

Gunning for the Spa Industry

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“A labour of love is how Maggie Gunning describes her job. A spa consultant based in Singapore she travels the world helping people get spas right. She’s often brought in at the eleventh hour by businesses that have ground to a halt in the setting up process, or while running, and, in her own words, “I go in and ruffle a few feathers.”

Her company, Spa Synergy, has become synonymous with quality spas not just in Singapore but across the world, as a direct result of her comprehensive experience in different aspects of the industry - her career spans beauty therapy, spa management, business owner and consultant. GSA talked to Maggie on the eve of the Turning Point Spa Seminar, found out what makes her passionate about the industry, and got some insider tips on the triumphs and pitfalls of setting up spas.

“I originally planned to go into nursing,” she remembers. “You can already see the caring nature, as nursing and beauty care go very well together.” In fact she did a three year diploma in beauty therapy, because she wanted to be a make-up artist for film and TV, and then worked as a beauty consultant for seven years in London, as well as the US and Australia. In 1991 she came to Hong Kong and spent four years as the spa manager for the Pacific Club Kowloon.

People talk about the spa industry being young now, but 14 years ago it seems incredible that this Hong Kong hotel had such a sophisticated spa. “It was a members' only club,” says Gunning. “Living in the city members wanted day spa treatments: slimming, packages of facials, waxing, massages every week, hydrotherapy, herbal wraps...”

“Hydrotherapy was originally a European treatment, and yes, it has been around for years,” she confirms. “But now it is much more sophisticated with programs for lymphatic drainage, for example. Machines are much more powerful and can combine with other treatments like scrubs and massages.”

In 2000 she set up Caci, a company which marketed a popular facial toning machine and then she moved to Singapore where she set up Spa Synergy.

“I got very interested in how spas were put together and how people worked best within the spa environment. There were so many mistakes made in designing them and so I kind of fell into advising people, as well as training and covering the customer service aspect. It’s very intensive, sort of a labour of love.”

One of her success stories is the St Gregory Marine and Day Spa. A 7,000 square foot space, she was called in at the last moment to coordinate everyone. “It was hard to get it all done in three months – I went in and it was a building site! It can be done but it is stressful, and you really need a good team. The project manager needs to be your best friend.”

More recently she has been working on a 30,000 square foot project in Turkey – a project she was brought in on right from the start. “It is a brilliant case study of when the owners are doing it right,” she says. “The architecture, design, and the consulting are all being done at the same time.”

Otherwise mistakes happen at the drawing board stage, and the time and effort going into correcting them can be significant. There are some basics in getting it right.

“Anyone out there building a spa - get a lighting designer,” she advises, slipping into consultant mode. “There should be wall cove lighting, not ceiling lighting or the client is looking straight into a light bulb. And air con is a major problem. The client’s comfort is of utmost importance. Women typically feel the cold

more than men and so you need air con control in each room. These are the two major mistakes I come across time and again.”

Part of the problem is that building spas is a fragmented business. A hotel spa can be a separate outlet and many hotels don't know anything about spas and don't want to be involved. As a result the outlet is contracted out, and there is little integration between the hotel and the spa operator – although to the customer it is still part of the hotel.

“Smarter hotel chains realize a spa is a necessity whether they are four or five star. Definitely if they are a resort,” says Maggie. “The hotel can build a core team within the group, just like F&B, and set money and budget aside. The rest of the hotel can leverage off that, then you'll have the consistency and integration. They build up the training department, leverage off the rest of the hotels training department, with customer service skills and manuals all customized to fit in with the existing hotel brand, they save with purchasing.... The Mandarin has grasped it. They know what they need and have the design quality.” Once set up she suggests mystery shoppers are brought in for some honest critical feedback.



As consultant Gunning is involved in every aspect of the spa. “I work with the financial analyst, I do research – local and secondary, I set up pre-opening operations, training manuals and the spa menu, I recruit staff, bring in supplies... I like to teach the client how to be a spa consultant,” she laughs, realizing that she is teaching someone how to do her job.

“Photos are so important,” she cautions. “You have got to have photography done for the brochure, website, for PR purposes and press releases. Customers take notice of these things. Spa Philosophy for example, is a small day spa in Macau I consulted for. They have done tonnes of publicity through Catch On & Co with Cathy Chon. Mandy [Chan] still calls me and I am happy to see her. It is nice to see that they are doing it the right way.”

Once her ‘babies’ are up and running she either continues to advise or steps back. Sometimes it is hard to let go when you see a project you have put so much work into run into difficulties, and although she is always available to give good advice, it is not always welcomed. “I used to keep that emotional attachment to one of my spas, but not so much any more. If a client keeps in touch that's great, and of course I'll continue to give advice, but if not it is like banging your head against a brick wall.”

Having such a comprehensive insider's view of the spa world has opened Maggie up to a unique view of the industry – typical hospitality but with an oh-so-personal touch. And just like hospitality what goes on behind the scenes to make the outside look good is very intensive.

“It is ironic. For the guests it is meant to be a stress-free experience, but for the people operating and running it, it can get quite stressful. At the end of the day there is the bottom line and there's a pressure to deliver to demanding guests. If well done there are rarely customer complaints. We pride ourselves on that. And when there are, we deal with them instantaneously, see it through and bring them back with another treatment.

“Men have been petrified of spas for a long time but after they've had a treatment they love it. And spas are becoming more therapeutic rather than just pampering. They can really help. Regular visits can prevent having all those ailments like arthritis, rheumatism, degenerative diseases... There will be a lot more integrated medicine in the next few years especially in the US and Europe. Asia has got a way to go.

“Singapore is so well established as a place to do business and education institutes are being built, the beauty spa industry can leverage off that with a department within the institute. Education is very important for Asians.”

For years now the gap between real spas – a place where water is used to promote health – and massage parlours or beauty salons, has been widening as the top end of the industry becomes more and more sophisticated. Smaller salons are billing themselves as spas now in name, but at the end of the day it is

the quality of treatment and price range that brings in the business.

“Out on the streets there is a big disparity in terms of very high end spas, and nice little local day spas. Locals go to local places which are less expensive. And the high end spas, Spa Botanica for example, cater to the international clientele and locals in terms of a special occasion or weekend. I believe that in the future there will be a lot of consolidation going on. The big boys get bigger and buy out the smaller companies. The smaller guys, if they give a really good service, and their customers are loyal, will still survive.”

It's that quality of service which makes such a difference, not only regarding the philosophy of the company, but also the staff. The global shortage of highly trained staff doesn't help and Maggie sees this as a problem that starts at the roots of the industry.

“On the therapist side it is difficult for staff to see therapy as a career rather than just a job to make money, but this comes down to good management. Therapists often go into spas for the money. They don't think of it as a career. What is important is high quality training, instilling pride into their work, and then the therapist will see it as more than just a job. The way they are treated by management is very important.

“After around 10 years I am still in touch with some of the therapists I've trained and managed. It makes me feel good to see that some of them have gone on to set up their own business.”

She is in the perfect place to influence the industry for the better. Involved in spas from the ground up, literally, Gunning's heart is in the industry. “It is fun to work with architects and interior designers, trying to interpret what it is you'd love to see. I have lots of ideas but are they feasible? A lot of our guests have expectations and can tell good from bad. In my opinion, you don't want the wow factor every time you go back to a spa. We are creating a good space to be in rather than an instant wow. More of an mmm...”

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