

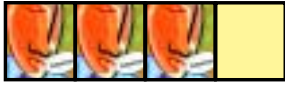
DESIGN
DIRECTION
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A professional spa consultant can point your business in the right direction.

By Amy E. Hamaker

Opening a day spa sounds sexy and fun, but even the most experienced entrepreneur can run into problems. In a single day, you may be called on to okay plumbing specifications, devise employee compensation for a new department and decide on a printer for your service menu. A small mistake in any of these decisions could cost you thousands. The good news is, you don't have to go it alone. Professional spa consultants can help you make the right choices and set up workable long-term systems.



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METROPOLIS SPA & SALON

Owner Steve Cerf originally hired consultant Paula Fierson to look over the rough blueprints of his expansion to a larger day spa facility. “When she saw the blueprints, she told us they were all wrong; we nearly cried because we were on such a tight construction deadline,” recalls Cerf. Fierson convinced him to utilize the basement, adding electrical wiring, plumbing, and bringing the space up to code. Cerf estimates that the advice saved Metropolis tens of thousands of dollars. “We’ve been in this location for two years, and we’ve already outgrown the space,” he says. “If we had left the basement alone, it would have cost a fortune to tear down the smaller spa and rebuild.”

BUSINESS COACHES

Spa consultants can offer much more than simple advice. “I prefer the word ‘coach’ because that’s what I do,” says Douglas Preston, a principal at Preston Wynne Success System in Saratoga, California. “A consultant’s job is to help someone conceive, plan and install a startup operation, especially someone from outside the industry, but we also help owners who’ve already opened a spa and have run into trouble.”

“I can help owners find a location, work with an interior designer, train and hire staff, select products, become more profitable, encourage retail sales techniques—even write brochures and menus,” says Paula Fierson, a spa consultant for Noelle Spa Consulting Group in Stamford, Connecticut. “It all depends on the owner’s needs and wants.”

Construction is often a major stumbling block for owners who have no background in the spa industry. Architects’ plans often need revision, and cost overruns can bankrupt a spa before the doors ever open. Paula Magnano, director of Mission Viejo, California-based Visionary, a spa consulting and construction firm, notes the importance of having a big-picture view of the business before construction begins. “To properly design a spa, you have to understand operation and personnel because these things will affect design,” she says. “When we consult, we find out what an owner is looking for, what type of business she’ll have and then incorporate that information into the construction plan.”

Michael Effler, founder of International Design Concepts, Bainbridge Island, Washington, was recently brought in to assist a spa owner who had signed a lease without thoroughly researching the cost

of retrofitting the site. The cost of tenant improvements for mechanical systems alone proved to be more than three times the amount originally agreed upon by the landlord and the spa owner. When the spa owner tried to cancel the lease, the landlord threatened to sue. “It’s important to involve a designer who’s experienced with the particular aesthetic, ergonomic, mechanical and structural requirements of a day spa,” he says.

Spa consultants can also help with less tangible issues, such as management style. “Unless an owner manages the whole business well, none of it will function,” says Preston. “A spa owner may call us and identify one small, specific area of difficulty, such as employee compensation, but it’s really the entree into a whole series of management issues. Once we help owners find the real issues, we can begin to work on a more holistic approach to making the business profitable.”

THE SPA AT SOUTH COAST PLAZA

The owners, who came from a health club management background, hired Preston Wynne to give an overall perspective of the spa’s operations, says spa director Todd Haymon. “We’re a 20,000-square-foot day spa with a health club attached, and we wanted to know if club memberships could support the spa,” he says. Preston Wynne recommended on-site training and implemented new protocols geared toward spurring increased sales. The results? “We’ve had a 200% increase in service revenue and a retail sales increase from 3% to 17% in the last 12 to 13 months,” says Haymon. “I think it’s a direct result of taking the suggestions and implementing them.”

A GRAND SALON & SPA

Visionary had consulted for owner Grace Odin when she did the first remodeling of her original hair salon, so when she decided to upgrade to a day spa Paula Magnano was the first person she called. "I wanted someone who knew what she was doing," she says. "I have so much research to do on my own, I don't have time to worry about the construction plans."

Odin also knows the pitfalls of hiring the wrong consultant. "A few years ago, my partner hired a consultant who cost less but didn't have knowledge of the spa industry," she says. "It was a disaster—everything that consultant bought had to be taken out."

VERSAILLES SPA

Owner Daphne Swenerton met Douglas Preston at a trade show and quickly realized that there were several aspects of the spa business on which she needed advice. "We went over my books, and he helped me with cutting costs, retailing and dealing with the staff," she says. "He has led several training sessions with my employees, and we have a conference call once per week. It was the best thing I could have done. I don't know if we would be in business if not for his experience and expertise."

HIRING AN OUTSIDER

It's easy to understand why newcomers to the industry want to hire help, but why would an established salon owner call for advice? "Unlike a traditional beauty salon, a day spa promises that the entire experience will be heavenly, from calling for an appointment to writing the check," Preston explains. "Spa clients are becoming savvier about what they expect to see."

"Many times people who are expanding from a hair salon into a day spa may not realize the atmosphere change that has to take place," agrees Fierson. "Spas are low-key and nurturing, and that can mean a real change in plans."

Todd Haymon, spa director at The Spa at South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, California, notes that sometimes owners need a fresh perspective. "Most spas and salons are very customer oriented, with the owner caught up in giving services," he says. "To get everything to work perfectly, you have to bring in someone who can help run the business."

A consultant's experience in all aspects of day spa operations can be a boon to owners unsure of the next step or lacking confidence in their own decisions. Grace Odin, owner of A Grand Salon & Spa, Chatsworth, California, who used Visionary to help with her expansion from a traditional salon to a day spa, found that whatever the question, the consultants had relevant experience they could share. "The Magnanos had built other day spas and already learned from their errors, preventing me from making the same mistakes. They listened to what I wanted and were able to tell me whether my plans would work."

Daphne Swenerton, owner of Ver-

sailles Spa in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, believes that using a consultant helped her spa's bottom line. "I knew that I didn't know everything about the business, and I wanted to make as few costly mistakes as possible along the way," she says.

The bottom line, says Steve Cerf, owner of Metropolis Spa & Salon, Princeton, New Jersey, is that while day spas are relaxing havens, they're also business investments and should be treated as such. "You can't run a business properly without a consultant," he says. "Even if you have experience, you need another perspective because you may not see the long-term vision or the areas where your plan isn't complete. You need someone else to proofread your game plan."

The cost of consulting services depends on the consultant and the work needed. Prices range from as little as \$100 per hour to as much as \$250 per hour; most consultants offer daily rates of \$2,000 to \$2,500, plus expenses. Design and contracting work are often priced per square foot, with an extra charge for subcontracting.

Although some may see consulting services as a luxury they can't afford, consultants and owners alike say that the services are well worth the price. "It's expensive, but if you don't get the right advice, it could cost you 10 times the price of the consulting in cost overruns and bills," says Cerf.

"The first thing I do is find the money in the business to pay for my fees," says Preston. "I find waste, compensation errors—things owners may not spot. Consulting fees should be considered an investment; you should expect to get a good return over time."



KIMBERLEY'S...A DAY SPA

"We brought in Noelle Spa Consulting to help organize our front desk," says owner Kimberley Comiskey. "We have 55 employees and a fully booked spa; the challenge wasn't to make the people I have more efficient, but to make the job more systematic."

Within three months, Comiskey and consultant Paula Fierson had departmentalized the front desk tasks and assigned one full-time staff member to large parties and bridal events. "I never realized how overburdened the front desk staff was," Comiskey says.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Because consulting is an investment, you should do a little homework to make sure you'll get the best return for the money. Here are some things to look for:

Personal experience in the industry. Ask a consultant for references and check each one. "When I looked for a consultant, the big issue I had was that a lot of them hadn't worked in a day spa before," says Kimberley Comiskey, owner of Kimberley's...A Day Spa in Latham, New York. "They might be wonderful at marketing, promoting and advertising, but to really know the business you have to be in the business."

Many consultants own and operate day spas, and this can provide a valuable test kitchen. "Look at where a consultant is coming from," advises Swenerton. "If that consultant owns a spa, is it turning a profit? I took several management courses at Preston Wynne, so I had several opportunities to see how the place ran and whether they practiced what they preached."

Magnano sees it as a matter of hiring an expert rather than a well-meaning novice or doing it yourself. "When you need a heart operation, do you go to the drugstore for fix-it medicine, go to the family doctor or go to the trained heart specialist?"

Willingness to listen. A consultant/client relationship must be built on trust, and trust can't be established if you feel bullied or patronized. "A consultant has to be resilient enough to take feedback from you and apply it to the consultation," says Haymon. "The consultant isn't going to be there every day. The advice is valuable, but they have to accept

that your business isn't like everyone else's. Look for someone who has conviction and is passionate about the industry, but has a real grounding in how your business operates."

Ongoing help. You may need help to solve some problems or implement a new program after the initial visit. Nothing is worse than paying for a consultation and then having doubts about the advice.

Most consultants regularly check on clients through conference calls or visits. Some offer classes and networking opportunities. Fierson holds two-day seminars for spa owners she has helped. "Everyone brings information about their business, and each owner leaves with a nice-size manual of new business strategies," she says.

Preston Wynne offers a Virtual Partner program that works on goals and troubleshooting for a year after the initial consultation. "We can chat to share troubles and work toward implementing new strategies," says Preston. "Owners need someone to be there with them to settle doubt and emotionally back them up."

There is one warning, however: You must be willing to be honest about your business and listen to what the consultant has to say. "The one thing that frustrates me as a spa director is that a lot of spas bring in a consultant but don't take or implement the advice," says Haymon. "Then they complain that they didn't get good results. It's a waste of time and money. Spa consulting is only as good as the follow-through." ♣

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