



Lessons Learned from

September 11

By L. Brooks Baldwin

The nation reeled in shock on the morning of September 11, 2001, when thousands of innocent citizens living ordinary lives met with their deaths at the hands of terrorists. The suddenness and extreme brutality of the attack seemed to paralyze United States citizens personally and professionally. In one morning we'd lost our sense of security and predictability. Furthermore, we had no idea how to respond to an event of this magnitude.

Still, in the days and weeks that followed September 11, millions of Americans were able to break their inertia and return to their ordinary activities. In the case of salon and spa businesses, owners began to look at their staffs' and clients' immediate needs, as well as their financial conditions. What follows are stories, insights and lessons learned by spa industry professionals who were confronted by both the immediate and enduring impact of September 11.

Avon Salon & Spa New York City (midtown area)



Avon Salon & Spa

“Shell-shocked” is how Wendy Clark, general manager of midtown Manhattan’s

Avon Salon & Spa, describes her staff and clientele at the events that unfurled in neighboring lower Manhattan on September 11. “Everything and everyone came to a complete standstill,” Clark recalls. However, the momentary freeze was broken by an urgency to ascertain the safety and status of others.

Once the logistics of getting everyone home—complicated by the shutdown of the subway and lower Manhattan thoroughfares—

were dealt with, the question remaining for Avon’s staff was: When would the business reopen? The spa team was extremely fortunate that none of its 145 members, nor their immediate circles of family and friends, had suffered a casualty in the tragedy. So, business reopened on September 13, and to the amazement of management, the vast majority of appointments were kept.

“What was unusual on that day was that many of our clients lingered after their appointments,” remarks Clark, who’d encouraged her staff to focus on personally connecting with each client. She believes it was these connections—the touching, talking and compassion—that guests were most interested in receiving from their therapists, technicians and stylists.

Clark is particularly proud to note the compassion and generosity demonstrated by the spa’s owner, the legendary

Avon Corp., in the wake of September 11. “Avon was the first donor of a cash gift to the relief fund in an amount exceeding \$1 million,” she reports.

During the past year, business has remained healthy, actually increasing dramatically, but Clark hesitates to attribute the increase to the effects of the attack. “Since opening 2½ years earlier, we’d already been experiencing a steady rise in demand for our services and products,” she says.

Lesson learned: Following a destabilizing event, people yearn to reestablish a sense of normalcy in their lives. At Avon, the staff was eager to return to work and clients wanted to return for appointments. The result of the experience has been a closer and stronger tie among managers, employees and clientele. Concludes Clark, “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.”

De Franco Spagnolo Salon/Day Spa Great Neck, New York

Twenty minutes east of Manhattan, in Great Neck, Long Island, De Franco Spagnolo Salon/Day Spa reopened its doors on September 12. That same day, the staff learned that two of its clients, a mother and daughter, had suffered the horrendous loss of their son and brother, Jonathan Ielpi; he was a New York City firefighter and had perished at the



De Franco Spagnolo Salon/Day Spa

“Many of our clients lingered after their appointments.”

“The ‘drama’ of a client canceling right before her appointment was put into perspective.”

World Trade Center. Staff instantly rallied, organizing a raffle of spa and salon services that raised more than \$25,000 within a week. Proceeds were donated to the NYC Firefighters’ Fund in Jonathan Ielpi’s name.

Business at De Franco Spagnolo remained steady immediately after the tragedy, but spa manager Monique Park was amazed at the boom in business that occurred during the holidays. It turned out that travel safety concerns and gloomy predictions about the economy had led clients to cancel their holiday plans to leave town and, instead, treat themselves to spa visits. Gift certificate sales also skyrocketed.

Lesson learned: Having steeled itself for the likelihood of a drop in bookings due to a backlash against luxury items in a time of crisis, De Franco Spagnolo was surprised to witness a boom in massage services. These treatments had become an essential means of release from stress—not a luxury at all. Says Park, “People now want to take time for themselves and enjoy life a little more.”

**de Jensen Salon & Spa
Sea Girt, New Jersey**

An hour’s drive from New York City, de Jensen Salon & Spa in Sea Girt, New Jersey, experienced an immediate drop in two aspects of its business after the Twin Towers fell: “Our request rate for spa services went dramatically down, as did retail sales,” reports owner Mark Jensen. He observed that although clients personally touched by the disaster continued to maintain their appointments, the services they requested were basic ones like haircuts, hair color and nail services.



de Jensen Salon & Spa

Many of de Jensen’s clients work in Manhattan or have close friends and family members who

The spa industry saw a slight dip in business right after September 11, but now ISPA members are busier than they’ve ever been. Even in the current economic climate, the spa industry continues to grow and build revenue. Many ISPA members are seeing record numbers of firsttime spa-goers and dramatic increases in the number of group bookings. The entire industry is getting back to the basics of customer service and spa philosophy, and consumers are responding with great enthusiasm!
—Lynne McNees, executive director, International Spa Association (ISPA)

do, and the staff felt compelled to do something significant to help, so they held a benefit for the victims’ families. The five-hour event was organized, advertised and executed all within two weeks. “The entire staff donated time to provide discounted services and even donated their tips for the cause,” Jensen says with pride. The response from the local community proved overwhelming. In fact, a whole new client base was established as a result.

As many in the spa industry found, the holiday season proved the turning point in business at de Jensen’s. “At the beginning of the holiday season, we experienced a 110% increase in gift certificate sales over our previously successful year,” Jensen reports. Approximately 55% of gift certificate sales included spa services such as massages, facials and body treatments. Retail numbers also rebounded sharply.

Lesson learned: “The ‘drama’ of a client canceling right before her appointment or a technician running 10 minutes behind schedule was instantly put into perspective on September 11,” says Jensen. “We now

Panicked staff contemplated moving to distant locations to be with family.

all realize how fortunate we are to have our health, families and careers when so many others are suffering losses too terrible for us to even comprehend.”

Eclips Salon & Day Spas Washington, D.C.

Located in the nation’s capital near Dulles Airport, with the Pentagon not far beyond, Eclips Salon & Day Spa suffered a shattering blow to its business as a direct result of the attack on the Pentagon. Diane Fisher, owner of four Eclips Salon & Day Spa businesses in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, distinctly recalls her angst in trying to hold everything together in the days and weeks following September 11. “Business was dead,” she says, “Staff morale plummeted.”

Fisher theorizes that the lack of business was the result of two factors: First, concerns about the ensuing state of the economy had affected her client base. Second, lingering concerns about their city as a prime target for potential subsequent attacks were keeping people in their homes.

The financial implications were daunting. Staff members were all on commission, and thus were first to feel the financial blow. Fisher was responsible for payroll, bills and leases, and there was no foreseeable let-up in the sudden downturn. “We generally don’t offer discounts or coupons, but that first week I had to give deals,” she says. Direct mail sent to established Eclips clients offered discounts on stress relief treatments. Thankfully, the marketing campaign worked and business began slowly to revive.

Morale was a tougher issue. “Several of our employees’ husbands lost their jobs, eliminating a large portion of their family incomes,” says Fisher. Some panicked staff contemplated moving to dis-

tant locations to be with family. Complicating matters were the two Afghani staff members who were suddenly on the receiving end of negative attention from co-workers.

To help boost morale, Fisher organized a cut-a-thon with all monies donated to the Red Cross, and Eclips donated shampoo for displaced victims. The working environment gradually stabilized. Tension surrounding the Afghani employees diminished; one made a goodwill trek to her native country, carrying with her supplies donated by co-workers eager to assist in relief efforts for innocent Afghani civilians.

By the holidays, financial woes were behind Eclips and, according to Fisher, business is now steady and growing.

Lesson learned: Despite nearly overwhelming financial and morale challenges encountered early on, the attacks on our nation ended up drawing staff closer together. “Once you know the feeling of plummeting, you become grateful for what you have,” Fisher says. “We learned to take no one and no thing for granted, and to cherish each day.”

Aline’s Salon, Day Spa & Wellness Centre Prescott, Arizona

In the charming, historic town of Prescott, Arizona, a 90-minute drive from Phoenix, one can find Aline’s Salon, Day Spa & Wellness Centre. But on September 11, 2001, the spa’s owner, Aline Richardson, was in Anaheim, California, attending the *Spacifically* spa conference. A majority of Richardson’s colleagues attending the show were from New York. “Their intense response to the tragedy had a great impact on me,” she recalls.

Determined to create something positive from the horror of that day’s events, Richardson came up with the idea of



The team at Eclips Salon & Day Spas

creating a protocol school, the purpose of which would be to bring families closer together. After attending a weeklong protocol program, she earned her protocol certification and, in October, opened The Protocol School in Prescott. "After the recent course of brutal events, I felt it was especially important to revive the 'bygone era,' when social staples such as people skills, manners and kindness were of highest priority."

Both spa and school businesses are doing well in the aftermath of the tragedy. Richardson notes an especially healthy increase in spa services and gift certificate sales. "Certificate sales have increased 25%, and guests appear to be seeking 'feel good' services and gifts, particularly those to help calm the mind and body."

Aline's also cooperated with five other salons to organize a fundraising cut-a-thon, and the \$7,500 in proceeds was donated to the NYC Firefighters' Fund.

Lesson learned: "After September 11, my employees, who have always been good listeners, became even more tuned in to our guests," discloses Richardson.

Bacara Resort & Spa Santa Barbara, California

Despite their geographic distance from the terrorist activity, West Coast spa businesses felt an immediate impact. Most profoundly affected were spas at resorts because the travel industry had come to a grinding halt. The Spa at Bacara, a 42,000-square-foot, tri-level spa at the glamorous Bacara Resort in Santa Barbara, California, experienced

an immediate decline in business activity following the disaster.

Prior to September 11, steady bookings had been the norm at Bacara. Midweek bookings typically consisted of local residents and corporate guests, while the weekend thrived with bookings for out-of-town guests. Following the disaster, the shock and realization of what had happened set in. "We did not make any precise push to drive business in the immediate aftermath of September 11," says Kate Monihan, Bacara's general manager. "We simply kept the resort and spa open as a resource to guests. If they felt like they needed a place to relax, they could find it at Bacara."

However, in time the spa's marketing wheels began to turn again, and management set its sights on the self-drive market (the resort is approximately 100 miles from Los Angeles). Spa and golf packages were directed to those seeking a getaway. The resort's adventure-oriented Kid's Club targeted the rapidly expanding family travel market. Business gradually but steadily increased. A year later, it has continued in its upward trajectory.

Lesson learned: "Post September 11 was a time to quietly support our customers and provide the care expected at our spa. The greatest lesson learned was the importance of reaching out; each service can provide a little piece of healing and additional comfort," says Monihan. "In retrospect, I believe the spa business is one industry where demand might actually increase as people strive to deal with feelings of confusion, fear, stress and the desire to refocus on what is truly important to human beings." ♦

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