

A well-thought-out sampling program can lead to more purchases and increased profits for your spa.

By Janet McCormick

# Strategic Sampling

**FREEBIES, GIFTS-WITH-PURCHASE, SAMPLES—EVERYONE LOVES THEM.**

Clients will often accept—and use—a free sample from a spa even if they wouldn't ordinarily have purchased the product. Savvy spa businesses develop sampling strategies because they know that it's much more likely that clients will purchase items they've already tried.

“Sampling definitely stimulates homecare sales,” says Ranie Phillips, owner of Treatments Day Spa ([treatments.net](http://treatments.net)) in Bradenton, Florida. “We try to give one to three samples of new products to each client after a treatment.”

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PHOTOGRAPHY: DAWN W KLUGMAN

"I'm a firm believer in sampling," agrees Sandra Donovan, owner of Donovan's Serenity Day and Wellness Spa ([donovanserenity.com](http://donovanserenity.com)), Alpena, Michigan. "One of the hair companies I deal with gave me sample bottles of its high-end shampoo and conditioner, something I probably would never have bought myself," she says. "But after one week of trying the product I made room in my budget for the shampoo and conditioner, and I've never used anything else since then. This experience confirmed my belief that when a sample of a great product gets into a client's hands to use, she'll see the difference it makes and become hooked." Knowing how to put together a comprehensive sampling program that doesn't simply give freebies but also encourages return sales and appointment bookings can really make samples pay for themselves—and more.

### Why Try?

Nadine Toriello, owner of All About You Spa and Wellness Center ([allaboutyoukw.com](http://allaboutyoukw.com)) in Key West, Florida, notes that sampling allows clients to try an expensive product and see how it works before investing in it. "They can also see if they're willing to invest the time required for a

complete homecare program," she says.

Sampling one product can help take away the apprehension of purchasing *other* professional products. "Trying one product through sampling allows clients to make the decision to purchase high-cost products with confidence, rather than under pressure," says Kile Law, co-owner with her husband, plastic surgeon Michael Law, M.D., of Blue Water Spa ([bluewaterspa.com](http://bluewaterspa.com)), a medical spa in Raleigh, North Carolina. "This allows the purchaser to feel more in control."

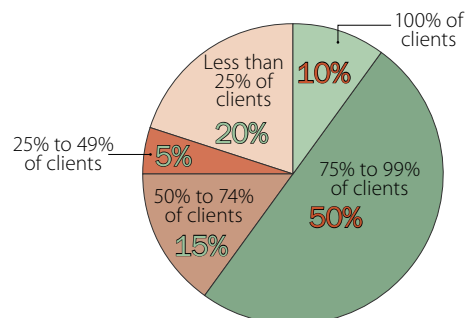
Kerenza Russel, an esthetician at Donovan's, believes sampling can reduce product returns. "Clients who've tried a product sample can make a better decision about whether the product is correct for their skin," she says. "Too many full-size products come back if a proper sampling program isn't used."

When giving samples, Toriello shows clients the proper-size "bead" to use of each product. "Our samples are in 1/8-ounce bottles or 1/4-ounce jars, depending on the product's viscosity—it's about two weeks' worth of product when the sample is used correctly," says Toriello. "So our samples teach the client how much product she *should* be using each time." Toriello believes that when clients are initially faced with a full-size bottle, they tend to use too much and may be frightened off by the cost per use. "We find that an 8-ounce bottle of cleanser should last about three to four months (at a retail cost of \$100 to \$140 per year) when used correctly. But if a client uses too much of it and it's gone in a month, she may decide it isn't worth



## Real-World Sampling

Percentage of clients who leave their visits to the spa with at least one sample-size product:



Source: *DAYSPA* online survey. Participate in the next survey by subscribing to *DAYSPA*'s monthly newsletter *e-Minutes* or visiting [dayspamag.com](http://dayspamag.com).

it to spend \$420 per year in cleanser alone! So, proper sampling helps teach her to use professional-quality products correctly and, ultimately, cost effectively.”

If you think sampling is a good idea only for new clients, think again. Samples can also be used as rewards for regular clients. Phillips’ spa provides samples of its regular products in a travel kit to clients going on a trip, and will often slip in a sample of something new for them to try. “We believe in rewarding our regular clients,” she says, “and this is one way we can show how much we care about their needs.”

### Sample Savvy

Donovan has trained her estheticians to first sample the “must sells,” meaning the items that every client should take home after a facial. “I believe that every client should be using at least a cleanser, moisturizer and SPF product, so we start there with our home-care sampling recommendations. We also discuss their special needs,” she says.

New clients are treated with care when it comes to product recommendations, as she has found that it can be overwhelming to face purchasing multiple items. “We define what’s most important for each client,” she says. “For

## Fill Your Own?

Most skincare companies have a sampling policy, meaning they package products in smaller sizes and provide them free under certain criteria or offer to sell them. But it’s also possible to create your sampling program from the items you carry in your back bar stock.

“I always need more samples than I receive for free from my skincare company,” says Karen Hodges, esthetician, manicurist and owner of Morning Glory Nails & Skin Therapy in Key West, Florida, “and on the figures I’ve run I know I can make my own samples much more cost effectively.” Hodges purchases large quantities of sample-size bottles and jars that match the look of her other samples to get a better price. She labels the containers, prints information sheets for each and then fills the containers from her back bar as needed.

Because of her well-established sampling program, Nadine Toriello, owner of All About You Spa and Wellness Center in Key West, Florida, has also found it more expedient to fill her own samples. “It took a little effort to find a sample-container company that had the best prices, and we had to be prepared to order them in quantities of 48 or more,” she says. “We pay about \$110 for 1,000 bottles. Eleven cents a bottle is a reasonable price to pay for an item you plan to give away—we give away 30 to 50 samples a week, so 1,000 bottles go very fast!”

If you choose to create your own samples, be particular about the size of the containers. Although some clients appreciate single-application foil packs, most single-application samples usually won’t result in a purchase, especially for results-oriented skincare products. “A two-week size, packaged according to the viscosity and dosage of the product, is vital for treatment-based clients,” says Hodges. “They have to see the initiation of changes or they won’t make a purchase.”

the client who’s using nothing but soap and water at home, that’s usually a cleanser. If she’s willing to buy that product, we suggest the rest and educate her on what her needs are. We don’t pressure her to purchase unless she easily buys—the rest of it we’ll send as samples for her to try.”

Choosing which products to sample is vital, according to Linda Orsuto, spa director for 800 West Salon and Spa (800west.com), Marlton, New Jersey. “We sample only products that show a very quick, if not immediate, change in the skin,” she says. For example, 800 West estheticians don’t sample the spa’s \$200 peptide product mainly because the amazing results that can be gained from it won’t show immediately. “We still sell a lot of our peptide product because we concentrate on building trust between us and our clients,” explains Orsuto. “Our regular clients know that we won’t recommend something that doesn’t produce the results we promise, so they trust our recommendations.”

Written information is an important part of sampling, says Karen Hodges, esthetician, manicurist and



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owner of Morning Glory Nails & Skin Therapy in Key West, Florida. “I write down my professional use recommendations to accompany the purchased products and the samples I want clients to use,” she says. “I’ve found that if sample instructions aren’t written, they forget what you’ve said about how to use them when they get home. I also tell clients to be sure to use everything completely. A sample won’t do them any good if some of it’s left in the bottle,” she says.

Knowing that Americans expect immediate results, Hodges also explains when clients should expect to see a difference in the tone, moisture or color of their skin. “I’ll call clients after a week to see how they’re doing with the samples,” she says. If the product is showing good results, she suggests they come in to purchase a full size; if it isn’t, she suggests they come in for a different sample. Hodges takes advantage of this contact to schedule follow-up treatment appointments, emphasizing that she’ll be happy to sell them the products they need at their next appointment. “The samples bring them back to that appointment because they *do* see a difference,” she says. “In my experience, they’ll always purchase more products at the follow-up appointment.”

### **Troubleshooting Tips**

There are some rules to follow when strategically sampling to keep clients from becoming turned off. Some spa owners believe that sending home multiple samples of new products with a client can cause problems. First, a client who has used only bar soap on her face previously may well become overwhelmed by suddenly being asked to use five products to clean her face, even if those five products are given as free samples. You and your employees must listen to how each client feels about approaching skin care.

It’s also important to remember that negative skin responses (allergies, irritation) to products can occasionally happen. One spa owner had a salesperson esthetician on staff who could sell \$400 to \$500 worth of product to each of her new clients. Unfortunately, the spa director ultimately had to stop her from doing so. “If a client had a problem, such as irritation, we had no idea which product was the culprit,” she says. Clients would return to the spa with all



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the products and justifiably ask for a refund for all. Sampling needs to be approached in the same careful manner that your staff uses when introducing products during treatments.

All spas with healthy sampling strategies emphasize that samples should be carefully offered to retain the high value of each product in the client's eyes. "I'm a believer in using restraint in sampling," says Judy Scheller, an esthetician/massage therapist at Milagro Spa ([milagrospa.com](http://milagrospa.com)), Manasquan, New Jersey. "I find that handing a client one or two samples and explaining them carefully enhances their value, and the client savors their use," she says. "If I give her a handful of samples, however, even with full explanations, the perceived value of each item is decreased."

Scheller agrees that treating her samples as a true value item instead of a freebie makes more sense. She places a value on samples by including an explanation of how they will help clients achieve their skincare goals when used alongside

## Sampling Tip

Try this simple strategy to convert reluctant samplers to skincare-purchasing devotees: When offering a product sample tell the client that if she brings back the empty sample container, she'll receive a discount on the first purchase of the matching full-size product. This not only encourages complete use of the sample, but it also helps push the client into her first full-size purchase.

their other products. Clients will then mentally "package" the sample products together with their current products and goals.

Phillips notes that sampling is definitely appreciated by clients, and can help build a spa's clientele. "When you support clients in this way, they know you care about them, and they'll respond with loyalty and increased purchases," she says. ●

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