasingly popular as spas need to be more financially sound.

Lifestyle Real Estate Concept

As spas become more mainstream, and they are, people want to live in places that have a spa which gives them a quality of life; fitness and wellness activities; life enrichment programs; educational and motivational opportunities so they can assume more self-responsibility for their well-being and having a better quality of life; purposeful leisure; and an environment in which to rest, relax and feel re-stored.

People will buy homes in mixed-use developments that have spas; they will invest in condo-hotels that have a spa; and they will buy and vacation at time share/fractional properties that have a spa. The spa is not only a marketing tool but it also adds value to the sales price of the real estate.

The spa also gives you the opportunity to offer special membership programs to the owners so that they can be more actively involved in all the spa activities and use all the facilities. It is convenient for people who "live at" the spa to embark on their own spa vacation whether it be for an hour or a day.

New Spa Paradigm: The Spa “Playground”

Labor is the highest expense in operating a spa. Operators need to look at two things: how to change the compensation program and how to provide less labor-intensive spa experiences. The new spa paradigm relates to the later.

Spa experiences are very much about touching and this will always be important, but I envision that spas will create areas that are wonderful self-service “spa playgrounds.” People will pay a “healthy” daily fee to use facilities that will be attended by several “spa concierges” who will introduce them to a buffet of fun yet purposeful delights.

This playground can include, but not be limited to: specialty showers and treatment tubs; private as well as group steam rooms, saunas, and air-jet floatation and cascading whirlpools with color therapy, music therapy, and aromatherapy; product bars with muds, salts and aromatherapy blends that people can apply to themselves; reflexology walking paths both in the water and on the land; meditation gardens; labyrinths; resource library with self-help, healing and motivational books, CDs, computers, etc.; retail centers that are designed as home spa relaxation rooms where guests can “try and buy” special massage chairs, floatation beds, scalp massagers, etc.; F&B stations with elixirs, nutraceuticals and water bars; etc. The list can go on and on, but the point is to give people a variety of spa vignettes where they can experiment alone or socialize with a group as they explore and have fun with all facets of health and healing.

Centers for Life-Enrichment

The concept of spas will expand in order to meet the personal, physical and professional needs of more people.

The spa will be a new type of social and business center or club as well as a place for personal renewal. This could be popular as a networking venue especially for professional women and for people who work from home. The spa will be a place where people can go to take care of themselves and to take care of business if they feel the need to stay “turned on and connected.” It would be good for the spa to have access to meeting facilities, a business center and dining. These can be part of the resort facilities.

The idea of spas as social centers and places of celebration is trending and will continue to do so. Spas will be designed to have more all-in-one spa suites and lock-off rooms with private spa lounges so that people can gather for spa parties, inter-generational family get-togethers, etc.

Spas will expand their offerings to include life-enriching seminars and programs that focus on activities such as wine tasting, art, music, cooking, pain management, healthy aging, etc. There will be a focus on programs that are life-stage and lifestyle oriented. Spas will be places where people can go to be educated, motivated, inspired and/or entertained. Spas will be learning centers with guest speakers, workshops and “artists” in-residence programs.

Spas can become centers for well-being with programs on fitness, wellness, integrated medicine, behavior modification, etc. This can be the bridge between traditional medicine and complementary alternative medicine. Advancements in skin care and the continuous integration of Eastern and complementary medicine will enable spas to help guests look and feel younger and to age naturally and gracefully. Spas may have a Longevity and Age Management Center or Department. There will be a focus on “spaceuticals” which are truly customized and maybe even “prescribed” spa products and services. The mind/body connection will be an even greater component of spas as the spiritual aspect of healing and reducing stress becomes commonplace.

Spas may have an aromatherapist on staff who will be like the pharmacist of today, i.e., someone to really talk to; who listens and understands the person’s entire body...physically, mentally and emotionally. Spa service providers will be an important part of a person’s health care team.

Spas used to be about giving treatments or bundling treatments into packages. Next came, the creation of experiences that touch people. Now we are into personal transformation journeys. People want more from the time and money they spend; therefore, the staff will be trained to be “experience makers.” Their focus will not be just on giving a service but rather how to provide a personalized, memorable and results-oriented service.

Spas can also be training centers or labs for universities so that more college students understand the career opportunities in one of the fastest growing segments of the hospitality industry.

Welcome the “Spa Virgin”

There are a lot of people who have never been in a spa and may never go into a spa if spas do not make

some changes. If spas expect to grow their business, they need to think about how to attract the non-spa-goer. These “spa virgins” can become “spa veterans” if the resorts understand the difference between the needs and desires of the resort spa guest and those of the spa resort guest.

More attention will be focused on consumer research and understanding spa psychographics so that we can grow the spa-goer market. Resorts will need to be more sensitive to and overcome the various barriers to entry: anxiety of the unknown in terms of what to wear, how to tip, fear of looking or acting like an “outsider;” price sensitivity with treatments; guilt in spending money and time on a perceived luxury; overwhelming and almost paralyzing number of treatments; etc.

Most of the spas today are still planned for and marketed to the well-to-do female, but there will be a movement to make spas more affordable, accessible and gender-friendly so that people will take spa treatments on a regular basis rather than just on a special occasion basis. Someone once told me “the rich will make you poor and the poor will make you rich.” Main Street has more people than Wall Street. If spas are more affordable, we might see an increase in spa utilization. As spas become more holistic in their appeal and less intimidating, they will be attractive to a broader range of people.

Spas are a Business

There will be more of a focus on the business side of spa operations. How do spas make money? What is the right pricing structure of spa treatments? How can the staff be fairly compensated, motivated and retained? How does the spa help your “core” business of selling rooms and/or real estate while still being a viable, stand alone profit center?

HFD has done numerous economic studies looking at development costs, RPOR, profitability analysis, bench-marking, etc. Most spas are still a “lazy asset” but more and more resort operators are becoming spa-savvy in terms of understanding the many facets that need to be carefully monitored and measured in order to have a marketable and profitable spa venture.

More research will be done in order to understand the economic realities of building and operating spas. There will be more resources, seminars and books for investors, developers and operators so they have a clear understanding of the risks and rewards.

Technology will enhance the “mechanics” of the spa experience especially with scheduling and the personalization of treatments so that the staff can focus more on the inter-personal connection and bonding with the guest.

Spas as Theater

Spas will be carefully orchestrated venues of enjoyment and enrichment. They will be created like a Broadway play. It will start with an idea that gets developed into a story (spa concept). There will be a script and playbill (treatment menu, packages, programs), stage design (facility planning), stage decorations (FF&E, products, supplies, laundry/linen) wardrobe creation (staff uniforms and guest clothing), rehearsals (training program) and show time (the spa is open for daily performances).

Each member of the audience (guest) needs to feel the thrill, excitement, stimulation and awe so that he/she will be a raving fan (return guest and spa ambassador through word-of-mouth marketing). Each cast member (employee) needs to give the best performance of his/her life with every guest interaction (customize and personalize the experience to create memories and joy).

Where Do We Go From Here

A lot of ideas have been presented. You need to understand your market to know which ideas make the most amount of sense for you because spas need to be market-driven and on-trend. The spa business is an extension of the hospitality business, and it needs the same degree of attention and accountability. As you create your future success, listen to your guests and staff and watch the trends in health care, the workplace, leisure time activities, real estate, the economy, etc. so that you can gather information that will help you make good business decisions.

Judy Singer is the co-owner of Pompano Beach, Florida-based Health Fitness Dynamics, Inc. (www.hFdspa.com) an internationally recognized spa consulting company that specializes in the planning, marketing, training, operations and management advisory services of spas for fine hotels and resorts, day spas and mixed-use developments. Since its inception in 1983, HFD has been the consulting firm to over \$625 million of completed spa projects. A partial list of clients includes: Little Dix Bay, Four Seasons Hualalai, Miraval, Malliouhana, Cranwell, Pinehurst, The Homestead, The Greenbrier, Bacara, Silverado, Delano, La Posada de Santa Fe and Hotel Crescent Court. Dr. Singer is also a past chairperson of The International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC).

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