

SPA<sup>®</sup>  
MANAGEMENT  
**THE WORLD'S ONLY SPA MANAGEMENT JOURNAL™**

**info@spamanagement.com**

**FINDING YOUR SPA'S THEME:**

*The Value of Authenticity*

*By Uta Birkmayer*



*About the Author  
Uta (oo'tah) Birkmayer,  
founder of Xsense, creates  
memorable and transformative  
client experiences for  
corporations all over the world.*

*Holding an advanced degree  
from Cornell University, she  
has earned a reputation for  
bringing a unique set of  
problem-solving skills to  
businesses seeking to provide  
extraordinary client  
interaction.*

*Her own experiences spans  
operations in the U.S., Europe  
and Asia since 1984.  
[www.x-sense.biz](http://www.x-sense.biz)*

# FINDING YOUR SPA'S THEME:

## *The Value of Authenticity*

*By Uta Birkmayer*

**W**HY do some spas get all the glory, getting continual listings among the world's top 10? Why do their repeat clientele not hesitate to pay premium prices and talk about them again and again to their friends, providing excellent free marketing to these already flourishing facilities? And why, if one were to copy their very concepts exactly, would this not work for other spas?

What truly separates Bliss Spas, Canyon Ranch, Miraval, The Golden Door, The Oaks, The Greenbriar, The Oriental in Bangkok, Chiva Som and many of the other celebrated destination spas from others that may have superior facilities and services is that they are original ideas. They have all developed a business around their beliefs, rather than copy someone else's concept, because they know who they are and what they are about. They are powerful and unbeatable spa businesses because of their striking authenticity.

Authentic businesses have a central core belief or story, which initiates an abundance of original ideas that touch customers in unforgettable ways. This, in turn, becomes priceless word-of-mouth marketing by these spas' clients – the best kind of free PR – which has made these spa businesses long-term success stories. But just where do these spas get their brilliant ideas to begin with? Well, let's take a look at what's really happening with these businesses.

### **BEYOND PRODUCTS AND SERVICES**

The business world has changed considerably over the years, and while I may have discounted customer testimonials as simply a nice perk in my business school years, I know now that customer memories and the word-of-mouth that follows them are the most valuable asset any company can have these days. This, however, is only true if the memories are positive, individual, distinctive, genuine, consistent, and, most of all, managed correctly.

## GETTING LISTINGS AMONG THE WORLD'S TOP 10?

Ten years ago, we would have labeled spa businesses as part of the service industry, since it was a common theory then that one could sell two types of things – products or services. Of course, the levels of those services were what determined their meaningfulness (i.e. “good service,” “really good service,” “excellent service” and so on). However, that’s not so these days. According to today’s business scholars, those who provide a service simply deliver an intangible activity that is easily interchangeable, with no difference between providers (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). This means businesses, including the spa industry, need to find creative, new ways to serve their customers. The service industry has transcended its old habits and entered the Experience Economy.

The Experience Economy is based on the premise that consumers today pay top dollar for more than just products or services – they want experiences. While the term “experience” is used as freely as “service” in business these days, business owners may still wonder what it is exactly, how to get it and keep it up, and how it can add to the bottom line of one’s business.

Let’s start by looking at a basic, non-spa example of an experience consumers want to purchase. Think of the teddy bear business. Think about how often have you bought or received a teddy bear as a sign of love, a long-distance hug, or as a way of saying “I miss you.” A teddy bear purchase is undoubtedly more

about the feelings you want to give and express than the tangible teddy bear itself.

So along comes Build-A-Bear. Ask anyone who has just built their own teddy bear at this store and their testimonials are so immediately powerful, the sparkle in their eyes so genuine that it is obvious that this experience is a complete success with all involved. At Build-A-

Bear, kids and adults of all ages get to build their very own bear by choosing from a variety of components, such as the body, the stuffing, the eyes, the clothes, etc.

To connect the “builder” emotionally, however, he or she gets to add a heart and record a personal voice message for the recipient of the bear (if other than themselves). In the end, the builder gives the bear an “air bath,” fills out a customized birth certificate, and places the bear in

its very own “house” (a large, decorative box). The emotional value of and connection to this bear goes far beyond a ready-made teddy bear because of one’s personal involvement in making it for a specific recipient or oneself. And because of this, people readily pay more for a Build-A-Bear bear, all because of the unforgettable experience involved, and they tell their friends about it, too.

Paying more for a service because of the experience involved is common these days, but what exactly is it that people pay so much more for, and how can we replicate and maximize it economically in any industry?

Authentic businesses have a central core belief or story, which initiates an abundance of original ideas that touch customers in unforgettable ways.

## SPA BRANDING

## WHY DO THEIR REPEAT CLIENTELE PAY PREMIUM RATES

## TAPPING INTO THE EXPERIENCE MARKET

In the late 1990s, several books on “selling experiences” were published, including *The Experience Economy* (1999, by Gilmore & Pine); *Experiential Marketing* (1999) and *Customer Experience Management* (2003, both by Bernd H. Schmitt). These books discuss the emergence of a new economic value within the service industry – the experience. But how do we measure an experience? Gilmore and Pine define an experience as memorable by the customer. So, then, if a customer sees a distinct value above the tangible and intangible components of buying a teddy bear, such as a distinctive experience he or she remembers and can't wait to share with others, this experience tops the service being offered.

To consumers, it is worth the extra cost for such an experience because it meets their emotional needs.

Those consumers, in turn, tell others about the experience (free marketing for the business), and of course the press loves to write about such experience-based businesses (giving the business more wonderful, free PR). Essentially, a service business could run its whole operation these days with an Experience Management Plan and truly thrive.

An Experience Management plan replaces the old “Strategic Plan,” a document those at the customer service level rarely even used. The Experience Management Plan helps employees see themselves within the big picture, guiding them through any customer interaction as a highly effective and problem-solving

management tool, and encouraging continuous innovation by concentrating and building on an authentic business theme.

In “Trading Up,” Silverstein and Fiske research this “New American Luxury” even further, adding an additional aspects of the experience known as the “Ladder of Benefits” (2003). This “ladder” ensures that the emotional value of an experience is built on technical and functional superiority. That is, if the technical and functional aspects of your business, such as physical space, natural setting, staff, menu or product performance, are not their best, an Experience Management Plan probably won't work as well as it could for your business (unless the concept is tweaked to support such shortcomings).

Let me explain this further with another example. I recently visited a chic diner on the East Coast. For Saturday brunch, it was a fun place for couples and families. The food was very good, as was the service, but it was not the kind of restaurant remembered for anything in particular (although it is branded as a 1930s-era diner with a hang-your-hat look). Although the developers had spent months designing the physical space, a regular guest would not talk about it with raves to others. Don't get me wrong – you would go back, but probably only for convenience (We ended up there because of a convenient parking space). Yet, they are so close to being a legend, a place people would tell their friends about. A place where friends would take visitors, because it's a must see experience.

The most dominant, decorative element of the restaurant was a stunning display of colored-

## AND TALK ABOUT THEM AGAIN &amp; AGAIN TO THEIR FRIENDS?

glass siphon soda bottles. These old-fashioned soda bottles, when they are filled with water and a CO2 cartridge is added, produce the freshest possible carbonated water, an authentic element of the 1930's.

The restaurant's logo also included these siphon bottles, as did their menu and business cards. In a nutshell, this business could elevate itself to a true experience industry with some up-playing of these bottles and a few easy alterations. Here's how:

**First**, tell the story of the siphon bottle and how it is connected to this particular restaurant. It may be the owner's passion, a noteworthy collection, or have some family history. Perhaps the venue is an old soda bottle factory. Whatever the story, there has to be some sort of intriguing connection.

**Second**, use the soda siphons!

Imagine walking into a restaurant where, instead of the bus boy serving and refilling ice water, the "Soda Boy" theatrically served complimentary soda water at all of the tables. Every table could even have their own soda siphons, so they can try the experience for themselves, providing an element of surprise, delight and the occasional burst of laughter.

**Third**, create an educational and entertaining experience around the siphon soda bottles. Have the soda boy tell the history of the siphon

### The Experience

Management Plan helps

spa staff see themselves

within the big picture,

guiding them through

any customer

interaction as a highly

effective and problem-

solving management

tool, and encouraging

continuous innovation

by concentrating and

building on an authentic

spa business theme.

happens!

**Fifth**, by all means, don't stop here. As you can imagine, because of the exciting and fun soda siphon experiences created at the restaurant, guests will have become excited about and emotionally involved with, yes, siphon soda bottles, drinking soda, mixing soda, etc.. Restaurant patrons will want to extend the soda siphon experience to their homes, share it with friends and become part of a group of people who are soda siphon connoisseurs.

bottles, collect anecdotes, create a special siphon beverage menu (imagine a collection of syrups or elegant European "Spritzers" ranging from mint to anise to raspberry or a collection of fresh herbs such as lemon balm, lemon verbena, apple mint, etc.) Moreover, don't forget a fun children's beverage menu, a soda siphon dessert menu, and so on. Involve the customer with the siphon bottle as much as possible.

**Fourth**, consider giving away the used private-label CO2 cartridges. Leave them on the table as a sommelier would leave a cork, and explain how they work. Invent a table game ("Spin the Cartridge"?). Let people take them. Adults and kids will love reciting the experience to other – with proof in hand. Make sure the restaurant's name and contact information is on the cartridge and watch what

## SPA BRANDING

### WHY IF ONE WERE TO COPY THEIR VERY CONCEPTS EXACTLY

They will want to buy one right there, so it is essential to have them available, along with the CO2 cartridges, syrups, and a fun little history and recipe book on how to use the siphon soda bottles at home, at parties, for fun, etc..

When people have a great experience, they want to have reminders. Tangible “souvenirs” are treasured far beyond their monetary value and become a major source of income and legendary word-of mouth (& spritz-of-siphon) advertisement for the restaurant.

Let me expand on this last point, because retail is extremely important for spas. Spa retail stores often feature beautiful collections of the world's best spa brands, and we all know, they sell at a significant premium.

It is good revenue and a necessary supplement to treatment sales. So why don't we sell more? Well, look at the example above. If the customers find emotional connection to the product during the time they spend at the spa, and if these products are unique to your spa and not easily available anywhere else, they will sell almost automatically. Another great example is the body scrub at the Grand Wailea Spa in Maui. Every spa customer gets a complimentary 5-minute body scrub with a Hawaiian-inspired private label formula scrub. There is no name brand, nor conspicuous packaging — but the product sales for this scrub alone in the spa shop are astonishing. Guests are emotionally attached to the product and its scent because of the 5-minute free body scrub, which they will most likely talk about to all of their friends. Buying a bottle of the scrub to take home is the least you can do to extend this experience. So many spa stores, however,

sell products that are not emotionally connected to the spa experience itself, either by not using the product on the customer during their treatment, or even worse, by not using the product and then urging a customer to buy them anyway — in the form of a subscription list screaming hard selling. In many cases, this is the ultimate turn-off for spa goers.

So, how do we put it all together — authenticity, the experiences, the products, the ladder of benefits, the memory-making that will have our customers bringing in more customers for us?

### DESIGNING EXPERIENCES

One way of designing an experience for your customers is to view it as a blockbuster production. To produce a movie, you first need a screenplay. Our screenplay in business is the Experience Management Plan, and it will help define everything that needs to be done for your audience, including driving the architecture and interior design, the treatment design, the staff selection, the script, the job descriptions and the way the staff interact with customers. In essence, the Experience Management Plan acts as blueprint for all the elements that touch the customer — the so-called customer touchpoints.

There are two crucial elements in developing an Experience Management Plan: finding the right theme for your business and consequential follow-through. The more difficult of the two is to find your story or theme, since not every story will work in the spa industry. Many different themes can work in your particular spa, but the best ones are simple, authentic and centered around values you and your staff truly

## WOULD THIS NOT WORK FOR OTHER SPAS

believe in and practice. When in search of true authenticity for your business' theme, it is wise to consult an experience consultant, since it is hard to step away from one's own business sometimes to see it clearly.

The second crucial element in creating an Experience Management Plan is to take the authentic theme or story you have carefully chosen and apply it to all of the customer touchpoints (i.e., the consequential follow-through). Take the Hershey Spa for instance. Naturally, a Hershey Spa should stick with the chocolate theme of Hershey.

Then, where do you go? First, you must create the best technical and functional basis. This means that the quality of the space, the staff, the treatments, etc. is of the best possible quality. Secondly, make sure there is an authentic application of the Hershey chocolate theme to the Hershey Spa. In this case Hershey researched the health and beauty aspects of chocolate and found unique connections, which were implemented in their treatments.

Finally, apply the Hershey Spa chocolate story to every customer touchpoint – the architecture/interior design, treatment ingredients, treatment rooms, treatment props, treatment names, staff uniforms, “scripts” and demeanor, retail products, etc. In doing this, you will be able to see for yourself that Thalassotherapy, for instance, or Ayurveda (and many other treatments available today) will have no place in Hershey's Spa theme. However, obviously treatments, like a chocolate bath, Chocolate Body Wraps are a perfect fit.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article,

finding your businesses' authentic theme is the hardest and most important step to be completed before you even hire an architect. You can have unique knowledge, or opinions or personal history (like Dr. Andrew Weil, Mel Zuckerman or Wolfgang Puck) around which you can build your story or theme. Alternatively, a unique venue (a lighthouse, windmill or old barn), the local weather (rain, wind, snow, dry heat) or native cultural elements (an Indian tribe, sacred caves, tales of witches, or Las Vegas lights) – will help you develop an authentic story with a personal twist. Authentic and untapped themes are often sitting there the whole time right under your nose and it just takes an outsider, like a professional consultant, to look beyond the obvious and point them out.

The possibilities are truly endless. It is, indeed, an art form to find and effectively interpret these themes.

So, to summarize, finding and cultivating an authentic, comprehensive theme for your spa can truly set your business apart from the masses – not to mention creating memorable experiences for your customers that will bring them, and their friends and family, back for more time and time again. ■

#### References

*Pine II, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.*

*Silverstein, M.J., & Fiske, N. (2003). Trading Up: The New American Luxury. New York, NY: Portfolio.*