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RECEPTION



Learn how to design client-friendly, clutter-free reception areas. By Monica Schuloff Smith

PERCEPTIONS



Have you ever heard the expression, "There are no second chances to make a first impression?" Nowhere does this apply more than the service industry, especially when it comes to designing a proper reception area.

"The reception area frames the whole setting of the guest experience," says Ronald Jean, managing director for Inter-Design Spa Consulting Group, a Cosmopro Group company in Daytona, Florida, that offers professional pre- and post-operational consulting. "From an operations viewpoint, it's the entrance and exit point."

The reception area should set the tone for the client's entire visit, according to industry veterans. They say a day spa's theme or philosophy should be prominent right at the door. "Remember that the point of the reception area is to create a sort of step-down space from the outside world into the spa experience," says Lisa Starr, the principal East Coast business consultant for Wynne Business, a company in Saratoga, California, that offers business-to-business services to the spa industry.

Other experts agree. "Without a reception area or front desk, guests can incur anxiety from not knowing where they should go," says William Caligari, managing principal of William Caligari Interiors in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. "The reception area should be neat and clean, and thoroughly reinforce your mission and message."

To design a reception area that reflects the care guests expect, you need a tranquil environment that showcases quality. Here's how to do it.

SenSpa in San Francisco utilizes sleek, streamlined shelving where a variety of products are displayed within a minimalist framework. This design also allows for more space within the shared reception/retail area.

"Retail, appropriately displayed, will entice customers on its own, so don't let it be a distraction."

Purpose and Function

A spa's reception area is usually multifunctional because of space considerations. The space can be designated as a waiting area or lounge for greeting clients, a retail checkout space or an information-gathering location. While they have many uses, the main purposes for reception areas are for customers to check in, pay for their services and buy retail.

However, some experts caution business owners about the way they set up retail displays. "Recently, I was invited to a spa opening and upon walking through the doors, I was struck by the overwhelming number of retail shelves, cabinets and kiosks," says Joshua Jones, project manager for bodywork mall.com, a company in Salt Lake City that offers spa design consulting. "There was so much stuff, you couldn't see the beautiful reception desk."

"The overall effect was maze-like, and the retail items were completely lost in the shuffle," he adds. "Retail, appropriately displayed, will entice customers on its own, so don't let it be a distraction."

Instead, Jones recommends using art as a focal point in your reception area. For example, sculptures or water features invite and relax visitors.

Retail and reception should be effortlessly and

effectively combined, say experts. "Check-in is a quick process, but checkout takes longer and should be where the retail is located," says Starr. "When the client gets out his or her wallet to pay, that's where there should be shopping opportunities."

Starr feels there should be minimal seating in reception areas used for retail. "We want clients to be browsing, not sitting," she says.

Divine Designs

Caligari says that reception areas are frequently under-appreciated or under-addressed. To design a proper one, he suggests that the space be appropriately planned.

"Ask a lot of questions to understand the function, brand and soul of the property," Caligari says.



Clean lines, uncluttered space and bright lighting create a welcoming atmosphere at La Belle Femme in Marblehead, Massachusetts.



Belleza Salon and Spa in Knoxville, Tennessee, charms clients with its modern lines accented with slices of natural light and floral arrangements.



The reception area at Turquoise Spa in Fairfield, Connecticut, was designed by renowned spa designer Alexis Uffland, Lexi Design, New York City.

"Bear in mind lighting and acoustics at all times."

"Start with the space plan, then work up the elevations. Move into furniture and furnishings, and then complete the space with art and accessories. Bear in mind lighting and acoustics at all times," he adds.

Much of the design for the reception area depends on the theme of the spa. Then, all of the systems for check-in, checkout and appointments should come into play. "This will help you understand how the area should function and what needs to be at the front desk," says Alexis Ufland, director of Lexi Design in New York City, who has designed spas worldwide. "You also need to take into consideration the size of the spa versus the size of the reception area and how many employees will be working the front desk."

Day spa owners shouldn't overlook the importance of a reception area—even if they're working with a limited budget. You don't want the front desk to work against you. "Decide up front if you want your customer service staff standing or sitting, and go from there," says Starr. "I like to create a front desk that is evocative of a hotel—not a lot of clutter on the desk, and clear directions to the client as to where to check in or out."

"If the area isn't designed correctly, it will continually create logjams for your spa operation," she adds.

On the other hand, you don't need to spend a lot of money on the design of your reception

RECEPTION AREA GUIDE

Contemporary

- Noise-free
- Separate check-in and checkout areas
- Wardrobe area for overcoats
- Greeting areas with beverage service
- Multiple one-on-one areas
- Semi-consultative retail areas
- Natural elements
- Illusion of personal space
- Clean, contemporary spaces
- Earth tones with color accents
- "Greening" or environmental consciousness
- Counter spaces with correct heights for check writing and service booking

Contemptible

- Wires
- Post-it notes, staff reminders and policies
- Central processing units
- Cash drawers
- Receipt printers
- Telephones, faxes and radios
- Wrapping materials and bags for retail sales
- Gift cards
- Brochures

area. Caligari feels that elaborate millwork and high-end finishes aren't necessary. "The area needs to be quiet, relaxing, contemplative and well-designed," he says. "We've done this with paint, artwork and lighting."

Jones has never been afraid to use color. "Splashes of bright red or lime green have their place in focusing clients while sparking creativity and imagination," he says. "Warm tones are wonderful for relaxing and making a space feel comfortable, but a client will remember a red couch, gold Buddha statue or colorful abstract painting more than beige walls."

The biggest oversights with reception areas are neglecting to control clutter and noise. Ringing phones are distracting—especially if a staff member is dealing with a complaint, says Caligari.

Another common mistake is installing a desk that's too small. "I love the reception desk at the Silken Tent Spa in Chicago," says Ufland. "The desk is like a piece of



A long reception desk enables front desk staff at Curlio Hair-Skin-Nails in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, to attend to multiple clients efficiently and quickly.

"Keep noise, such as phones, faxes and music, subtle or away—at least below speaking-voice levels."

art. It's big enough for three people and computers to sit comfortably. It has excellent storage for gift bags and gift-wrapping, and enough space to actually wrap gifts.

"The height of the desk is what I love the most," adds Ufland, whose pet peeve is walking into a spa and seeing only a receptionist's forehead. "Either raise the desk and get bar stools or lower the counter, but let guests be greeted by a friendly smile when they enter—not a forehead."

Mini Makeovers

If you're thinking about freshening up your reception area, there are a few simple, cost-effective ways to do it. At the basic level, clean the space, light it well and make the products accessible.

"Look like you're selling products and not exhibiting at a museum," says Jean. "Make sure staff members don't huddle behind the counter. Have them come out to greet customers, inviting them into the space. Keep noise, such as phones, faxes and music, subtle or away—at least below speaking-voice levels."

Ufland likes to remove incoming phone calls from the front desk entirely. She suggests creating an appointment-taking office to minimize activity in the reception area. "This way, receptionists have more time to speak with the client, and there are less mistakes with the cash drawer. The receptionists are able to help close a product sale and rebook a client without continually having



A clear vision of a spa's style and needs is required before building or renovation, as this Lexi Design sketch of The Chopra Center in New York City illustrates.



When possible, allotting plenty of space to a reception area tells guests that they're valued from the moment they enter, as illustrated at La Dolce Vita Salon and Day Spa in Boston.

“Keep makeovers simple, and display retail tastefully and creatively.”

to answer the phone. The customer receives more attention and better service in the end.”

Jones strives to create a feeling of abundance in the reception area. “Free tea, fruit, flowers and hip magazines are great ways to get people to linger, look at retail, enjoy the space, get comfortable and have fun,” he says.

Keep makeovers simple, and display retail “tastefully and creatively,” says Caligari. In addition to organizing, cleaning and clearing the space, he suggests a few other easy modifications. “Change the lamping on your fixtures to 3,000 kelvin or lower, and add some acoustical material with a noise reduction coefficient of 0.8 or better,” he says.

As far as decorations are concerned, feel free to get in the spirit of seasons and holidays. “Seasonal decorations show you have spirit and want to share it with your guests,” says Caligari. However, he warns day spa owners not to get carried away.

Still, some spas choose to keep seasonal decor to a minimum. “It’s part of their identity,” says Jean.

For those who choose to let it all out, however, seasons aren’t the limit. “Some alter their decor not only seasonally but also by theme to promote a particular marketing initiative,” says Jean. “After all, we wear different clothes, eat a variety of foods, and accessorize with jewelry, scarves, perfumes and color. A spa can do the same.”

Of course, a smiling face behind the counter is always the best way to accent a reception area. “A knowledgeable, customer service-oriented staff member will make or break the entire experience you’ve tried to create,” says Jones. ♦

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