

## Ask the Experts

From how to protect your therapists from inappropriate clients to hiring better educated technicians, Anderson and Associates answers your questions.

**Q.** What are the massage therapist's rights if a client acts inappropriately, such as grabbing the therapist during the treatment? And, if the employee comes to us days later rather than right away, can we refuse to service the client when another appointment is requested? How would we go about saying, "You're not welcome here," but in a less rude way? —*Concerned in Pennsylvania*

**A.** Dear Concerned in Pennsylvania: This is a potentially fragile situation and, while expedience is important, handling something days later may provide perspective and insight. (This assumes no physical or emotional trauma has occurred to your therapist that warrants the immediate intervention of law enforcement or health-care workers.) As you proceed, remember you were not there and do not know the personal circumstances of the people involved. Your job as the spa owner is to treat everyone with respect and dignity and to protect the integrity and professionalism of your business.

**“It is not your job to instruct or discipline a [badly behaved] guest, but it is your job to run your business professionally.”**

Because you have more control over your employees' behavior than your guests', let's start there. To safeguard against inappropriate behavior between employees and guests, provide your staff with clearly defined protocols as well as options to exercise if a guest's behavior seems inappropriate.

During staff training, all employees should be made aware of the standard protocol required between guests and therapists to ensure that no mixed signals are sent or received and that no



The best spas are sanctuaries of peace and safety for both guests and therapists.

inappropriate actions occur bringing discomfort to your clients, employees, or business in general. The training should be reiterated in your company's standard operating procedures manual, and new employees should review the manual upon orientation and sign a statement that they have read, reviewed, and understand the procedures. You may want to include the American Massage Therapists Association's seven-point code of ethics. These are easy-to-use guidelines and also send a clear message that you are concerned for your staff as employees and professionals.

Now, let's consider the badly behaved client. It is not your job to instruct or discipline a guest, but it is your job to run your business professionally. First, have the employee who was compromised prepare written documentation of exactly what transpired, including dates and times. His or her signature on a notarized statement is one

way you can minimize your exposure if the situation evolves into something larger. Second, use the event (without mentioning names) as a training opportunity with the staff. Third, do not proactively contact the client and tell him or her not to return. Why go out of your way to create ill will? Rather, wait until the customer calls for another treatment and assign the client to the employee who can best handle a potentially difficult situation. (Make sure the

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original therapist is not available to the problem client.) Provide the new therapist with a history of what previously transpired and take action immediately if the behavior occurs again. Ask to speak to the client in your office or another private location. Bring the signed documentation of the previous “mistreatment” and the current therapist as a witness to the conversation. In a calm and non-judgmental manner, explain to the client that your spa is a sanctuary for guests as well as employees and that his or her action is not generally condoned behavior in a well-run spa. You can tell the guest that you’re looking out for the well-being of him or her, your staff, your clients, and the spa community in general. Good luck.

**Q.** The supply of educated therapists in my area is limited. The local cosmetology, esthetician, and massage school is not of the highest standard. In fact, a recent graduate wasn’t taught waxing or how to do a facial from the forehead to the décolleté. The nail techs are not even taught how to do a backfill. Retraining new hires wastes precious time and dollars. Help! —*Disappointed in Iowa*

**A.** Dear Disappointed in Iowa: Why not review the course catalog of the school near you and evaluate exactly what the program offers and what the graduation requirements are? If you feel the program is deficient, set up a meeting with the program director and discuss your concerns. You may be able to create an academic/professional alliance that will benefit not only your business but also the schools. Unlike spa operations in larger cities, you and your current team of professionals have a unique opportunity to make a meaningful contribution that can help shape your spa community.

**“Set up a mentoring program where senior staff can be a resource to junior staff.”**

We also invite you to remember your skill set when first starting out. There was a time when we were all challenged by procedures and circumstances that we now take for granted. School gives us a starting point to develop our professional skills. We develop our talent over time through experience, which sometimes involves mistakes and inefficiencies. If this was not the case, a senior nail tech or senior therapist would in theory have the depth of knowledge similar to those coming out of school.

The concept that responsibility for the training of your staff lies almost exclusively with the beauty school is not completely accurate. Given this, we suggest a few parallel tracks to embark on that will help ensure the quality of your new hires. First, spread a wide net when searching for applicants. Graduates of other schools as well as technicians who have been in the industry for a while may have a skill set that better suits your needs. The Internet and regional newspapers are great ways to advertise your job openings. Second, be very specific about what you are looking for in a candidate, and take your time to select the best from the applicant pool. Always check references before you extend the offer. You can often tell much



A 90-day probationary period lets you see if your new hire has the skills he or she claims.

about a candidate by what is not said in a reference check. Third, you can put new hires on a 90-day probationary period, ensuring that they are proficient in the skill set they claim to have and are also compatible with your operation. You may also put the new hire on a training wage to offset some inefficiencies during the probationary period. Last, you may want to set up a mentoring program at your spa in which senior staff can coach junior staff and act as a resource to them. Thinking outside of the box can create a win-win situation for everyone.—*Peter C. Anderson and Michele A. Chandler*

Peter C. Anderson is a principal at Anderson and Associates, a spa consulting firm based in Santa Monica, CA. He is also on the Board of Advisors for the Medical Spa Program at the University of California-Irvine and is on the faculty at the Collins School of Hotel Management at Cal Poly Pomona. Michele A. Chandler heads up the Toronto office of Anderson and Associates. She brings 20 years of financial, operational, and water-treatment managerial experience to the firm. You can e-mail Anderson at [peter@anderspa.com](mailto:peter@anderspa.com) and Chandler at [michele@anderspa.com](mailto:michele@anderspa.com).