

Spas: Embracing wellness

through the pandemic and beyond



New touchless equipment, more outdoor experiences, and safe returns to wellness services people are accustomed to are all part of the spa trajectory moving forward

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

Spas have long been a wellness hub both in senior living communities and in the community at large. International Spa Association (ISPA) data from before the coronavirus pandemic showed the industry

was growing overall, with total revenues over USD\$18 billion, and average revenue per spa reaching \$826,000 in 2018.¹ Notably, among 6 spa types, 80% were day spas and 8.2%, medical. These are the types of facilities most likely to serve older adults, and to operate as part of an active-aging community.

The pandemic forced 99% of spas to close in the first quarter of 2020, according to ISPA. However, by October, most spas had

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*Hydrotherapy with Gharieni Libra
Edge K features choreographed water
temperatures and programmable water
pressures using a touch-screen control
panel. Photo: © Gharieni Group*

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A therapist is optional for acoustic and vibrational therapy with the Gharieni SpaWave System, which allows touch-screen preprogramming. Photo: © La Butte aux Bois, Belgium

navigated the reopening process, with 90% reporting opening and receiving guests.²

The turnaround has been “impressive and gratifying,” according to Wendy Bosalavage, spa and wellness/chief revenue officer and president of New York City-based LIVunLtd, a consultancy, amenity/spa management company and concierge company. Yet, reopening has come with “some significant transformations,” she acknowledges.

Customer expectations and the transformations they’ll require are highlighted in a consumer survey conducted for ISPA by PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP, at the end of April 2020.³ For example, 42% of spa-goers anticipate asking a therapist to wear a mask during treatment; 72% will likely bring their own hand sanitizer; 65% say they will avoid communal spaces; and 64% will avoid shared amenities.

Nonetheless, more than 80% of respondents plan to spend as much or more on

spa visits once the pandemic ends. And only 25% say they will feel very nervous about visiting a spa at that point.³

Wellness is a strong driver of the return to spas, and ISPA says respondents’ increased attention to their wellness in general is a positive sign for the industry. Forty percent of respondents report getting more physical exercise during the pandemic, 41% say they’re eating more healthily; and 55% are doing more to look after their well-being.³ ISPA suggests the data “may indicate a greater desire for investing in their health and accessing spa services once guests are able to return.”

Bosalavage notes, “These insights into customer thinking, and their expectations for a return to a ‘new normal’ are shaping how spa services will be offered in freestanding spas, as well as in senior living. The need has never been greater,” she adds, “and the industry is anticipating a ‘pent-up’ demand after all the restrictions put in place over the past year.”

The spa industry veteran has worked in various capacities over 30 years to bring health and wellness centers, programs and education to spas, residential communities, country club communities, commercial fitness centers and not-for-profit facilities. A Medical Spa Society founder, Bosalavage also served as a board director for Glen Ivy Hot Springs Spa and Day Spas, as well as on ISPA’s Standards and Practices Committee and as the Day Spa Association’s former president. Currently, she cochairs both the Social Impact Initiative and the Living Well From Within Initiative for the Global Wellness Institute, and serves as treasurer of the Green Spa Network. (To learn more about Bosalavage, see the “snapshot” sidebar on page 28.)

The *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently interviewed Bosalavage about where spas are heading and why they remain a necessity for the active-aging industry.

ML: *Wendy, how would you describe the current situation for spas, given that we are*

still in the pandemic, and restrictions vary in different places?

WB: As noted earlier, spas are in a transformative state. They are making significant changes to how they do business, in keeping with pandemic protocols, with an eye to the future. Overall, spas are doing well, and anecdotally at least, many have been experiencing an uptick in the past few months. We're seeing innovative ways of delivering services and new equipment that enables individualized, touchless well-being experiences.

Right now, we're looking ahead. And we envision what will most likely be hybrid kinds of settings and services. Before we get there, we need to get through the pandemic and its requirements while doing what we do best, and what is particularly important now: helping customers optimize their wellness.

ML: *Many organizations recognize the benefits of spa services across the continuum, from independent living to memory care, even as the pandemic continues. What should they be aware of if they're considering setting up an on-site spa now?*

WB: I've been working on a spa for an assisted living community in Manhattan, and we continue to make design changes that will enable us to serve clientele now and easily retrofit once the pandemic is over. A key is multipurpose spaces. For example, relaxation rooms are being designed now taking social distancing into consideration. We're asking such things as: How many lounge chairs can we fit if they have to be 6 ft. apart? The same thing for a pool. How many lounge chairs can we have? What kind of partitions can we have? Happily, working with our interior designers, we've come up with some aesthetically beautiful partitions that are flexible, should we have to move them to accommodate more people.

Other big changes are coming for our steam and sauna rooms, which are usu-



The SpaWave System uses Gharieni's MLW Amphibia NEO table, with heated water cushioning. Photo: © Gharieni Group

ally communal experiences. We're guiding clients toward personalized experiences for now, designing the experiences for individual use. The salt room is a good example. Usually, an individual shares that room with 4 or 5 other people. Instead, we're designing salt capsules for individuals—someone uses the space once, then it gets wiped down and totally disinfected before the next person comes in. This same individual use is true for infrared saunas as well. And we're offering steam showers instead of a steam room.

In addition, we're incorporating a lot of touchless points. Customers don't have to open the door, for example, as it opens for them. Also, instead of a greeter, check-in is touchless.

The focus on eliminating touch and human contact is, of course, counterintuitive to the spa environment, which is all about heart-centered relationships and making people feel comfortable. We recognize, however, that there is some understandable trepidation on everyone's part, so we need to make the experience as safe and comfortable as possible.

For the initial visit, instead of filling out a form on a clipboard or tablet that someone hands to them, customers will receive a form via email to be filled out prearrival. A therapist will see in advance if a person has any issues, and the two can talk on Zoom before the visit. In that respect, there is still an opportunity to build a personal relationship with a therapist, even if the actual visit is touchless.

In terms of new equipment, the industry has pivoted to technology. For reflexology, for example, there's something called a Kneipp pool. As a person walks in the pool, it provides reflexology using different types of pebbles on the floor and different water temperatures. Some treatment rooms also offer waterless massage beds, plus sound and meditation beds. Again, these are for use by an individual with no therapist.

We expect many spas to turn to touchless services such as hydrotherapy massage beds that deliver high-quality hygienic treatments but require minimal staff. Guests can choose which body zone needs more attention and alter the pressure, speed and duration of the treatment on their own. The values they set for each experience can be combined and saved, forming a specific individualized treatment that can be called up from a library of treatments. In essence, spas can create their own massage journeys and/or personalized programs that they save for frequent guests.

ML: *What costs are involved with installing this type of equipment?*

WB: These pieces of equipment are definitely an investment as they run between USD\$5,000 and \$10,000 each. On the other hand, you can lower the cost for service because these touchless pieces of equipment don't require a therapist. The question really is, how can an organiza-

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The Somadome™ meditation pod integrates energy medicine with color, illumination and sound therapy in an immersive experience designed to improve the user's mood and well-being. Image courtesy of Somadome, Inc.

tion *not* afford to invest in these services? There's a lot of competition. To stay competitive, you have to figure out how to make this work.

Many Boomers have experienced the benefits of massage and, particularly because of COVID, they're very aware about building the immune system and prevention. Wellness is a key. So, organizations that serve older adults need to offer these options. People who are in their 50s now might be your new customers in independent living, and they'll want the services they're accustomed to getting. They also may have parents in their 80s. When they're helping their parents look for a place, they're going to be looking for fitness and wellness.

For example, foods in senior communities and venues used to be very institutionalized, but that's now not acceptable. Back then, you could have said, "Oh, can we afford to have foods personalized for individual tastes and nutritional requirements?" Well, it might not have looked good on profits and losses statements, but organizations realized they needed to do it.

My prognosis is the same thing will happen with spas. Senior living organizations will need to figure out how to make these spa services work while bringing in some return on investment. It might be similar to a country club, where generally the costs are lower because they're not looking to monetize the revenue stream through services. Instead of offer-

ing a treatment that costs USD\$150 when it's delivered by a therapist, there's a margin needed to cover the costs of electricity, towels and things like that. These services could become another added benefit to market to prospective residents.

ML: *What about organizations that aren't starting from scratch—that is, they already offer spa services on-site, but need to make protocol changes to follow cleanliness and other pandemic requirements?*

WB: A touchless check-in system is something organizations can institute immediately, as is sending the initial registration form. They may also retrofit some space for relaxation with lounges placed 6 ft. apart. Residents can bring their own blankets.

It might make sense to try some of the equipment incrementally, in stages. Maybe put in one touchless bed and see how people feel about it.

Also, we're recommending that spas book clients every other hour, which gives the air in the room a chance to turn. You also can say to potential customers, "Look, we're staggering utilization. There'll be nobody in that room for a full hour, and we're going to disinfect it during that time."

Of course, hygienic practices are more important than ever. For existing spas, this probably will mean educating staff, putting policies in place, creating a checklist and having clear expectations for the staff or management company. There needs to be a big focus on cleanliness, and everything needs to be monitored—even simple things, like making sure linens are changed. Importantly, customers need to be aware of what you're doing. We used to assume basic things like changing linens were done, but we can't assume anything anymore.

I stayed in a hotel recently, and a label over the door of my room said, "This room has been cleaned and checked." The same thing could happen in the spa area—for example, a visual on the massage bed saying, "These linens have been changed." Do whatever you can to create an environment of safety and cleanliness, and communicate everything explicitly to customers.

ML: *You and others have noted that spas as people used to know them—with therapist-provided services—will come back, and have started to do so already. Can you elaborate?*

WB: In time, people will go back to having therapists, but there will be precautions such as we're building in now—they might wear a mask or a face shield. And there will be new protocols, like having your temperature taken and handwashing.

In fact, I went for a spa treatment recently. When I came into the treatment room, I

washed my hands and the therapist washed her hands. An air purifier was in the room. The therapist wore a mask and a shield, and I wore a mask. When I had my head on the massage table, there was a pillow case over the donut-shaped pillow, so I breathed in my own air instead of room air.

The reality is, people will still want the human touch; nothing replaces it. At some of our locations, people are already asking when they can get in-person massage. Some single people, in particular, have not been able to be touched since the pandemic started. They would welcome the opportunity to have even a foot massage now. In fact, if you go for a foot massage now, and you and your therapist wear masks and you have a shield, you're pretty safe. Once vaccinations are done, I think people will have a comfort level to come back.

Organizations might say, "Why should I invest in new equipment and protocols now, if the pandemic will be over in a couple of years and people will go back to what they had?" The reality is that while I'm incredibly optimistic about the future of spas, they are unlikely to ever be the same as they were. We are adjusting to a new normal. Organizations should consider building a hybrid design that they can easily modify, should something like this pandemic ever happen again.

People will continue to want wellness services. They'll want to listen to beautiful music in a quiet, tranquil place. They'll want to have facials. I know people who are going for facials now. As long as we adhere to the protocols to make sure that we're doing everything possible to make it the safest experience it can be, this industry is far from done.

Ironically, touchless used to be looked down upon in the spa industry. People would say, "Oh, no, if it's touchless, you don't get the benefits." Well, I've been in some of those touchless machines, and I

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Resources

Internet

Gharieni Group GmbH

www.gharieni.com

GSNPlanet (Green Spa Network)

<https://gsnplanet.org>

International Spa Association

<https://experienceispa.com/>

LIVunLtd

<https://livunltd.com/>

Somadome, Inc.

<https://somadome.com>

Spa Industry Association

(The Day Spa Association and the International Medical Spa Association consolidated in 2017.)

<https://dayspaassociation.com>

Print

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Wendy Bosalavage: A snapshot



Wendy Bosalavage

As spa and wellness/chief revenue officer and president of LIVUnLtd, a New York City-based consultancy, amenity/spa management company and concierge company, Wendy Bosalavage helps to redefine the way people interact with their communities, unwind and live the 21st century “dream.” For more than 30 years, she has worked through consulting, design, marketing, programming and operations to bring health and wellness centers, programs and education to spas, residential communities, country club communities, commercial fitness centers and not-for-profit facilities.

Bosalavage is a founder of the nonprofit Medical Spa Society, created to promote the sound development of the medical spa field. She served for more than 7 years and oversaw strategic planning on the Board of Directors for Glen Ivy Hot Springs Spa and Day Spas in Temescal Valley, California. Her professional contributions include serving on the


Standards and Practices Committee of the International Spa Association and as former president of the Day Spa Association. Currently, she cochairs both the Social Impact Initiative and the Living Well From Within Initiative for the Global Wellness Institute, and serves as treasurer of the Green Spa Network.

Also, Bosalavage strives to help people take better care of themselves by giving back to her community through volunteering and mentoring. She served on the boards of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Rockland, the JCC (Jewish Community Center) Rockland, the former Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School, and as fundraising chairperson for the 2014 Shatterproof Challenge, an initiative to increase awareness and resources to fight addiction. She is also currently a board member of GOSO (Getting Out and Staying Out), a reentry program for young men involved with the justice system. Bosalavage has studied dialectical behavior therapy, a form of cognitive behavior therapy aimed at developing healthy ways to cope with stress and improve relationships with others, and has a certification from the Institute for Integrative Nutrition to learn skills to help her work with people in underserved communities and those reentering society after incarceration.

Bosalavage credits her success to surrounding herself with a strong network of women who can help support each other in business. In April 2014, *New Jersey Monthly Magazine* chose her as one of its “Leading Women Entrepreneurs and Business Owners” based on her innovation, market potential, community involvement and advocacy for women.

will tell you something, I felt great when I came out. So, having options to go touchless or to have a therapist will be ideal going forward.

The other thing spas are doing is making big use of outdoor spaces, especially in environments where the weather is mostly good year-round, like Florida. Lots of services can be provided outdoors, whether it’s a hot tub for one person, outdoor classes where people retain a sense of socializing and belonging to a group, or walking trails and labyrinths designed as part of the spa. Some organizations are incorporating treatment rooms that open up to a patio, so the treatment can be given outside.

The bottom line is, the wellness industry and spas are not going away because of COVID. They’ll look a little different, but the demand is there. We live in an experience economy with wellness as a key. Older adults will spend on experiences that make them feel good, now and in the future. 

Marilynn Larkin, MA, is an award-winning medical writer and editor, an ACE-certified personal trainer and group fitness instructor, the editor of ICAA’s Research Review, and a contributing editor and technology columnist for the Journal on Active Aging®.

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3. PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP, for ISPA Foundation. (2020, April). Navigating Through the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Consumer’s Point of View. Executive Summary. ISPA Consumer Snapshot, Vol. X. Retrieved from <https://view.joomag.com/consumer-snapshot-volume-x-executive-summary-consumer-snapshot-vol-x/0164057001588186052?short&>.