

Writer Karen Fong

Old Spas, New Tricks

It's a tough world out there for spas. Keeping relevant and retaining clients is often a major concern for both the spa and its investors – be it a huge hotel chain or a labour of love



Over the years, the spa industry has developed a lot of catch phrases, throwing around words like 'medi-spa' and 'wellness'. But for the already established, which of these, if either, is the way to go? "After two decades of commercial success, the industry is struggling to find its purpose and identity in a spa-savvy market," says Adria Lake, Founder and Managing Director of spa design and consultancy firm AW Lake Spa Concepts. "Do we offer prevention or cure? A spiritual sanctuary or a body repair shop? Boot camps or palaces of indulgence? Whatever the claim, most spas over-reach and under-deliver."

Urban spas in particular are under pressure. Unlike resorts where guests have usually already allotted time to relax in the spa, urban spas need to find and keep their city-dwelling customers, many of whom have limited time and are looking

for results as much as relaxation. For Lake, this means spas need to start offering services that customers see as part of their everyday life. "Many spas are still being designed using an outdated blueprint with ensuite treatment rooms, dimly-lit relaxation lounges, underdeveloped and/or poorly designed wet areas inside locker rooms, small and uninviting retail spaces – all of which discourage social interaction between guests and can be intimidating and/or unappealing to those who prefer to relax and share the experience with friends or don't have much time to spare and want to get some work done while being 'worked on'." Her suggestions include multi-treatment express pods for facials or mani-pedis, or treatment rooms that let customers plug in and access emails on their iPads. "The possibilities are endless."

MENUS: SIMPLIFY VS. EXPAND

In many ways, a menu makes a spa and it is the signature treatments that a spa becomes known for. At Aramsa – The Garden Spa in Singapore, a standalone spa uniquely set in a sprawling park in the city, guests can rest assured that the menu is to their liking. "Every three months we offer treatments as part of 'The Escape Series,'" says founder Jazreel Low. "For example, we worked with Chinese brand Eu Yan Sang to create TCM-based treatments. We take feedback very seriously, and if they like them enough, we'll consider making them permanent on the menu."

But Lake believes that less is more. "From a customer's point of view, it's not as intimidating," she says. "In particular, five-star hotels should look at how a smaller menu can result in a more curated experience for guests. It's not about time or money, but more about what they are getting out of it. Then you're doing the thinking for the guest, and for me that's luxury, that's service. Then you're not putting the responsibility on the guest to choose the right treatment."

For a brand like ESPA, whose partner hotels have worked with the brand for up to 15 years, innovation is important. "Unlike other companies, we only launch products when we discover a breakthrough in ingredients or science, or a gap in the market," says Tracey Chappell, Global Director of Spa Operations of ESPA International. She also cites consistency as a major issue. "It is equally important to maintain consistency in service standards and treatment quality. Our training extends beyond the fundamentals of technical treatment protocols, to luxury brand standards and standard operating procedures. For treatments, we have an on-going development programme for the

latest techniques and protocols to ensure we deliver the very best of on-going training. This not only helps with staff retention but also keeps our treatment menus competitive in order to deliver the returns that are demanded from owners and investors."

THERAPISTS AND TRAINING

A menu is only as good as the therapists who carry out the treatments. At Aramsa – The Garden Spa, Low is proud that many of her therapists have been with the spa since it first opened eight years ago. She implements a strict training policy, only accepting therapists who have had at least two years of experience, which ensures quality across the board. "Some guests might have preferred therapists, but most of our repeat customers are happy with any of our therapists because they are all good." Again, Low highlights customer feedback. "We use this to constantly improve our treatment protocols and the overall experience."

Lake agrees that training is important as it allows a spa to increase the responsibilities of the therapist, giving them greater ownership of their work, which therefore entices them to stay loyal to one spa. It also gives them a chance to make a greater connection to a guest. "By giving them the flexibility to create and tailor a treatment for a guest, they become more aware of the guest and their needs." She also recommends movement therapy before treatments even start as a way to get therapists to interact more with guests. "This is a great way for therapists to see how a client moves and help them understand what the body needs."

EVOLVING EXPERIENCE

"A lot of people tell me they feel intimidated when they get into a spa. They are very conscious of their bodies and that's the

"Ultimately, it is about providing experiences that feel so good that they become a habit"

~ Adria Lake

opposite message we should be sending," says Lake, whose new spa projects, URSpa at The PuYu Hotel and Spa in Wuhan, China and the recently opened Heavenly Spa by Westin at The Westin Resort Nusa Dua in Bali, include communal spaces. "Getting people to feel comfortable with their bodies is the first step, then people will want to take care of it. We're looking at concepts where the spa is not just a spa, but a multifunctional space. Maybe it's a place where guests can wait and browse before a flight, or a bar offering non-alcoholic, healthy drinks to boost your system. There are many ways to be creative about it, but we want these experiences to stick. We want people to want to do [this] every day so that

it becomes a habit or something they want to do regularly."

ESPA also believes in evolution, and two years ago the brand created ESPA Life, their wellness division, which can be experienced at the Corinthia Hotel London. "Here, the team includes leading complimentary alternative therapists, functional medical testing, rehabilitation personal trainers, nutritional spa cuisine and the best spa therapy team," explains Chappell. "ESPA Life addresses lifestyle issues, such as fertility, stress and sleep patterns with programmes ranging from one day to one month."

Ultimately, trends and hype aside, spas have to go back to basics, taking inspiration from the very idea of why people spa, in order to evolve. "The new trick for staying relevant is not a trick at all," says Lake. "It is about creating a place where people look forward to going to, where they can learn something new about themselves or share a laugh with strangers who become friends. Ultimately, it is about providing experiences that feel so good that they become a habit." 🌿



THIS PAGE: Relaxation lounge at the Heavenly Spa by Westin at The Westin Resort Nusa Dua, Bali. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Heavenly Spa by Westin in Bali includes communal spaces