

# Turning Massage into Gold with Flawless Guest Experiences

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on behalf of the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)

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*imassage, Inc. offers consulting services for companies interested in improving their customer experience. imassage can help develop a technically skilled therapeutic massage team adept at navigating softer skills such as customer service, transitions, draping, and effective communication.*

The AMTA works to advance the massage profession through ethics and standards, continuing education, professional publications, legislative efforts, public education, and fostering the development of members.

## Know thy guest

Before you can build a great guest experience, you must understand the needs and desires of those you are creating it for. Savvy companies understand the value of continually investing in methods to delve into what truly satisfies guests and encourages them to return.

Going beyond the generic understanding that many spa guests seek stress relief, these companies endeavor to understand the nuances of their guests' perceptions. For example, a company investing in opulent design might find that their core customers would prefer a knowledgeable and highly skilled staff over a new high-tech salt infused relaxation room. In this case, the company's money would be better spent on in-depth employee training. Gaining this understanding early can simultaneously save the company money and help focus resources on experiences that exceed the customer needs.

Within the population of spa-goers, there are various segments, or customer groups. Each has different desires, motivations, and needs in a spa experience. When you understand the differing desires for your chosen groups, then you can artfully craft your spa experience to attract and keep them.

Here are some inexpensive ways to gather information about your guests;

1. Acquire industry-level research such as that provided by the AMTA and ISPA.
2. Send surveys to guests in your database, paying special attention to loyal customers and those came only once.
3. Perform market-level research to identify your opportunity.
4. Interview frontline staff for key insights.
5. Host customer focus groups.

## Define your experiential strategy

Once you decide on your target customer groups, the process begins of strategically building an experience that will exceed customer expectations. In other words, what carefully chosen tactics will you put in place to create a unique spa experience? Answering this question for your spa will impact every aspect of your business, including type of employees you hire, collateral materials, design, communication processes, pricing, and services offered.

For employees to deliver this detailed plan, the experiential path must be clearly defined and supported. Provide employees with knowledge of expected deliverables through regular training

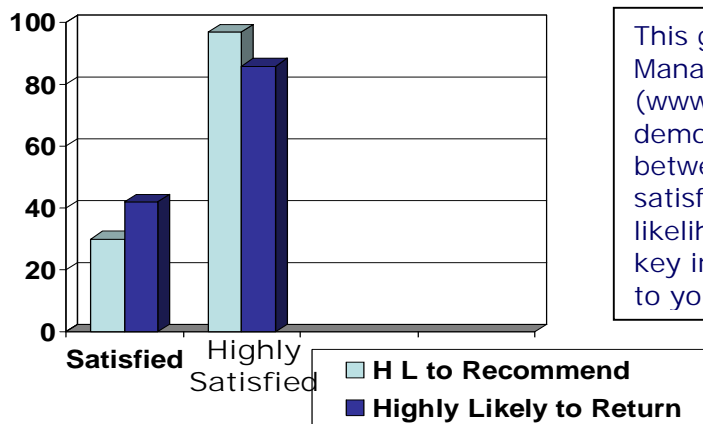
and feedback. When questioned, your people should be able to clearly communicate what is most important to your spa guests and how they deliver on these expectations.

Ideas to implement a flawless experience:

1. Keep employees informed on what the key satisfaction drivers are for your guests, as well as what dissatisfies them.
2. Identify key touch points on the guest's service path that must be delivered. See *the bonus handout for an example of the service path*.
3. Build training to support these touch points so that staff can deliver service correctly.
4. Create easy-to-implement problem resolution strategies so employees can quickly recover from service failures.
5. Always remember what is most important. You may have the best-looking spa in the world, but if you have a poorly trained massage team, you will be left with few loyal customers.

## Assess satisfaction and loyalty

Once your experience is defined and launched, it is important to constantly assess results and adapt your experience accordingly. Assessing guest satisfaction is one method to do this.



This graph, provided by Service Management Group ([www.servicemanagement.com](http://www.servicemanagement.com)), demonstrates the significant difference between a satisfied and a highly satisfied customer. A customer's likelihood to recommend and return is key indicators of customer loyalty, vital to your long-term success.

Research shows that less than half of **satisfied customers** say they are highly likely to return to a business, and less than one-third would recommend that business to someone else. **Highly satisfied customers**, however, are twice as likely to return as those who are merely satisfied, and highly satisfied customers are three times more likely to recommend the business to friends and family. From this we can gather that merely "satisfying" customers is not enough.

Setting your organization's satisfaction bar on the right rung is a necessary step in the process of improving guest satisfaction, earning repeat business, and receiving referrals from guests. But that rung is high: It is a flawless, present-centered experience.

Ideas on how to use satisfaction and loyalty to build revenue:

1. Measure satisfaction levels of your guests anonymously and regularly.
2. With 70 percent of guests receiving massage, delve deeper into satisfaction with this service.
3. Create easy channels for customers and employees to provide feedback.
4. Keep your employees involved in the assessment process and informed of results.
5. Build incentives for employees focused on satisfaction and return behavior (loyalty), not just financial measures.

# Turning Massage into Gold: Treatment Planning\*

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## Introduction:

A three-session massage treatment plan has many advantages over a one session “wait and see how you feel before you book another” approach. In a three-session series:

- Clients can see cumulative results due to a realistic time-line and strategy.
- Client and therapist have a proper window of time to establish safety and trust (rapport) that is paramount in any healing relationship.
- Reinforcing good behaviors within a three-week period, leads to a higher likelihood of creating habits. Establishing a new habit requires approximately 21 days.
- Clients stay focused on the expectation of feeling better, increasing a potential placebo effect.
- Studies have shown that written goals have a tremendous rate of success.

In addition, your spa will improve revenue in a way that does not cost money!

## Notes:

1. Selling vs. Sharing:

2. Client Education:

3. Formulating an approach:

General Notes:

\* The **Treatment Planning Template** is attached separately

# Bonus Handout

From the imassage '08 I SPA Presentation: Flawless Guest Experiences

## Joining guests on their spa experience path

In this article, we will travel with guests through their spa visit, exploring 11 crucial service touch points along the way. Within each touch point, we will provide numerous ideas to help you make the leap from idea to action. To sharpen focus, consider these two statistics: more than 70 percent of all spa guests receive full body massage and for many spas, the massage department generates over half of all revenue. To reach most guests, perfecting the massage experience is a great place to start ensuring perfection. While emphasis is on the massage experience, the concepts are just as applicable to other services.

### Touch Point 1: Aligning expectations to delivery

Expectations are being set long before the guest attempts to make an appointment. These partially come from personal beliefs and past experiences, but can be influenced by your spa's marketing and communication avenues. Communication with the guest can recalibrate personal beliefs and alleviate fears, aligning them to what they will experience at your spa.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Ensure consistent and accurate messaging.** Develop consistency across all avenues of marketing such as printed materials, media, your website, and press information. All should have a similar look and messaging. When creating ads, ask for professional advice within the represented department to guarantee the pictures and words communicate what really happens during the service. For example, massage therapists would not have long nails. Stones placed on someone's back undervalue the therapeutic benefits of hot stone therapy.
2. **Examine Web reviews.** PhoCusWright reports that for *new generation travelers*, 37 percent are influenced by personal comments read on social networking or travel advisory sites. To find out what is being said, search for your spa's name using one strong descriptor such as "horrible" or "awesome." Visit top travel sites to see if reviews are posted.
3. **Minimize stress during the early stages of decision-making.** Make your website easy to navigate, materials accessible, and services easy to understand and purchase.

### Touch Point 2: First Contact

First contact is any avenue a potential guest uses to contact your spa with questions or an attempt to book. A good philosophy at this phase is to keep communication channels both informative and easy to navigate for both guest and employee alike.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Develop new guest protocols.** When an inquiry comes in from a newer spa goer, consider having collateral that alleviates some of the "newbie fears." Make them easy to access through pre-created emails, website attachments, or mailers. Have content focused on process explanation and fear alleviation. If your POS allows, enter notes on the conversation for reference when the guest checks in.
2. **Make staff knowledgeable.** The person answering the phone must be knowledgeable about all aspects of your spa. Consider having these employees attend service and product training, and experience the treatments. Also have a service binder close by with detailed descriptions

of the treatments. The receptionists are often the deciding factor on whether a guest will book or not. Starbucks creates card games for employees so they can have fun while they learn.

3. **Provide smooth access.** If your front desk person cannot navigate check-ins, check-outs, phone calls, and technician transitions, consider increasing staff or using a call center to assist during busy times. One spa has all their calls managed by a call center, freeing their front desk staff to perfect the art of personal interaction. This first or last contact can have immense repercussions on satisfaction if not running smoothly.
4. **Do no harm.** ISPA conducted extensive research to understand what motivates spa visits. They discovered that for all spa types, half of guests are seeking to reduce stress. With stress reduction a key motivator, it is imperative the spa experience not induce additional stress. Spa goers say that red flags for stress or discomfort include being shown products for sale, expressing concern, waiting for treatment, tipping, and undressing.

The decision to visit your spa has gone smoothly. The guest had no problem booking, all questions were answered efficiently and they received collateral alleviating the concerns they had about spa process. The guest prepares for her visit and arrives with high expectations.

### Touch Point 3: Ready or not, here they come

It is up to you whether the experience will create a loyal guest or something less. If it is less, you may never see the guest again, and he or she will probably not tell you why. Spa goers say they are looking for confident employees and a smooth, informative intake. The first face-to-face interaction will set the tone for the rest of the visit.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Create a system to recognize returning guests.** Train staff to thank them for returning, demonstrating they recognize their value. Bonus points if staff discusses their previous visits and treatments.
2. **Use kid gloves for new guests.** If a new guest is checking in, take special care to ensure they are comfortable with all aspects of their visit. Also consider having a new guest process in place. This can include escorted transitions, a thorough explanation of processes, and an active way to identify areas of unease.

### Touch Point 4: Managing wait time and transitions

Spa goers have a high level of discomfort with waiting and transitioning between services. These negatives can be managed by trained employees who recognize the discomfort is usually a result of insecurity about what comes next.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Guide transfers.** Never point a guest in the direction they should go. Find ways to ensure they are clear on where to go, what their options are while they are there, and what comes next. Be specific, so they do not feel unsure or abandoned as time passes. Use caution with loyal spa goers as they can become irritated if you over explain to them. Build systems to help employees determine what level of explanation is needed.
2. **Sell products carefully.** Eighty-five percent of guests report being uncomfortable with sales tactics. Selling a \$50 product is not worth having a highly satisfied customer move to just being satisfied. The ISPA 2006 Consumer Report discusses this dynamic in detail. If you do sell, they prefer customized recommendations based on their unique needs from the expert working with them.



features of the spa experience. If a guest does not feel safe and comfortable, the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) will inhibit the relaxation response, resulting in lower satisfaction.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Be present.** A therapist who is present will be attentive to the changing needs of the guest.
2. **Communicate.** Establish a feedback loop to avoid imposing pain on a guest. Because many spa goers are uncomfortable with voicing their concerns, therapists must sharpen their communication skills to avoid guest dissatisfaction.
3. **Be client-centered.** It is important to deliver what the guest is requesting, not what is mandated or on the therapist's agenda. Although therapists may make suggestions, ultimately guests will be dissatisfied if they did not receive what they perceived they would.

### Touch Point 8: Do sweat the small stuff

Pay attention to every detail of the environment from the lighting to the music, to the temperature and the smells. The higher the price for a massage, the higher the guest's expectations for a pristine spa experience. Any aspect that proves incongruent runs a risk of degrading the overall value of the spa in their minds.

Ideas to consider:

1. **See what they see.** Routinely run a "Shoes and Cobwebs" check. Require all therapists to wear clean, professional footwear as this is all a guest will see when face down on a massage table. Also, take time to lay face up on all tables to make sure cobwebs have not accumulated on the ceiling. This is what the guest sees, and it will impact their perception of quality.
2. **Hear what they hear.** Music should be free of lyrics. The mind has a tendency to try to follow words. The spa-goers main objective of letting the mind go can be hindered by any sound which disallows relaxation.
3. **Guarantee functionality.** Make sure all equipment such as table warmers, face cradles, electric tables, pumps and lighting are all in proper working order. A damaged or misaligned face cradle is rarely something a guest will complain about, yet it can ruin their ability to rest their head properly in the device.

### Touch Point 9: Investing in your most important asset

The people expected to deliver flawless service are the most important asset of any spa. With spa goers expecting a "tightly run ship," it is vital to have seamless congruency between departments. From front desk personnel to technicians to attendants, a consistent level of education will build the confidence and morale required for superior service.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Integrate training.** The more each employee knows about other departments, the more efficiently the guests path will go. Cross train employees during in-house training sessions and multi-departmental meetings.
2. **Use external trainers.** Sometimes you need outside assistance to bring new ideas into the spa. There are numerous customizable continuing education opportunities available to your spa. Not only will therapists receive quality training, they might also be meeting their certification requirements, alleviating future schedule conflicts. Remember, product training and continuing education have separate focus. It is important for employees to know you are investing in them, not just their product knowledge so they can sell more for the spa.
3. **Give employees a personal experience.** Optimally, all employees should experience the spa as a guest. Then they will speak from a personal vantage point when answering

questions for guests. Find creative ways to integrate the experience for staff and make it a perk.

The final touch points focus on staying in contact after the service experience has ended.

## Touch Point 10: Gone, but not forgotten

The experience for guests does not end once they pay their bill and head back to their hectic lives. There are many ways to continue the positive feelings while trying to garner loyalty.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Follow-up.** When asked, guests enthusiastically indicate they would appreciate a follow-up phone call. If unable to follow-up with all guests, at least attempt to ensure new guests have been contacted. One note: Guests do prefer if it is someone who has the power to change things.
2. **Measure satisfaction.** The only way to know how you are doing is to seek assessment from your guests. Numerous companies can assist you with programming this into your system. The data gathered can guide future changes as you identify the core satisfiers and dissatisfiers for your spa. Remaining anonymous is important to getting at the truth.
3. **Measure return behavior.** When you create incentives for guests to return, employees will find ways to ensure great experiences.

## Touch Point 11: When things go wrong

As hard as you try, there will be times when the service experience fails in some way. When guests bring this to your attention, be thankful. Most spa guests will not voice complaints, they will just never return. On average, 65 percent of customers who report problems are less than highly satisfied with the resolution. Interestingly, for those customers who are highly satisfied with resolution, a full 84 percent report a high likelihood to return, showing signs of greater loyalty than a highly satisfied customer who did not experience a problem.

Ideas to consider:

1. **Empower employees.** Consider building a service recovery structure that gives employees latitude to make decisions which immediately gratify guests. Starbucks has made a science of this. They have incorporated the “Just Say Yes” policy, allowing employees to occasionally go outside policy to correct failures. The last thing they want to do is win the argument and lose the customer.
2. **Customize resolutions.** A free gift certificate will not please everyone. Have options available to ensure each guest is highly satisfied with the resolution offered.
3. **Fire problem guests.** In the end, some guests will pull more financial and energetic resources from your spa than you will ever be able to recoup. When they are identified as such, do not hesitate to professionally fire them from your business. You will improve morale when taking a stand against problem guests.

## Resources:

-Service Management Group, *Five Things We Learned from Talking to 100 Million People*, 2007. [www.servicemanagement.com](http://www.servicemanagement.com)

-Harvard Business School, *Starbucks: Delivering Customer Service*, 2006, written by Youngme Moon and John Quelch

-All ISPA research is available for purchase at [www.experienceispa.com](http://www.experienceispa.com)

- ☞ ISPA, *Spa-Goer Study*, 2006
- ☞ ISPA, *Consumer Report*, 2006
- ☞ ISPA, *Spa Industry Study*, 2007

-PKF *Hospitality Research*, 2006

-PhoCusWright, *Consumer Travel Trends Survey*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition

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