

Spas & wellness

The spa industry has been trumpeting the wellness message over mere pampering for several years, but recent initiatives show that this may now be moving beyond marketing speak
by Alissa Demorest

In effort to offer more than just pampering and add value to its services, spas have started to talk more about wellness and health in the past few years. The problem is that the word 'wellness' is already overused and has no clear meaning for either consumers or spa professionals.

The interest in conveying a wellness message rather than mere pampering is easy to understand. With consumers watching their purse strings more than in

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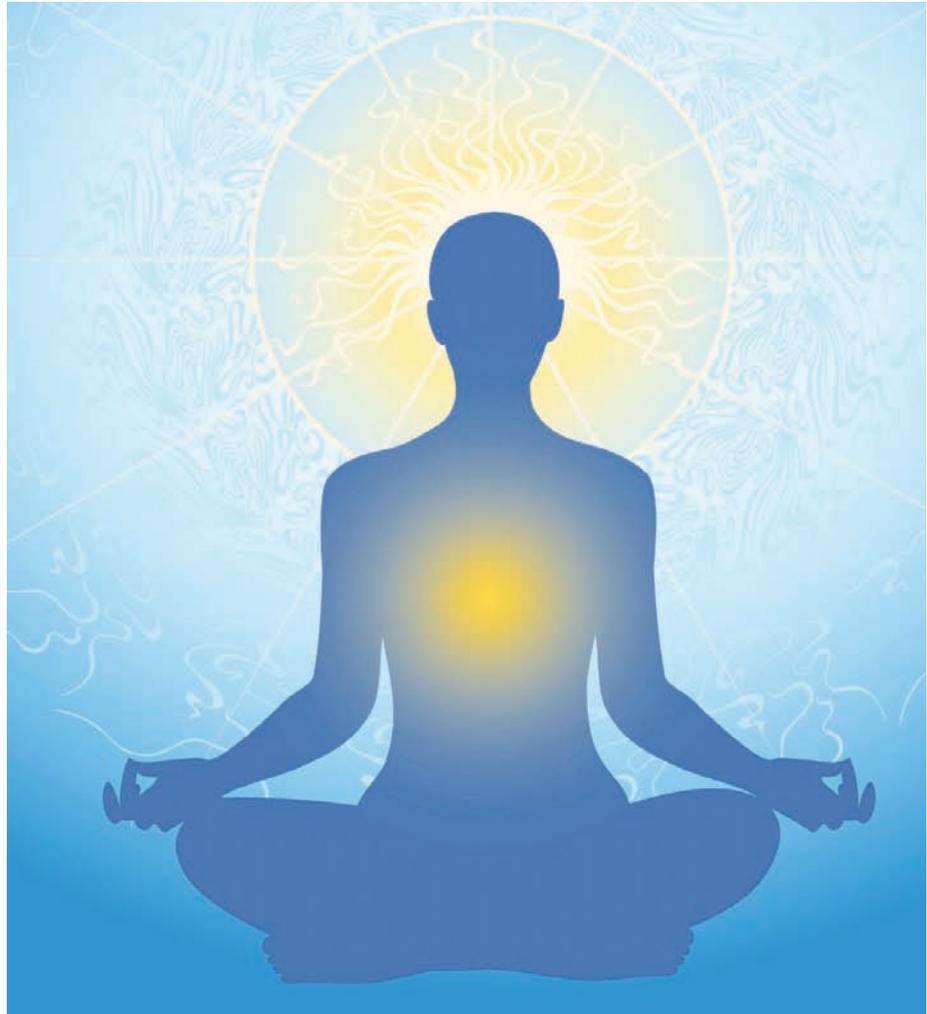
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Contento Marketing Group
principal Nancy Griffin

the past, spas are finding that their clients are reluctant to spend on pampering, but are more willing to invest in their health through spa-based therapies. "Advertising is often about pampering, but we need to change the message to say: 'you can spend money now on prevention, or spend it later on sickness,'" argues US-based consultancy Contento Marketing Group principal Nancy Griffin.

Most spas now make some sort of wellness or health benefit claim, but these

Change in motion



credit: istock

are often more marketing ploy than hard facts. "Some spa leaders are pushing a little too hard on wellness to gain market share and if you push too hard, you are going to see resistance. There needs to be a slow, consistent approach to bringing spa and wellness together," one industry analyst recently told *BW Confidential*.

Tools for wellness

Organizers of the annual Global Spa Summit (GSS), held in April this year sought to provide more clarity to the idea of wellness with the unveiling of an online "wellness portal," www.spaevidence.com. The platform is funded by GSS corporate sponsors and the idea is to educate spas and consumers on wellness therapies. The website provides access to a

panel of medical studies and evaluates more than 20 therapies that can be offered in spas, such as massage and acupuncture (see box).

"The spa has always been a touchy-feely [concept] that no one has been able to substantiate. The creation of this portal is the first time that the industry will get traction through evidence-based studies on the treatments being offered—it's going to force the spa industry to grow up," comments US-based consulting company Wuttke Group principal Mark Wuttke. Susie Ellis, president of Spa Finder Inc and one of the portal's founders, adds that the tool will provide evidence, which she believes was the "missing piece of the equation". She continues: "The consumer is asking more questions and there is a need for greater transparency. Through this portal we wanted to create something that would be

available to the industry, the consumer and the media, and it would be free”.

Industry players hope that this initiative will encourage spa operators to review their offer, so that eventually every element—from the food served to the skincare used in facials—adheres to a philosophy of wellness.

There have also been moves to boost training and education efforts in the area of wellness. Melbourne University in Australia has launched a Wellness Master’s Program

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(founded by Dr. Mark Cohen, also a co-creator of the portal) with three levels of certification, and it is believed that these kinds of programs are set to grow.

Wellness, health and regulations

But while spas seek to add more credibility to their wellness claims through medical studies, some fear that this could lead to regulatory hurdles. “Under what category does spa and wellness fall? Many spa industry leaders don’t want spa and wellness to fall under medical, because then it will be highly regulated and they’ll face numerous barriers. But if they fall outside of health and medical they’ll have to work harder to garner support. The most important point is to have quality training and education and to develop credibility within the industry,” says US consultancy Global Spa & Wellness business advisor Camille Hoheb.

It remains to be seen how the industry will follow through on its claims to wellness, but the good news is that the first tools are now falling into place. ■

What the experts told us: The future of wellness



“In the past, health and wellness has been about trendy treatments and the next big thing, but consumers want to get back to basics. Wellness is a staple, not a choice, and as an industry we have to focus on continuing to educate the consumer on how to live a healthy and balanced life.”

International Spa Association (ISPA) president Lynne McNeas



“Today with the economy, consumers want results and they want their purchase to be well-spent. We need to go back to proper marketing and education and having a solid idea of what wellness is; it is still a very vague concept.”

Global Spa & Wellness business advisor Camille Hoheb



“The spa sector will increasingly become the spa and wellness industry and we’ll see a much better understanding of the pro-active wellbeing benefits of spa treatments being taken up by the mainstream. We expect to see this in the contribution of spa to an individual’s health and happiness regime and also for spa to have a place in occupational health in the workplace.”

Spa Finder Europe chief executive Kevin Turnbull



“The smart spa operators are going to shift into wellness and they will be very strong. We have clients who are taking this route and are seeing double-digit growth. I am seeing many more wellness clinics and integrative medicine centers opening today than day spas.”

InSPArition Management founder & ceo Dori Soukup



“As an industry we say that going to spas is a necessity, but to consumers it really isn’t and that is unfortunate. In terms of social media we are missing a huge opportunity to educate on wellness; most social media is about discounting or specials. Spas are missing the mark; they’re tempted to take a short-term approach instead of creating long-term relationships.”

Contento Marketing Group principal Nancy Griffin

Spaevide.com at a glance

A new website providing results-based studies on spa therapies www.spaevide.com launched at this year’s Global Spa Summit (GSS). An initiative of the GSS spearheaded by Spa Finder Inc president Susie Ellis and a panel of medical doctors, it offers industry professionals and consumers a wealth of studies gleaned from respected medical databases: Natural Standard, Cochrane, PubMed and TRIP Database. The portal is easy to navigate: visitors can choose from more than 20 different therapies (this number will grow as the database expands) and can read in-depth research reports, which give both positive and, when applicable, negative feedback on the therapies. The database is also meant to be a platform for exchange: in the ‘conversations’ section, visitors can leave comments and in the ‘contributions’ space they can post testimonials or publish studies, which will be vetted by the portal.

In its first phase, Spa Finder’s Ellis explains that while the portal is geared to spa professionals, it is open to consumers as well. A number of spas have already placed a link to spaevide.com on their websites. The GSS will put a strong focus on communication to get the word out: more than 2,000 spa industry leaders will be kept abreast of all new developments. “We believe this is a game changer as to how people perceive the spa industry,” Ellis enthuses.

