

1

The importance of customer care and service design in the spa environment

Good and bad customer service

Customer service must be at the heart of any successful spa operation. This is why, before discussing any other topics, this book begins by examining the ways that spa managers can both meet and exceed the expectations of not just today's spa goers, but also the spa goers of the future.

As people become more educated and travel more often, globally customer service levels are becoming more sophisticated. Spa goers are more discerning in both what they expect and what they will accept as an acceptable customer service. Spa customer service etiquette is therefore having to adapt and change – and it is evolving, constantly.

Meeting customers' expectations is the core essence of what a spa must deliver. Without good customer service a spa will run into problems. Beautifully designed spas have been known to fail because they were not able to consistently offer good customer service, and in contrast, excellent customer service can compensate for a spa operation that is past its sell-by-date.

People experience customer service on a daily basis and even the most undemanding of customers are now able to differentiate between good service and bad service. A bad experience will stick, it may also be shared between family and friends and, in today's digital world, to possibly hundreds of people via social media.

To understand what constitutes good customer service it is worth examining some of the common signs of what constitutes bad customer service – the list is not extensive, but its characteristics are unfortunately all too common:

- **Sloppy body language:** body language reveals the thoughts and attitude of the person serving – just through their posture the customer will be able to tell in seconds whether the member of staff is professional and has their best interests at heart, or not.
- **A low level of energy and/or poor attitude:** through body language and micro-movements the customer can immediately pick up on the energy of the member of staff. In the hospitality and spa industry a helpful, positive attitude and enthusiastic energy level are expected as the minimum starting point. If what is delivered is anything less, at best the customer will be disappointed, at worst it may be the beginning of the start of a conflict.
- **Disinterest:** when the customer gets the feeling that the person serving them is not 100% committed to serving them or putting in the necessary level of effort – again evident through the server's body language.
- **Speed:** going too fast for the guest (chivvying them along) or just being too slow.
- **Chatting:** with other staff members over or in front of the guest.
- **Keeping the customer waiting:** ignoring them whilst finishing off, or occupied in, another task.
- **Abruptness:** answering queries and questions to a minimum (i.e. just giving "yes" or "no" answers) and not being forthcoming in communicating the required information.
- **Giving negative closing responses:** "no", "it's not possible", "I can't do that" "sorry, it's not available", etc. and not giving suitable alternatives.

To say our health club was run down would be an understatement. The spa had not been renovated for 30 years and our fitness equipment was well out of date. We also had a serious damp problem. We even used to joke that we could grow mushrooms in our spa! However I made that spa work. I picked a team that were full of personality and who loved people. They were my most valued asset and I treated them with total respect. I had a rule that whenever a member walked in through the door we would run to them with a smile (not wait for them to come to us), hand them a towel and greet them by name. We made it our intention to make our guests feel special and loved. I ordered retail goods and displayed them all around the club (mainly to hide the mould), we made a little counter into a coffee and snack bar and encouraged people to stay after their workout and chat to other members. Our USP was our happy 'family-like' atmosphere. Our tiny little club was designed for 500 members, but at its peak we reached 890 members, even selling more retail products than the larger clubs. Eventually we had to close membership and make a waiting list, and of course once there was a waiting list, everyone wanted to be part of our little oasis in Watford!

Sarra Temple, previously manager of Watford Health Club, UK.

Poor customer service has a serious negative impact on any business operation, but more so in a spa environment where everything depends on human interaction. The moment the customer experiences a poor interaction, it will kick-start negative emotions and they will begin to lose trust. If this experience is at the start of their spa journey, then they will be more likely to look for other problems to complain about. If a spa is consistently not delivering acceptable service in an environment where guests chat and share their experiences with one another, problems will escalate.

Whilst in the past, customers might have been satisfied with basic politeness and a smile, because of globalisation, expectations have become much higher. Worldwide, as customer service and service design have evolved, these expectations are showing no sign of slowing down and this is something which today's spa managers should be acutely aware of. Here, we examine the minimum that guests expect when visiting a spa:

- **A kind, genuine smiling face:** is a must and a minimum expectation required by all staff, from the cleaner to the manager. In a spa, guests expect authenticity, sincerity and empathy. Most are coming to relieve their stress levels, so staff should be doing everything they can to help their guests achieve this. A supermarket checkout worker's smile and greeting are not enough for the spa environment!
- **Good energy:** as stated above, the staff's body language and micro movements mean that the customer will be able to read their attitude and feel their energy. The energy of staff in a spa should reflect positivity and an openness to please.
- **Speed:** going at a speed slower or faster than the guest, even if it is delivered in a positive style is likely to frustrate and annoy the receiver, staff should pay attention and adapt to the different tempo of the guest that they are serving.
- **Flexibility:** staff should be able to handle queries and problems and provide an acceptable solution to most requests and/or complaints.
- **A willingness to do everything to meet the guest's requirements:** the guest should feel that the member of staff will help them and will go the extra mile if necessary.
- **Correct, clear and fast billing:** guests should be able to see clearly what they have bought, what is charged for is correct and that it is presented quickly and seamlessly.

In a well-run spa the above points are now expected by spa goers as the norm. If professional customer service is offered consistently, it results in better staff-customer interactions and happier customers, which in turn helps to contribute to a healthier atmosphere and a healthier business (which could possibly result in more opportunities for the staff). When delivering customer service training the spa manager should emphasize this to the staff and make them realize how good customer service has the potential to benefit them personally, both through a pleasant working environment and possible bonus and/or promotional opportunities in the long term.