

IN THE WORKPLACE



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CREATING A Front Desk TEAM THAT WORKS

BY ADA POLLA TRAY

Introduction

Throughout my discussions with spa owners and managers, whether in North America or Europe, one question continually comes up, generating heated debates and impassioned discussions – how does one create a front desk team that works?

Creating a successful front desk team is key to a client's positive spa experience. The reception team is the first and last point of contact that a client has during a spa visit, and represents an integral part of a client's overall spa experience. A fabulous facial or massage, preceded or followed by rude service at the front desk will not be remembered. The poor reception experience will, however, make a lasting negative impression.

The key challenges associated with creating a front desk team that works are the following:

- The front desk staff is rude to clients and/or abrupt on the phone
- There is high turnover in front desk staff
- It is difficult to ensure that the reception team is well versed in the spa treatments, policies, etc.
- The front desk staff does not know how to sell, whether products or services
- And many more...

At Forever Laser Institut in Geneva, Switzerland, we have created a fabulous front desk team, through trial and error. Here are the most important lessons we learned over the past 10 years:

Upgrade the job description and empower your front desk team

Part of the challenge in creating a successful front desk team is the difficulty of recruiting quality people. That in turn stems from the job description. While the front desk team is absolutely crucial to a quality spa experience, the job is often perceived as a low-level, unglamorous position, reserved for those who can't find anything else. Hence, the pool of applicants rarely includes educated, ambitious, high-quality people. How do you change that?

At Forever Laser Institut we have in essence "upgraded" the front desk position to involve not only the typical reception responsibilities (answering phones, checking clients in and out, booking spa treatments), but also managerial responsibilities (being the right hand of the spa manager). We empower our front desk staff and emphasize their importance among our team and their value to the success of our spa. Thus, the job becomes more appealing, more satisfying, making it easier to attract talented and ambitious employees.

Similarly, once we have chosen a candidate as a receptionist, we remind them that they were selected among a large pool of applicants; we highlight what a competitive process selecting a front staff member is; and we make them feel proud to be such a crucial part of our team. ►

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Give your front desk team something to aspire to

As a corollary to upgrading the job description of our front desk staff, we have created a system that enables qualified people to be acknowledged and promoted within a specific structure. We have found that people naturally perform better when they can see future progression in their career path. No matter how much we “glamorize” the position, the ambitious people we recruit want upward mobility. As such, within our 4-person reception team, there is a “Manager of the Front Desk,” namely a front desk “boss.” That position is filled from within, meaning that one of the front desk partners is promoted to the manager position. This creates an incentive for excellent performance and cuts down on rudeness to the clientele, absenteeism, and other signs of a careless staff.

Train your front desk team

No matter how polite and delightful, a front desk person unfamiliar with the treatments offered at your spa and unable to make a product recommendation will not be helpful to the clientele. Once you have recruited the right people, training is key. At Forever Laser Institut we ensure that our front desk team has a chance to experience (gratis) the various treatments on our menu,

with the various therapists that perform them (this helps to create the type of relationship discussed below). We also provide them with products from the various lines we retail, once again on a complimentary basis. While the front desk team considers this as a great job benefit, we rather see it as a key investment in their training.

We also provide sales training to our front desk staff, to improve their ability to recommend products and services to our clients in a helpful, profitable, but non-pushy manner. This has proved beneficial not only in terms of increased sales volume, but also in terms of adding a high-level dimension to a job that usually lacks one. Such an investment in training explicitly shows that we value our front desk team and understand the key role they play in the success of our spa.

Finally, a third component of our training is role-playing. The spa manager becomes a difficult client, which the receptionist has to appease and satisfy. This is helpful both in person and on the phone. The role of the smile is highlighted during this type of training, to illustrate that actual words matter less than the manner in which they are spoken, whether in person or on the phone. Phone practice shows our staff that

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you can “hear” someone’s smile even on the phone... something more of us should remember in our every-day lives!

Incentivize your front desk team

No amount of recruiting or training will incentivize your front desk team to perform, keep performing, and stay with you over the long term as effectively as financial incentives will. As a result, we pay our front staff competitive rates (this also helps to minimize turnover), and they each receive a commission on the overall sales of the spa (both treatments and product sales). After tinkering with the commission system during our first few years, we decided the fairest and easiest method of compensating them was to provide them with a percentage of total sales. Paying them a commission on their direct sales engendered the following problems: Who sold a specific treatment, the therapist or the receptionist? Who really sold the product? Who started the sale? Who ended the sale? What about telephone sales? All these questions are too time-consuming to answer, and more importantly can league the therapists against the front desk team and vice versa.

Always be on their side!

One of the common problems we faced early on was tension between the front desk staff and the therapists. Therapists wanted to check their own clients in and give them their next appointments; whenever a scheduling problem arose, therapists blamed it on the front desk staff. Of course, the front desk staff is not perfect, and errors do happen. But early on, we learned that management must always take the side of the reception team (this is true also when an incident occurs with a client or patient): constantly blaming everything on the receptionist does not create a sense of value or empowerment. Always being on their side, even when they are wrong, empowers your front desk employees, makes them feel valued, and prevents them from feeling that they are the lowest of the lowest on the totem pole of spa employees. Along the same lines, we forbid our therapists



from taking on any front desk responsibilities. After all, you would not allow a receptionist to perform a massage, so what does it say about the receptionist’s tasks if a massage therapist is always taking over?

Create a team relationship between your front desk team and your therapists

The types of tensions mentioned above can be further minimized if you encourage team bonding. We organize outings, offsites, and dinners during which therapists and receptionists intermingle and share “war stories.” This creates a forum for both groups to become more aware of the other’s tasks, responsibilities, and the various difficulties faced by each and every one. The more each knows about the job of the “other” group, the better they will be able to help each other.

Conclusion

The various strategies suggested in this article have worked at Forever Laser Institut and enabled us to create an integrated and successful front desk team composed of high-level, motivated, and educated partners. As in any job, as in any personal relationship, the overall key is to make the front desk team feel valued and empowered – whether by “glamorizing” their role, by investing in their training, by incentivizing them generously, or by taking their side when problems arise – if they feel valued and valuable, their own attitudes will be more positive, more professional, more invested in the spa – leading to an improved spa experience for your clients. ◆