

Client Accommodations

From managing tardy clients to addressing traffic flow problems in a busy day spa, Anderson and Associates offers these suggestions.

Q. My day spa has many regular clients who know each other. A few of them are always late for their appointments, which are then rushed and sometimes compromised. I'm afraid this may reflect badly on my therapists' skills and on my spa's reputation. Although I maintain client confidentiality, I'm afraid that if I address the issue they may feel I've crossed a boundary and discuss the subject among themselves. What's your advice?—*Clock-Watcher*

A. Dear Clock-Watcher: Your frustration with tardy clients is common among spa professionals, and your sensitivity to confidentiality and the appropriateness of your interactions with clients is excellent. It should be the standard at all spas, whether they're located in a small town or thriving metropolis. While your "inner scheduler" cannot understand why guests make relaxing spa appointments only to rush in late, consider that this dynamic is at the very heart of their need for your spa's services. Your job is to be as accommodating as possible, which includes being sensitive to your clients' circumstances.

“Show clients you go beyond what's prescribed in order to provide extraordinary customer service.”

The fact is that the spa guest has purchased one unit of time, and when the treatment time is over, his or her appointment is up. The therapist moves on to the next client. There are, however, ways to soften this reality and let your clients know you deliver exceptional customer service. You might try these tactics:

- To the perpetually late, suggest they arrive 15 to 20 minutes before their actual treatment times. Reinforce the earlier times on appointment cards and with reminder calls the day before their appointments. The slightly earlier appointments should allow for your clients' customary lateness and for therapists' schedules to run smoothly. Your customers only lose out on pre-treatment relaxation time.
- When possible, book these clients for the last appointment of the day or, if you can do so without undermining your schedule and revenue, leave a larger gap of 10 to 15 minutes after their

treatments. This allows you to accommodate the late client without compromising the schedule or the treatment's quality. Don't share with your guests how you manage this. Show them you're willing to go beyond what's prescribed in order to provide extraordinary customer service.

- In circumstances where their lateness may impact the outcome of the service, such as having time to apply nail polish to only one hand, explain the time limitations and suggest an alternative treatment or time.
- If it is your spa's policy to charge for the full treatment hour, even if only 30 minutes of value remain, do so. The sting may make the client realize that his or her appointment time is not flexible. However, you can be conciliatory and even apologetic in this process. Above all, be accommodating and gracious. Remember, you are running a business that requires schedules and time accountability. Your clients play by a different set of rules. As paying guests, they are free to come and go as they please.

The two of us recently visited spas—one in upstate New York and the other in Southern California—to receive treatments. We had very different experiences. The New York spa *required* that guests be present 30 minutes before any service, which, after changing, left 15 minutes of waiting. Unfortunately no pre-treatments were offered, and the lounge area was undersized.

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Help clients who are always late by suggesting they schedule appointments 15 to 20 minutes prior to their actual start time.



Don't compromise on space in the locker room. Clients don't want to feel like they're bumping into one another.

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There were not enough seats for all of the spa guests, and the wait was not peaceful. The spa was clearly sending the message that its profitability and schedule was more important than its clients' time and experience.

Alternatively, the spa in Southern California showed superb customer service. The staff was prepared and positive in dealing with a late arrival of 15 minutes and performed an excellent facial. The esthetician's technical abilities combined with the high level of customer service provided an exceptional spa experience despite tardiness. Of the two examples, it's easy to surmise which experience leads to better client retention.

It is your job to help clients forget their stress, not add to it. You have no idea about (nor any control over) a client's reality outside your spa environment. Within the spa, however, remember to keep the *service* in customer service.

Q. Our spa is about three years old, and we have achieved reasonable success in our marketplace. I sometimes wonder if we're too successful, though. There are traffic jams in our reception area, and there is little or no room for guests to relax and decompress after treatments. Clients even complain sometimes. Any suggestions?—*Busy and Worried*

A. Dear Busy and Worried: Congratulations on achieving success in your marketplace. At this rate, however, it will be short-lived as your customers become increasingly frustrated and look elsewhere for their spa services. You are right to be concerned.

Without knowing your spa's layout, we are going to make some assumptions. The current design is no longer serving your busy spa's flow needs. Expansion, if at all possible, should be considered sooner rather than later. Can you lease additional attached space? If construction can be done, it would be prudent to look at the feasibility of adding square footage and completely re-evaluating the spa's flow. Meanwhile, if the climate is suitable, perhaps you can use outdoor areas as posttreatment relaxation areas.

We must caution you against a common misstep often made while you're evaluating the client flow in your spa. Operators often convert their non-revenue-producing areas into treatment space. This is a penny-wise, pound-foolish solution in the spa business. Spa-goers need and demand personal space. From the check-in desk, where guests want privacy to discuss their treatment needs, to adequate locker rooms, where guests don't want to feel like they're bumping into one another, personal areas should not be downsized.

Posttreatment relaxation is also an integral part of the spa experience, and as an operator, you should be mindful of overcapacity. It's jarring and disappointing to leave a treatment and not be able to find personal space where you can privately regroup. In addition, rushing clients is more detrimental to your business than deferring revenue generated by overbooking your spa's capacity. Until your expansion is complete, can you stagger appointment times so clients are able to enjoy your spa and their visits more fully?

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To understand the problems, try walking through your spa—from the front door to the lounge—and critically evaluate where gridlock occurs. It may cost you some development dollars to fix the problems, but it's better to spend money now than to have none to spend later when your clients have moved on to the competition.—*Peter C. Anderson and Michele A. Chandler*

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