

7 Considerations for Successful Hotel Spas in a Post Coronavirus World

By [Anne McCall Wilson](#), Chief Executive Officer, McCall & Wilson | July 19, 2020



Hospitality has been hit hard the past few months and most brands and businesses are in full survival mode. Staff reductions and furloughs have affected all levels of organizations. Current C Suite conversations are more likely about cuts and what offerings to curtail than they are about the guest experience or any well-being platforms including spas.

The consumer landscape has changed. Summer vacations have been postponed and road warriors are now working and playing at home. Almost everyone has shifted personal priorities, been adapting to new technologies and trying to find some balance in their multi-tasking world. Most have also taken steps to develop a healthier lifestyle and build up their immune systems.

Recent spa industry surveys indicate that there is pent up demand for spa visits and the [April ISPA research](#) indicates 80% of people surveyed will spend as much or more on spas once they open.

While some of this bodes well for spas, the spa customer has changed. They are likely to be more local and regional in nature, with fewer discretionary dollars but with a higher wellness priority and knowledge base. They will be safety conscious and more comfortable in generous outdoor spaces.

Consumer insight advocate, [Andrea Johnson of Brain Candy Marketing](#) said in a recent interview that "a big challenge for all forms of hospitality will be to balance the polarities of consumer behavior. The extreme gap between those who want their freedom - life and all associated experiences as they were before - and those who are extremely cautious about health and safety measures will be difficult to manage operationally. From open spaces to private places and from slow living to integrated tech, the interactions of staff, the services offered and ambiance management will pose greater complexities in operational management than ever before".

While spas are not the current hotel priority, a concern for customer well-being certainly must be. As hotels start reopening, will brands and properties have the capacity, talent and capability to even think about their hotel spas? What new or abandoned spa expectations will guests have - short and longer term? What about the fears and expectations of spa employees? And, most importantly, with all of the downsizing who will lead the spa changes required? Will brands even have time or inclination to adapt, let alone re-imagine spas and the opportunity to satisfy an increasingly sophisticated and growing wellness customer?

Seven Thought Currents for Spa Success

There is much to be considered in the coming months. Here are seven thought currents for the future success of hotel spas: Cleanliness covid-gilantes, trust before treatments, a touchy subject, wellness wise, self-care support, health and healing spaces and employee well-being.

1. Be a Cleanliness Covid-Gilanti

There has been a lot written on cleanliness lately, including my own post on the [hypervigilance of guests](#) on this subject. So many others have added to the discussion and there are a lot cleanliness standards for reopening spas available. There seems to be a collective "We've got this!".

But I would be remiss if I didn't address its significance, so here are just a couple of things to add to the mix.

I recently wondered if the distinct smell of bleach will replace welcoming eucalyptus in spas. Definitely cleanliness will be a multi-sensory experience and spas have to consider smell, appearance and feel at every touch point (or maybe non touch point now!) Even simple hand sanitizers are getting a new status - maybe even considered as a new beauty product. Since big beauty brands are producing these sanitizers now too, proprietary formulations, scents and added benefits are not far behind.

Kenneth Ryan, Vice President Global Spa, Fitness and On-line retail at Marriott says "Hotel spas and facilities have a distinct advantage

in that large brand names will ensure the highest possible cleanliness standards. In this way, we have a unique opportunity to lead this space as consumers have confidence and comfort that we will get it right". However, rest assured that customer vigilance will spot any single hiccup with no second chance recovery available. They will be more likely to let you know immediately... and then spread it loud and wide.

2. Put Trust Before Treatments

Everyone is rethinking the menu of services and offerings given the current situation and while that's important, the bigger issue is one of trust. BC (before coronavirus) renowned trend predictors "[Future Hunters](#)" wrote that "trust is the next luxury market" and that it is "the most valuable and rarest of currencies".

In our current on-line world where anything can be posted, it is difficult distinguish what is fact or fiction. Fake science abounds and even fact science doesn't always agree. Spas need to be knowledgeable and transparent about the efficacy of all offerings.

Spas need to ensure that they develop a trust environment. They need to be taking also the emotional temperature of returning employees and guests and listen and adapt to fears and concerns and provide transparent and honest responses.

Trust and comfort comes also with finding the familiar in all of these changes. Anticipating my own return to the gym, I pre-calculated the potential distancing and cleanliness trouble spots but in the end, I trusted my long time personal trainer to have my best interest at heart. My usual massage therapist reached out and told me how he would be managing the flow and requirements weeks before he actually opened. My relationship with these people superseded that of the business itself. Trust building should be on the agenda of every staff meeting... and a consideration for the measurement of the guest experience in the future.

3. Be a Touchy Subject

From clean hand obsession to craving big hugs, touch is front and center. How does our high touch industry navigate when so much talk is about touchless interaction and so much need is about being in-touch? The fact is we have to concurrently manage touchless safety, high-touch immune support and the need for connection and staying in-touch

Touchless:

We have moved from touchpoints to no touch points and spas have to evaluate where policies, processes, services and amenities need to be changed or eliminated for both a short and long term touchless environment. In the immediate future, guests will notice things that are touchless as much as cleanliness. Paperless transactions, appointment scheduling and flow, single use products and amenities, automatic doors and RFID locker openings are all part of the discussion. Where once we thought of spas a social facilities, common lounges and shared wet areas at least temporarily need a rethink. After centuries of shared hamams, bath houses and banyas around the world, my belief is that this wellness communal gathering will return. For now, it will have to be booked, shared with known groups and may actually become a new revenue source.

High-Touch:

While we may be willing to give up a handshake or limit our hugs, human beings crave touch and human connection to thrive. Spas must deliver meaningful, effective, human to human hands on treatments. Massage may be more important than ever to guests and spas must deliver it in a way that trusted hands honor safety but deliver an emotional connection not just the physical one.

In-Touch:

Being in-touch and able to connect has been challenged by shelter in place requirements. Many hotels and spas turned quickly to the digital world to open the door to new ways to stay in-touch when physical touch wasn't possible. Wellness information and even spa services were increasingly important as people became more conscious of the need to take care of themselves. For example, the Six Senses at Home portal was developed in less than 4 weeks and information was guided by global wellness industry expert, Anna Bjurstam who says the initiative was hugely successful in developing a dialogue with their past guests - and potentially new guests.

An [April survey by ISPA](#) confirms 25% of customers were accessing on-line fitness videos and 16% had downloading wellness mobile apps. Large increases were experienced in download of meditation apps such as Headspace and signups for streaming services like wellness focused Gaia were up over 40% and above increases from other streaming services such as Netflix.

Staying in touch digitally and virtual spas are here to stay. Companies will need to ensure that they have a trusted, informative, relevant and current digital platform to augment their spa and wellness offerings. This is no longer an optional strategy as customers want to get in-touch before a spa visit or stay and to keep in-touch long after they leave.

4. Be Wellness Wise

Wellness has become validated, wide spread and worldly.

We know more about the scientific benefits of a healthy lifestyle in the prevention of disease. Pandemic panic has amplified this awareness. The need for a healthy immune system and its role in limiting the effects of viruses has become part of our everyday

vocabulary.

Wellness is a sophisticated and interconnected system of modalities. Mind, body and spirit is increasingly evidence-based and the depth of our knowledge has moved along the wellbeing continuum to include not just good sleep but circadian rhythm resets and a view of nutrition not as food but as medicine. Spirituality has surged with more time and inclination to look inwards and healing traditions from around the world from Traditional Chinese Medicine to Energy Medicine have gained acceptance to compliment the allopathic approaches of the west.

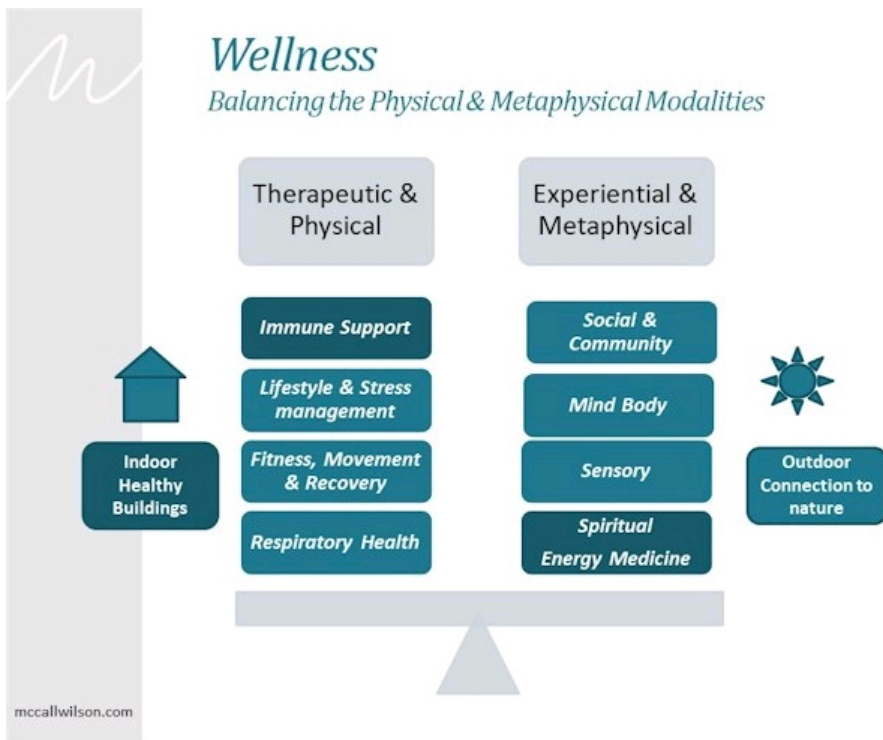
Covid19 has acted as an accelerant to wellness wisdom and these trends. Amy McDonald, global spa consultant and owner of Under a Tree Consulting, added "COVID 19 has touched us all and reminded us of how fragile we are and how important it is to have a strong immune system and resilient respiratory health. McDonald believes that wellness will evolve more deeply into evidence-based modalities supported by technologies.

So what does this mean for hotel spas? Gone are the days of serving up fluff and fads. Chocolate dips may have been great for romance articles but the market has moved beyond. The wellness word is ubiquitous and the opportunity for wellness "light" or worse "well-washing" is great.

This doesn't mean that every hotel spa has to offer a comprehensive menu of wellness services and practices. Not all hotel spas should be full service destination wellness centers or worse pretend to be. How deep and diverse into wellness is up to each spa; BUT, it is critical to be clear about what you are and health benefits it provides.

It is much better for the spa the guest, to pick a specialty and be the expert and go deep. Guests will increasingly expect us to be highly knowledgeable in whatever lane we pick; whether it is fitness and recovery, meaningful stress relief, relaxation and sleep support, social or solitude, or just wellness support while on the road.

Spas must be clear, transparent and comprehensive in what they provide and how it benefits the guest's health.



5. Support Self-Care

Over the past few months, it has become clear that we are responsible for our own health - for taking care of ourselves and our families: physically, emotionally and spiritually.

A recent [Wunderman Thompson survey](#) indicates "89% of Americans believe that the government alone cannot stop the spread of the coronavirus" and that increasingly we will look to ourselves and companies to help.

Spas have an opportunity to play a larger role in this movement to take control of our own health. Spas may have to shift from being a facility and service provider to being a partner, teacher, guide, resource or coach. There is a growing need for positions like wellness concierges, master guides to massage or curators of community resources for our best health.

While spas need to seriously help guests on their health journey with information and quality services - spas also need to be places of joy, happiness and optimism - especially now.

Susie Ellis, Chair and CEO of the [Global Wellness Institute](#), noted that there are "numerous studies on how optimism is strongly associated with better health outcomes and boosting immune systems". So let's also have some fun at spas.

6. Healthy and Healing Spaces

Spa space design is moving beyond aesthetics and flow to contribute directly to well-being outcomes.

Whether Dr. Joe Allen's work at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and his new book "Healthy Buildings" for healthy systems design or the "Healing Spaces" classic by Esther Sternberg or any of the myriad of reports on the benefits of biometric design - the role of the built environment to improve our well-being is on the rise. Virus transmission has increased the focus on everything from ventilation systems and air quality, to self-cleaning fabrics and surfaces, to sterilizing UV light and robots to voice operated doorways and these will be important considerations for all new spa builds and retro fits.

Common areas for social spa-ing, have been the signature spaces of many hotel spas. The April ISPA survey indicated that 65% of spa goers will now avoid communal areas on their trip back and 64% said they would avoid shared amenities such as wet areas. Changes in spa flow, scheduling and space repurposing will be required certainly in the short term. Wet areas may have to be booked with set times and even prescribed in combination with services focused on respiratory health or sports recovery. Pre and post treatment lounges may become small group areas similar to private dining areas. We will not lose our desire to socialize but it may take a turn to socialize separately from others we do not know... at least for a while. Spas may have to be both private and social places.

The saving grace is outdoor space. Guests indicate that they are more comfortable right now outdoors, so spas with direct outdoor access have an advantage. The interest in the outdoors as a safe place coincides with increasing evidence of its positive impact on our immune system. Cognitive function, physical and emotional health and spiritual satisfaction all improve in outdoor experiences and there is no better time than now to integrate the outdoors into healing therapies.

7. Employee Health

Roles, scheduling and the mental health and well-being of spa employees needs more attention than guests. Renne Moorefield, CEO, Wisdom Works suggests right now spa employees need [leaders to provide facts, candid and caring communication and a human connection](#).

Active listening sessions where employees comfortably express their feelings, stress and ideas need to be regular and often. Practice treatments and role playing for the new spa flow is a great way to get ready to open smoothly while giving employees a change to receive needed care.

Employees also need to be clear about the new processes and rules. There are many exceptional reopening guidelines and procedures available from brand and organizations. ISPA's reopening package is available free to all and is exceptional. BUT, detailed guidelines need to come alive to be remembered. Spas need to find ways to make new practices intuitive and memorable and most of all practice translates into a welcoming calm atmosphere that feels safe to all.

This increased employee focus will be required for a while with the ebb and flow of business levels, virus levels and job uncertainty.

Wellness Beyond The Walls - Leadership Opportunity

There is a lot to do and more than ever, the health and well-being of guests and employees is a foundational requirement of all hospitality businesses.

Wellness has certainly expanded beyond the walls of the hotel spas in recent years and many brands had been making wellness a more integral part of the entire guest experience. While guest wellness needs and expectations have been growing over the past few months, hotels have been halted in their tracks. Will hotels and hotel brands have the bandwidth to focus on their spas and wellness offerings in the near future - beyond safety and cleanliness measures?

The challenges are many but the opportunities are as well. Spas have been connecting to a widening number of local and regional customers on line. Brands have powerful loyalty programs that can be used for local offerings like never before. New revenue streams and new partnerships with specialists are available for spa businesses. Guests are open to upgraded healing and immune support and coaching.

The question is who will lead and take spas and their contribution to wellness to the next level? Many senior leadership roles in wellness portfolios have been eliminated or furloughed? What roles will spas and wellness facilities play beyond their walls now? Will new businesses develop while hotel spas falter and leave a gap for others to fill?

The question is not if but who will rise up and take the spa and wellness opportunities to the next level and thrive in the Post Covid19 world.



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[Extended Biography](#)

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