

Toward Professionalism in Spa Management: Defining a Body of Knowledge

By Dr. Gary W. Matkin

The Global Spa Summit inaugural event held in New York City this past May brought together industry leaders from around the world in an unprecedented effort to share information and define common problems and issues. No problem was more pressing than the current and intensifying labor shortage within the spa industry. Tremendous growth in the number of spas, particularly in new and major resort hotels, will require an increasing number of well-trained therapists and frontline managers in the very near future. Yet, except in small pockets here and there, little is being done to address this unavoidable issue.

By the end of the conference the most strident call to collective action was for the attraction, development, and retention of a qualified workforce. Clearly, the shortage of therapists presents the most significant challenge because therapy ranges across many different treatments and techniques. Most of the shortage will need to be addressed through third-party providers of training and education, supported and funded wherever possible by spa employers.

The development of frontline, day-to-day spa managers will require a concerted effort from the spa industry, which commands the insight, knowledge, and expertise needed to define the attributes of a qualified spa manager.

Indeed, a mark of increasing maturity and sophistication of the spa industry would be the development of a professional cadre of spa managers. Preceding all other elements is the definition of a coherent 'body of knowledge'—skills and abilities with significant differentiation from other fields. This body of knowledge should:

- Be of significant complexity and require relatively high levels of native intelligence and ability in those entering the profession
- Require a significant learning effort and time commitment
- Be distinguishable from the knowledge and expertise of other fields

As an example of this differentiation, spa managers should have the understanding and ability to perform and manage tasks different than those that are consistent with hospitality food and beverage managers.

Fortunately, progress has been made in the creation of this body of knowledge, the first step toward recognizing the profession. Associate Professor Mary Tabacchi of Cornell University has been a leader in defining the knowledge and skills required by large-scale spa-related businesses at the executive level. Two other institutions, Elmcrest College of Applied Health Sciences and Spa Management and the University of California, Irvine Extension, have programs focused on the development of spa managers. Elmcrest offers three levels of spa management education with on-campus programs: Spa Manager/Director Diploma Program, Spa Leadership Certificate Program and Customer Service Professional Diploma Program. UC Irvine Extension offers a certificate program in Spa and Hospitality Management in both classroom and online formats. Both programs were developed with considerable input from the spa industry and are remarkably similar in design and direction. Similar topics address Business Planning and Operations, Leadership, Marketing, Retailing, Human Resources, Finance, Customer Service, and Legal issues.

Elmcrest's three programs require approximately 1040 hours of full-time study. The UC Irvine Extension online certificate program requires at least 150 hours of instruction which is offered part-time on campus and online to accommodate working professionals. These curricula could serve as a starting point for developing an industry standard, professional body of knowledge.

Agreement on a body of knowledge, important and difficult as it is, is not enough to create a profession. The next step is for the industry to recognize the certified attainment of that body of knowledge in hiring and promotion decisions. Of course, this means that the educational treatment must be effective in improving practice. This can be achieved through the separate actions of major employers in the industry sponsoring education and training programs for their own and prospective employees.

Right now, the jury—the leaders of the spa industry—is out on the question as to whether spa management is a real profession. The benefits of creating a spa profession will result in:

- A large, well-trained and educated labor force
- Clear guidelines for what constitutes entry into the field
- Creation of career ladders that will retain talented managers

Those benefits may or may not overcome preoccupation with the many daily concerns of the rapidly growing industry. The jury cannot deliberate much longer before encountering some serious limits to growth. The decision rests with you, the leaders of this industry.

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